

# THE SOUTH WEST PACIFIC

animals, especially the mongoose, have had a devastating effect on the birdlife on the main islands of Fiji. It is the same sad story that we know so well in New Zealand. Even what we would regard as a resilient species, the pukeko, has vanished from the main islands because of predation by the voracious mongoose.

Fortunately some of the large outer islands, eg Taveuni, Kadavu Ovalau and Gau, and most of the smaller ones, are still free of this animal. Apparently there are still petrel colonies in the hinterland of Viti Levu, but the long term survival of these must be in doubt with predators such as the mongoose at large in the forests.

From Suva *Derwent* sailed eastwards to Gau, where we searched for that least known of all the tubenoses, the MacGillivray's petrel. Only one specimen is known to science — it was collected by the crew of H.M.S. *Herald* in October 1855.

We made several forays onto the high forested ridges inland from our anchorage at Herald Bay on the north western side of Gau. When questioned, the local inhabitants seemed to have little knowledge of any burrowing or surface nesting petrels on the island.

A thorough search for MacGillivray's petrel needs to be given immediate attention. Recently, Dick Watling has visited Gau, where he found a few burrows of the small collared petrel. If that species survives, then there might be a chance that the similar-sized MacGillivray's still exists. Unfortunately Gau does have black rats and some feral cats, although we caught only kiore in our trapline, which was set at Herald Bay. Along with the mongoose the wild pig is also absent from Gau.

We made a brief stop at Kadavu, the big southern island of the Fiji Group, Kadavu has three endemic birds — a fruit dove, a fantail and a honeyeater. We found all three in moderate numbers.

Some of the forest in the area we visited at Tomba Kavala, near the eastern end of Kadavu showed considerable hurricane damage, where fierce salt-laden winds had caused die back in the canopy.



The spectacular needle-like *Araucaria* pines on the cliff edges at Lifou, in the Loyalty Islands.

Much of the forest on the drier northern slopes of the island has gone, and has been replaced by an induced grassland with pockets of dry scrub — similar to that in the dry zone of Viti Levu. Petrels apparently still breed on some of the high forested peaks, such as Nambukelevu, a distinctive conical landmark, which overlooks the western tip of the island.

From Kadavu the expedition headed back to Viti Levu — this time to the western side of the island, where we based ourselves at Lautoka. Here we carried out surveys of bird life in open grassland, remnant stands of dry zone forest, and in the recently-established plantations of *Pinus caribaea*. We were given valuable assistance by the staff of the Fiji Pine Commission, who provided transport to places of interest.

Centuries ago the whole of the western sides of the main islands supported a dry forest — but that soon vanished once man arrived on the scene. Over vast areas the forest has been replaced by the induced

grassland of mission grass, *Pennisetum polystachyon* and reed, *Miscanthus floridulus*.

The Fiji Pine Commission has found that the indigenous forest remnants in the damp valleys form excellent natural firebreaks between the exotic plantings. Therefore their present policy is to preserve as much of this forest type as possible. Fires are a persistent problem, especially when the cane farmers are burning off during the dry season. The relict stands of native bush held an astonishing variety of birds. This contrasted sharply with the exotic monocultures and open grassland, which not unexpectedly had very few species.

Several short forays were also made to various small islets and stacks in Nadi Waters — the sea area west and south of Lautoka. The most interesting place visited was White Rock, a small guano covered stack about 20 kilometres off the coast, between Lautoka and the Yasawa Islands. Brown boobies, crested terns, black-naped terns and white-capped noddies evidently breed there.

The Yasawa chain is known to most visitors to Fiji as the area one sees on the Blue Lagoon Cruises. The Yasawa coastline is outstandingly attractive for yachtsmen also, for there are many delightful, sheltered anchorages.

Most of the Yasawa Islands are inhabited, and as with the western side of Viti Levu, forest patches are few, and the terrain on the hillsides is rather arid and rocky. Many of the small pockets of forest that do remain have been badly chewed out beneath by goats. The most forested island in the Yasawas was the jagged limestone outcrop of Sawa-i-lau. This island is one of the local scenic attractions for it has spectacular sea caves.

Sawa-i-lau was the only place in the Yasawas where we encountered the elusive island thrush. Fiji goshawks and barn owls were also present.



Young plantings of *Pinus caribaea* on the ridges, with indigenous forest in the valleys; Lololo Forest, Viti Levu, Fiji.