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NEGROS DEL NORTE, THE PHILIPPINES



Fig. 1. A **Philippine Coucal** at Rafael Salas Center access Rd, in a spread-wing posture, after rain.

In 2016, between 3rd to 8th August, I visited the northern part of the island of Negros, in the Philippines. The time was spent at and around Mt. Kanlaon, the traditional even though severely threatened haven of Negros endemism. I flew in from Cebu City, on a Cebu Pacific ATR and had another flight to Manila, on a larger Cebu Pacific jetliner. I have no complaints on the conditions or service on board of the Cebu Pacific flights, but the latter flight was delayed by three hours because of capacity problems in Manila. I therefore had to postpone a visit to La Mesa Ecopark, scheduled for the next day. Fortunately, everything went well a day after (see separate report).

The NAIA (Ninoy Aquino International Airport) is not able to handle all the traffic it receives nowadays and there is no space to expand the runways. The only solution probably is another airport further away from Metro Manila. Well, at least there was interesting news to read while

waiting for the flight. Each day after President Rodrigo Duterte came into power in the Philippines has been a good day for news reporters...



Fig. 2. Waiting for a flight to Manila, at Bacolod-Silay International Airport.

The island of Negros has several species endemic to it. Among them, the **Negros Fruit Dove** is the most enigmatic one, barely discovered in 1953 at Mt. Kanlaon, and not seen since. **Negros Bleeding Hearts** do still exist at the mountain but it was not possible to find out where the last few pairs of the critically endangered Negros **Walden's Hornbills** were. Twin Lakes, Calinawan Forest, Balinsasayao? Possibly in Panay only?!

Depending on one's taxonomy, the following full or proposed species form the rest of the Negros's endemic avifauna, some of them shared with Panay: **Visayan Brown Dove**, **Negros Scops Owl**, **Visayan Hornbill**, **White-winged Cuckooshrike**, **Visayan Balicassiao**, **Visayan Fantail**, **Negros Striped Babbler**, **Flame-templed Babbler**, **Visayan Bulbul**, **Visayan Shama**, **White-throated Jungle Flycatcher**, **Visayan Rhabdornis**, **Black-belted Flowerpecker** and **Maroon-naped Sunbird**. All in all, 17 species or proposed species. Out of them, 12 could be observed during the five-and-half days I had on the island. The missing ones were, unsurprisingly, the fruit dove, the bleeding heart, **Walden's Hornbill** and the striped babbler. In addition, the **Visayan Brown Dove** was also missed.

On the other hand, I made three surprise observations of some interest, a **Bat Hawk**, a **Grey-throated Martin** and an adult **White-capped Munia**. The last species is likely to be an escapee (breeds in Java), the second either a scarce breeder or a migrant from Luzon, and the first possibly an overlooked scarce breeder in the Visayas, or a vagrant from Borneo or Sulawesi. More details will follow.

Birding certainly was interesting in Negros, once an access to a suitable location was discovered and the organization of basic services somehow realized. Locating adequate accommodation and food proved however to be surprisingly serious problems at Mt. Kanlaon. This was an obstacle I had not anticipated before my arrival, because such problems had not really been encountered in Luzon, Palawan, Bohol and Cebu, my previous destinations of the island nation. It did not help, that much of the service information in the Internet proved to be reflecting fantasies rather than the actual reality.

For reasons which will be explained below, it is best to stock up with food at Bacolod if one desires to visit Mt. Kanlaon. Having a hotel room in Bacolod is also an option to be seriously considered, too, because there currently appears to be no comfortable choices at the mountain, as far as I was able to find out. I did not, however, check out the rooms of Buenos Aires Mountain Resort, after a very disappointing experience with somewhat similar Mambukal Resort.

On this visit, the Twin Lakes area, in the south of the island and very popular with bird tour groups, was ruled out because of several unanswered questions and the long distance involved. The primary unanswered question was: Would it be possible to drive a sedan up to the Twin Lakes? From Bacolod, the driving distance was 500 km return, with no guarantee that one could actually reach the destination. Moreover, the Twin Lakes have only one species apparently not available at Mt. Kanlaon, the **Negros Striped Babbler**, and I was in any case not ready to climb the mountain there to see it. For an uninformed solo visitor, Mt. Kanlaon clearly was the number one choice.

Fortunately, car rental worked exceptionally well in Negros and driving there was easy. Also the people tended to be quite agreeable, especially in Bacolod. In regard to safety, Negros felt quite peaceful and secure. In the Philippines, the local flights are not expensive at all. I would therefore encourage others to travel to Negros independently, too. Hopefully the following text is going to be helpful in the organization of such a visit. There is space for discoveries in the island, off the beaten track and off the usual tour season in particular. The knowledge on the local avifauna is not comprehensive yet, even though thorough surveys have been made at certain locations.

CAR RENTAL

It was a relief that at least one of the basic tourism services worked so well in Negros. I rented a black Toyota Vios at Meca-J rent-a-car in Bacolod (mecaj.bacolod@gmail.com) and was very happy with their services. Their office is located at the corner of Araneta Ave and Ajilis Rd, next to the old Bacolod Airport (closed, since 2008), and by a Phoenix gas station. When planning a visit in North Negros, it is important to realize that the active airport of Bacolod is the Bacolod-Silay International Airport, some 21 km and 40 minutes away from Meca-J and the center of Bacolod. Unlike some other airports in the Philippines, the Bacolod-Silay airport still collects a terminal fee, PHP 200 (€4) per passenger. An airport shuttle may be ordered from the car rental, for PHP 100 (€2) one way, shared, or for PHP 600 (€12), private.

The black Toyota was brand new and quite adequate for all the roads at Mt. Kanlaon. The charge was PHP 1.900 (€36) per day, with 200 km daily kilometer allowance (PHP 10/km excess). In regard to fuel, I only added few liters of gas into the tank towards the end of the tour, filling it up at the above-mentioned Phoenix gas station when returning the vehicle. Premium gas (the recommended brand) was PHP 37 (€0.70) per liter, 50% of the price in Finland.

Traffic was not too difficult in the region, even though I had to overtake a few hundred slow vehicles, especially on the Murcia road. On the mountains, one had to think twice before parking the car next to the roads, to avoid falling branches etc. Occasionally, I also placed stones behind the car's tires, to be sure nothing would happen if its hand-brake happened to fail.

FOOD AND ACCOMMODATION

I stayed at three places in Negros, out of which only one allowed proper rest and meals:

Mambukal Resort, Catugasan (PHP 900, €17): The resort is predominantly geared towards day visits and family accommodations. For a solo visitor, the most economical option was a PHP 900 (+ PHP 200 key deposit) per night double cottage. It was, unfortunately, a feasible solution only in theory, and awful in practice. Personally, I somehow survived one night, before demanding my money back and leaving the resort for good.

The dirty bed, mold and worn out structures would have been tolerable as this was something I had expected, after reading some negative Internet reviews. Unfortunately, there were other problems, too. For example, I had paid for a hot water shower, but the taps emitted only brown mud. There was no towel either, not even after a request for it. One gets sweaty in the hot climate...

The room was also seriously infested by a multitude of ants which spoiled all my remaining food before I could find a way to keep it out of their reach. Flying fox droppings covered the car under a thick layer of excrement and urine at night, and I had to wade through garbage to get into my room. Some stray dogs spread it all over the place at night, and also tried to enter the room.

At the resort restaurant, I had a take-away dinner. When opened in the room, the container revealed a meal very different from the photograph in the menu. In fact, there was no resemblance at all. It was inedible grub made of pieces of gristle and intestines, instead of beef. As a result, there was nothing to eat during my stay at Mambukal Resort.

Overall, the resort is best visited as a day visitor from Bacolod, where proper accommodation and food may be located with ease. Staying in is not a good idea.



Fig. 3. Avoid these Mambukal Resort cottages at all cost. From a distance, they may look ok, but...

Pavillon La Carlota, La Carlota (PHP 1.000, €19): This is a locally well-known viewpoint by the Guintubdan National Park, west of the main crater of Mt. Kanlaon. In addition to views, unfortunately only towards the coast and on an almost completely clear-cut slope, the two-storey building has couple of basic rooms for rent. The location was ideal, the viewpoint had some bird viewing potential in the afternoons and there was a guard dog included. The friendly mongrel arrived in the afternoon, slept on my door step and guarded the door at night very well, before apparently being chased away by the staff. It was not their dog. Otherwise, the people were nice.

Nevertheless, in the final analysis Pavillon La Carlota is an over-priced and fairly uncomfortable accommodation, and therefore mostly empty, at least during my visit. Their best room was damp, moldy and cold at night, but at least the dirty toilet had a working hot water shower. Also the sheets were crisp and spotless, unlike in Mambukal, even though the mattresses and pillows under them were black with mold. There is electricity in the evenings.

Again, finding food was a considerable problem. There was none available in the general area. After I had finished the food I had brought in from Bacolod, I made a search in the villages along the access route. The barrio of Ma-ao had something, but not much. The best discovery were six fresh eggs (PHP 6 each, €0.1), which a lady at the Pavillon La Carlota boiled for me, on fire, for PHP 20 (€0.40), a reward suggested by me and considered excessive by her. In the villages, much of the food for sale was dirty and potentially contaminated, including the food court of Buenos Aires Mountain Resort. Rural Negros is deep in the Third World and one needs to be prepared for that. I regrettably was not.



Fig. 4. My damp room at Pavilion La Carlota. Not too bad, but not too good, either.

Sugarland Hotel, Bacolod (PHP 1.600, €30, including a meager packed breakfast for PHP 100): After three nights in less than comfortable accommodations, I gave up and stayed the last night at Sugarland Hotel, 600 meters north of the Meca-J office (see Agoda.com, for example). The double room was very comfortable, clean and also peaceful, a piece of heaven after the rough mountainside accommodations. The staff was polite and helpful.

There is a mall, a Gaisano Mall, another 700 meters away from the Sugarland, towards the city center. In there, food and many other items may be purchased, including bird guidebooks at a bookstore. I had a crew cut at a local barber's shop, for PHP 80 (€1), twenty times less than in Finland. The hair cut included extensive massage. I asked him to stop after head and shoulders...

The problem of the Sugarland Hotel is that it has not been able to decide whether it is a hotel or a wedding venue. As a result, hotel guests are disturbed by the excess of people on the grounds and the consequent perpetual shortage of parking space. I myself had to park my car behind the building, wading back in ankle deep water in torrential rain. In other occasions, it took quite a while to find space in front of the hotel, with the eager help of the staff. Likewise, the visitors of the various venues have it difficult to park their vehicles at the hotel and may also get wet in their festive clothing. Fortunately, the late afternoon rains also meant that there was no music and dancing at the inner courtyard. That would have disturbed sleeping in the rooms.

Much of my food was bought on the way to the town of Murcia. The Murcia road (Alijis Rd) conveniently starts right by the Meca-J office and continues to Mambukal Resort. Alternatively,

one may turn right at Murcia (to Murcia – Bago City Rd), driving through extensive and birdy rice fields to the Ma-ao Rd, the access to highest part of Mt. Kanlaon. At the Bacolod end of the Murcia Rd, there are 7Elevens and a reasonably good pizzeria (Greenoz). The best place for pizzas is, however, the new and tidy Pizza Drive (good service, toilets), at the Carmenville Subdivision of Bacolod, further along the same road. In Murcia itself, there is a large but rather untidy market area. At the end of the day, have a look at Google Maps and plan ahead to guarantee your food and drinks supply if visiting Mt. Kanlaon.

BIRDS AND SITES

The bird observations are first presented with more detail, site by site, and finally in a comprehensive bird list of 94 recorded species. The sites may be located at Google Maps, with the help of their coordinates. Place the numbers in the search function area and hit the enter button. Rafael Salas Center and Pavilion La Carlota are not 'resorts', even though they are marked as such in Google Maps. The same applies to a number of other establishments in the general area.

Mambukal Resort (10.513253, 123.103925)

The small touristy resort, at an altitude of 360 meters, is not really essential for birding, even though it certainly is worth a short visit to score with the **Black-belted Flowerpecker**. I saw six there, and none at other sites.

Walking the resort paths proved not to be very productive. More could be seen by scanning the treetops and the sky above the higher slope southeast of the resort. The best viewpoint for scoping proved to be at the northern corner of the artificial Boating Lagoon. This is also the spot for **Black-belted Flowerpeckers**. I spent most of my time there and the weather remained hot and sunny, with a clear sky. If the same time was spent in a similar weather at Rafael Salas Center, for example, more birds would be on my trip list.

The most prominent bird within the resort was **Visayan Bulbul**, but I only recorded some 10 to 20 individuals. The gardens around resort houses had 10 **Philippine Magpie-Robins**, four **Philippine Pied Fantails**, one **Magnificent Sunbird**, one **Olive-backed Sunbird** and 20 **White-bellied Munias**. Around the ponds and streams, there was a pair of **Collared Kingfishers**. In the trees, two **Philippine Coucals**, one **Visayan Balicassiao**, three **Large-billed Crows**, one **Lemon-throated Leaf Warbler**, one **Negros Leaf Warbler** and one **White-vented Whistler** were seen. The best treetop birds were, however, a single **White-winged Cuckooshrike**, even though I only had fleeting views of it, and a **Visayan Rhabdornis** (*rabori*).

In the sky over the forest, there were about 30 **Glossy Swiftlets**, about 25 **Pygmy Swiftlets**, 60 **Philippine Swiftlets**, one **Pacific Swift**, one **Asian Palm Swift**, 30 **Purple Needletails** and, to my delight, four **Philippine Spine-tailed Swifts**. Some of the swiftlets breed in the resort, under a

bridge by the waterfalls, but I did not go there and the above numbers are admittedly also somewhat impressionistic. There were many unidentified swiftlets and I did not bother to do accurate counts on the ones which were identified. In the morning, also a selection of raptors appeared there: two **Brahminy Kites**, a pair of **Philippine Serpent Eagles** and the best of all, an adult **Pinsker's Hawk-Eagle**.



Fig. 5. My Meca-J Toyota Vios at the best viewpoint of Mambukal Resort, by the reservoir dam.

At night, a **Negros Scops Owl** was discovered close to Tourist Lodge, at the northern section of the resort. The owl must have had it difficult to attract females in such a noisy location! The same area had a **Chocolate Boobook**, too. The resident 5.000 flying foxes included a majority of **Large Flying Foxes** and sizable minorities of **Golden-crowned Flying Foxes** and **Little Golden-mantled Fruit Bats**. At night, I also spotted a **Philippine Shrub Snake**.

Pavilion La Carlota (10.424898, 123.083736)

In the first evening in the area, the weather was fine for scoping at the viewpoint (1.000 m), in front of my rented room. I had done some scanning of the trees and bushes already after arrival, in mid-day conditions. The scoping was disturbed by young Filipino visitors looking for a selfie with

a foreigner, and the ever present AOR upstairs, but not too much. On the next day, foggy conditions prevailed in the evening, and showers of rain kept on spoiling the mid-day hours.

Nevertheless, two important records were made at Pavilion La Carlota: On the 4th of August, a male **Green-faced Parrot-Finch** crossed the grassy slope behind the building, flying into some bamboo at the edge of the forest. The same evening, just before the sunset, an adult **Bat Hawk** was seen flying south, slowly following the lower ridge of Mt. Kanlaon. Later on, a **Negros Scops Owl** called by the viewpoint, and was soon joined by a **Philippine Nightjar**. In the next evening, the weather was for too wet for the owl and the nightjar.

The **Bat Hawk** had apparently not been recorded in the Philippines, even though it occurs close in the surrounding areas (e.g. Borneo, Sulawesi) and even though there are plenty of bats in Negros, too. The one at Pavilion La Carlota looked like a **Least Pipistrelle**. My wild guess is that the hawk was not a true vagrant but a sign of a breeding population. **Bat Hawks** are, after all, not that easy to locate even close to their nests, because of their predominantly nocturnal habits. At times and at bat colonies, they start their hunt early, before sunset. My first record of the **Bat Hawk** was a breeding pair at their monitored nest in Transvaal, in 1989, a tip from Christine Lambrechts.



Fig. 6. A *nigrorum* **White-eared Brown Dove**, one of a party of 8 at Rafael Salas access road.

Rather interesting were also a party of six unidentified swiftlets, uniformly blackish brown above and with lighter bellies, and clearly larger and more robust than the common **Philippine Swiftlets**. I wonder if **Whitehead's Swiftlets** breed at Mt. Kanlaon? The birds looked like them. The few trees and bushes, and the grassy slope around Pavilion La Carlota also attracted some other birds, including 10 **Barn Swallows**, a few **Yellow-vented Bulbuls**, a **Visayan Balicassiao**, a **Large-billed Crow**, my first ever (male) **Maroon-naped Sunbird**, the only **Pygmy Flowerpecker** of the trip and a number of **Tree Sparrows**. Dozens of fighting cocks were noisy in the surrounding gardens.

Thousands upon thousands are bred in the general area, on the formerly forested lower slopes of the mountains. Some are exported all the way to Sarawak, Malaysia, where cock fights are illegal.

Rafael Salas Center (10.427181, 123.086476)

Rafael Salas Center, at an altitude of about 1.050 meters, is a modern building placed on a slope overlooking one of the few still mostly forested lower slopes of Mt. Kanlaon, the prime habitat of Negros's endemic birds. There is much less endemism on the higher, well-protected slopes.

At the time of my visit, the center was closed because of a full renovation, which was about to end in 2016. The men at the construction site had already been working there for several years. Early in the morning, there was nobody at the center and I entered the building, discovering a spacious lobby area and its open views over the canopy. Conveniently, there was also a vacant plastic chair there, and I spent three hours at the viewpoint, carefully scanning the forest with my Swarovski scope. The weather was clear and sunny, with weak wind, and therefore ideal for scoping.



Fig. 7. The great viewpoint of Rafael Salas Center lobby area, a place of comfort and birds.

At some point, the workmen and their headman arrived, warmly welcoming me to stay there. They even offered a cup of hot coffee, which I regrettably had to decline, because I cannot stand the taste of the drink . There was no entrance fee for the park (not a 'national park', as in Google

Maps), because the site was not officially open. The resident **Glossy Swiftlets** (40) did occasionally enter the open lobby area. There were many moths on the walls and ceilings.

The next morning I did the same, even though there initially was no chair this time. As soon as the first of the men arrived, I made a request for a chair and one was kindly delivered for me! Unfortunately, the second morning was a bit foggy, unlike the sunny first one, and bird activity started later, dying out in the late morning.

In both mornings, the hundreds of fighting cocks in the village gardens made considerable noise at sunrise, making it difficult to hear the thin calls and songs of passerines. Otherwise, the second morning was as peaceful as the first had been. Being able to completely focus on birds, I lost the sense of time. Overall, I consider the Rafael Salas Center to be my most enjoyable birding spot in Negros.

The most obvious birds of the forested valley were a group of about 10 **Coletos**, total of 25 white-bellied **Visayan Balicassiaos** (*mirabilis*) and dozens of **Visayan Bulbuls**. Once, a male **Visayan Hornbill** stood on top of a large tree for a while, appearing shy and afraid of people. No wonder, the endangered birds are trapped and sometimes sold for a mere €1. Not many remain in Negros today.

An immature **Philippine Honey Buzzard** rested in a tree top close by, with very nice views of this long-crested raptor. There was a meager and very secretive variety of pigeons and doves around, including **Pink-bellied Imperial Pigeon** (2) and **Yellow-breasted Fruit Doves** (3). A few unidentified calls deep in the forest probably included emerald doves. A **Plain Bush-hen** was also heard there.

Several birds spent some time in the treetops, sunning there in the mornings. A total of tree **White-winged Cuckooshrikes**, including a pair, did that, just like two **Philippine Orioles**, three **Visayan Rhabdornises** (seen several times), and a party of six juvenile **Asian Glossy Starlings**. A lone **Colasisi** was observed once.

Among the smaller birds, a **White-throated Jungle Flycatcher** probably was the best one. I almost missed the bird, because it moved along the edge of the forest right below me, being only occasionally visible in gaps of vegetation. A male **Rufous Paradise Flycatcher** was also a nice find, on top of a tree below me. About eight **Visayan Shamas** sang in the area, skulking and very difficult to observe, together with four **Visayan Fantails**. There was a **Bicolored Flowerpecker** and two *dorsale* **Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers**, all adult males.

Other passerines of the site included a party of 10 **Scarlet Minivets**, one **Elegant Tit**, one **Sulphur-billed Nuthatch**, one **Olive-backed** and two **Maroon-naped Sunbirds**, and dozens of both **Yellowish** and **Montane White-eyes**. The lone adult **White-capped Munia**, on top of a close-by tree, must have been an escapee, I presume. Java is a bit far away for vagrancy and munias are common as cage birds. The receding forest on the slopes of Mt. Kanlaon seems to attract both

lowland and mountain forest species, because their options are limited as a result of deforestation.

As the records show, the site had some significant potential. The other option in the area would have been the trekking trail which starts soon after the close-by national park headquarters, above Pavilion La Carlota. With my limited time, I decided to spend my hours at the Rafael Salas Center, because it provided such extensive views of the canopy of the lower forest, potentially most productive for Negros endemics, and because of the shelter there.

On the trail, one could get wet because of the periodical rain and the views would be limited. With great luck, a **Negros Bleeding-heart** could perhaps be spotted, but for most of the target birds the Rafael Salas Center had an edge over the trail.

Most importantly, one probably has to obtain a permit for the trail, pay a mountaineering fee and employ a guide and porters to be allowed to enter the trail, even for a short walk. Moving around in such a group would scare the birds away. Moreover, the park office opens late, at 08.00 and is closed during the weekends. The red tape needs to be finished before entering the trail, too late in the morning. In conclusion, once again, the observation of birds had been made next to impossible in a national park.

My suggestion is: Go to the area and see how things are at the moment. There were promising paths right next to the Rafael Salas Center building, one of them possibly leading to a good vantage point. More paths exist lower in the valley, with potential access to view points on private land. I am sure that a permission to enter would be granted. In case of rain, it is always possible to do some roadside birding, along the access road, while waiting for better viewing conditions.

Rafael Salas Center access road (10.426803, 123.074191)

The tarmac road between Buenos Aires Mountain Resort and Rafael Salas Center is not, according to the locals, what it used to be few years ago, when the forest had not been encroached as badly as it today is, and bird parties often frequented the roadsides.

Nevertheless, there was one spot which always had a mixed bird party and an assortment of territorial birds around. When climbing up the road, there is an obvious very sharp curve to the left (at 10.426803, 123.074191), uphill, at a spot where open pine forest starts. There are still some bushes around, in addition to grass. Further up, a few other records were made. I parked my car on the road and walked slowly to the birds. Unfortunately, the area is under intensive clearing, despite the fact that slopes this steep should be left in peace, if for nothing else, to prevent landslides.

Many of the birds in the curve area were there on each stop I made at the site. One of their main attractions was a fruiting tree among the pines and in that tree I could observe and film a tame

party of eight **White-eared Brown Doves**, subspecies *nigrorum*, sometimes (BirdLife etc.) split as **Buff-eared Brown Dove**. A surprising bird was a lone **Grey-streaked Flycatcher**, either a very early arrival from East Siberia, or an over-summering individual. Once, a **Flame-templed Babbler** was discovered in the scrub above the road. A few **Visayan Shamas** also had their territories along this stretch of the access road.

The more common species included several dozen of **Visayan Bulbuls**, several **Philippine Coucals**, a **Philippine Drongo Cuckoo**, a **Pied Triller**, a few **Yellow-vented Bulbuls**, three **Elegant Tits**, two **Lemon-throated Leaf Warblers**, a pair of **Tawny Grassbirds**, two pairs of **Black-naped Monarchs**, couple of **Coletos**, four **Magnificent** and one **Olive-backed Sunbirds**, both **Yellowish** and **Montane White-eyes**, and two **Chestnut Munias**.

Below the curve, the stream close to the edge of the forest had a **Dimorphic Dwarf Kingfisher** (at 10.428396, 123.064865). Lower down, the open pastures (at 10.434393, 123.061727) also had their share of birds: About 10 **Horsfield's Bush Larks**, a **Paddyfield Pipit**, a *nasutus* **Long-tailed** and a *lucionensis* **Brown Shrike**, and 20 **White-bellied Wood Swallows**.



Fig. 8. The 'uphill curve area', along the Rafael Salas Center access road.

Beyond the Buenos Aires Mountain Resort Jct, on the Bago – Ma-ao Rd, there potentially is access to good birding habitat, via a side road to Northern Negros Geothermal Power. In Google Maps satellite images, the road appears to run quite high in the forest. Boy, the bird guide of Mambukal Resort, apparently takes people somewhere in this direction, but it is a rough ride, first 30 minutes on a motorbike and then a long climb, possibly in rain, in the hot and humid climate.

Not knowing if it currently was possible to enter without a prearranged permit, I decided to not go there. Some trip reports indicate similar problems as at Guintubdan National Park: red tape and up to two porters/guides forced on one, for walking a car track. The site is therefore perhaps best left for guided tour groups.



Fig. 9. Logging is rampant on the steep lower slopes of Mt. Kanlaon. Landslides to be expected...

Murcia rice fields (10.500185, 123.077426)

As already mentioned, there are extensive rice fields between Murcia and the Bago – Ma-ao Rd in the south. During rains, they get flooded and attract many migratory shorebirds, the first of which had already arrived at the time of the visit. The observations were mostly made in heavy rain. Be careful with the trucks in such a weather. It is a narrow road and the shoulders are muddy in places.

In this section of the road, it soon became clear, that the invasion of **Javan Pond Herons** in the south of the Philippines has advanced with full force. According to the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines, there are less than 30 records outside of Mindanao. This statement is outdated. The islands which used to be covered by forest have now been cleared for agriculture and certain invasive species benefit from the man-made habitats. About 40 pond herons were seen at the fields, with a few **Great, Intermediate, Little** and **Eastern Cattle Egrets**. Two **Yellow Bitterns** completed the assortment.

The most numerous shorebird was **Wood Sandpiper**, with 150 fresh arrivals from Siberia. The other waders included one **Common Sandpiper**, two **Little Ringed Plovers**, one **Long-toed Stint**,

three **Rufous-necked Stints**, a lone **Oriental Pratincole** and six **White-headed Stilts** from Australia. The other birds at the rice fields were my only two **Philippine Collared Doves**, a few **Feral Pigeons**, two **Asian Palm Swifts**, at least one hundred **Barn Swallows**, two *nasutus* **Long-tailed Shrikes** and a *lucionensis* **Brown Shrike**, five **Zitting Cisticolas** and a large number of **Tree Sparrows**.

The best bird of the area was a **Grey-throated Martin**, located in the large party of **Barn Swallows**, either a migrant from Luzon (?) or a member of a small resident population. Its presence among the migratory **Barn Swallows** does perhaps point towards the first conclusion?



Fig. 10. One of the many **Javan Pond Herons** at Murcia rice fields, in heavy rain.

I also checked out the western section of the Bago – Ma-ao Rd, all the way to the coastal Negros South Road and Bacolod, and the Negros Occidental Eco-Tourism Highway between Murcia and Salvador Benedicto. These routes did not have much to offer, birdwise. There was neither access to forest, nor wet rice fields.

Overall, the only additions to my bird list on these roads were **Golden-bellied Flyeater**, with two individuals, a **Crested Myna**, and four small coastal swiftlets thought to be **Ameline Swiftlets**.

My guidebook did not show any presence of **Ameline Swiftlet** in Negros, but I believe the distributional records of Filipino swiftlets remain to be somewhat unclear, because of difficulties in field identification. Separating **Ameline** and **Philippine Swiftlets** in field situations appears to be impossible. It does not, however, necessarily make sense that the lowland **Ameline Swift** was completely absent in Negros, even though present in the neighboring islands...

The uniform swiftlets on the forested lower mountains probably are **Philippine Swiftlets**, but the question would apparently need more research to be solved. Another larger species with somewhat similar colors occurs in Negros, too, but is it the **Whitehead's Swiftlet**? Interesting questions...

Bird list (94 species):

Great Egret	7 Murcia rice fields
Intermediate Egret	1 Murcia rice fields
Little Egret	1 Murcia rice fields
Eastern Cattle Egret	5 Murcia rice fields
Javan Pond Heron	40 Murcia rice fields
Yellow Bittern	2 Murcia rice fields
Philippine Honey Buzzard	1 Rafael Salas Center
Brahminy Kite	2 Mambukal
Pinsker's Hawk Eagle	1 Mambukal
Philippine Serpent Eagle	2 Mambukal, 1 Rafael Salas Center
Bat Hawk	1 Pavilion La Carlota
Plain Bush-hen	1 Rafael Salas Center
Little Ringed Plover	2 Murcia rice fields
Common Sandpiper	1 Murcia rice fields
Wood Sandpiper	150 Murcia rice fields
Long-toed Stint	1 Murcia rice fields
Rufous-necked Stint	4 Murcia rice fields
Oriental Pratincole	1 Murcia rice fields
White-headed Stilt	6 Murcia rice fields
White-eared Brown Dove	8 Rafael Salas Center access road
Yellow-breasted Fruit Dove	3 Rafael Salas Center
Pink-bellied Imperial Pigeon	2 Rafael Salas Center
Philippine Collared Dove	2 Murcia rice fields
Zebra Dove	2 Bacolod
Feral Pigeon	11 Murcia, Murcia rice fields
Colasisi	1 Rafael Salas Center
Philippine Drongo Cuckoo	1 Rafael Salas Center access road
Philippine Coucal	2 Mambukal, 14 Rafael Salas Center access road
Negros Scops Owl	1 Mambukal, 1 Pavilion La Carlota
Chocolate Boobook	1 Mambukal
Philippine Nightjar	1 Pavilion La Carlota
Whitehead's Swiftlet?	6 Pavilion La Carlota
Philippine Swiftlet	60 Mambukal
Ameline Swiftlet	4 coast south of Bacolod
Pygmy Swiftlet	25 Mambukal
Glossy Swiftlet	30 Mambukal, 20 Rafael Salas Center
Philippine Needletailed Swift	4 Mambukal
Purple Needletail	30 Mambukal, 4 Murcia rice fields
Fork-tailed Swift	1 Mambukal
Asian Palm Swift	1 Mambukal, 2 Murcia rice fields
Dimorphic Dwarf Kingfisher	1 Rafael Salas Center access road
Collared Kingfisher	2 Mambukal
Visayan Hornbill	1 Rafael Salas Center
Grey-throated Martin	1 Murcia rice fields
Barn Swallow	10 Pavilion La Carlota, 100 Murcia rice fields
Striated Swallow	2 Bacolod Airport

Horsfield's Bushlark	10 Rafael Salas Center access road
White-winged Cuckooshrike	1 Mambukal, 3 Rafael Salas Center
Pied Triller	1 Rafael Salas access road
Scarlet Minivet	10 Rafael Salas Center
Yellow-vented Bulbul	13 Pavilion La Carlota, Rafael Salas access road, Murcia
Visayan Bulbul	20 Mambukal, 115 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Visayan Balicassiao	1 Mambukal, 1 Pavilion La Carlota, 25 Rafael Salas Center
Philippine Oriole	2 Rafael Salas Center
Large-billed Crow	3 Mambukal, 1 Pavilion La Carlota
Elegant Tit	4 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Sulphur-billed Nuthatch	1 Rafael Salas Center
Visayan Rhabdornis	1 Mambukal, 3 Rafael Salas Center
Flame-templed Babbler	1 Rafael Salas Center access road
Philippine Magpie-Robin	10 Mambukal, 2 Pavilion La Carlota
Visayan Shama	11 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Golden-bellied Flyeater	2 Bacolod, Murcia
Lemon-throated Leaf Warbler	1 Mambukal, 2 Rafael Salas Center access road
Negros Leaf Warbler	1 Mambukal
Tawny Grassbird	2 Rafael Salas Center access road
Zitting Cisticola	5 Murcia rice fields
White-throated Jungle Flycatcher	1 Rafael Salas Center
Grey-streaked Flycatcher	1 Rafael Salas Center access road
Philippine Pied Fantail	4 Mambukal
Visayan Fantail	4 Rafael Salas Center
Rufous Paradise Flycatcher	1 Rafael Salas Center
Black-naped Monarch	4 Rafael Salas Center access road
White-vented Whistler	1 Mambukal
Paddyfield Pipit	1 Rafael Salas Center access road
White-breasted Wood Swallow	6 Bacolod, 20 Rafael Salas Center access road
Long-tailed Shrike	1 Rafael Salas Center access road, 2 Murcia rice fields
Brown Shrike	1 Rafael Salas Center access road, 1 Murcia rice fields
Asian Glossy Starling	5 Murcia rice fields, 6 Rafael Salas Center
Coleto	15 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Crested Myna	1 coast south of Bacolod
Maroon-naped Sunbird	2 Rafael Salas Center, 1 Pavilion La Carlota
Magnificent Sunbird	1 Mambukal, 4 Rafael Salas Center access road
Olive-backed Sunbird	1 Mambukal, 2 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Bicolored Flowerpecker	1 Rafael Salas Center
Black-belted Flowerpecker	6 Mambukal
Orange-bellied Flowerpecker	2 Rafael Salas Center
Pygmy Flowerpecker	1 Pavilion La Carlota
Yellowish White-eye	80 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Mountain White-eye	90 Rafael Salas Center & access road
Tree Sparrow	360 Murcia, Murcia rice fields, Pavilion La Carlota
Green-faced Parrotbill	1 Pavilion La Carlota
White-bellied Munia	20 Mambukal
Chestnut Munia	2 Rafael Salas Center access road
White-capped Munia	1 Rafael Salas Center

IN RETROSPECT

Once again, I should have made more background work before arrival. Many hours were spent in the Internet but the available information was both fragmented and confusing. Additionally, more serious problems with Sumatra arrangements wasted a large share of the time I had reserved for the Philippines. Knowing what I today know, I would be able to plan the visit more effectively. Nevertheless, I managed, partly due to off season timing and luck with Rafael Salas Center, to observe the endemic birds without becoming entangled in red tape and restrictions on visitor access.

After the disappointing Mambukal Resort, I admittedly already felt like giving up, but fortunately decided to keep on trying in the south, in the La Carlota region, where the highest peak of Mt. Kanlaon is located. It was exploration in its true sense, evaluating the habitats on the go and finding solutions as fast as possible, to be able to focus on the main thing, the enjoyment of bird observations. In the end, I feel well rewarded for my struggles. Hopefully, this report will help you to plan your visit in Negros, with significantly less probing and searching I had to endure, with close to zero advance information.

Good luck with your exploration of Negros del Norte!



Fig. 11. A poster at Bacolod-Silay International Airport. It is good to see that somebody is trying to stop the trade on endangered animals, however difficult that may be in the Philippines.