

By Priestley Habru

Tirotonga village, located just a few kilometres inland and uphill from Isabel's provincial township of Buala is fast becoming a hub for birdwatching.

The major drawcard for tourists are the rare species of birds like the Black-faced Pitta, Solomons Frogmouth, Fearful Owl, Imitator Goshawk and Sanford's Sea-eagle. Other birds tourists want to see include the Woodford Rail, Solomon Boobook and Myzomela, according to owner of Mae Holo Bird Watching Roger Manehage.

Mae Holo and Bubuli Bird Watching owned by Gerard Kidia are currently the two birdwatching ventures at Tirotonga Village



*This Black-faced Pitta is endemic now to two islands only in the Solomon Islands.*

# Bird Watching in Isabel

with two more expected to be opened soon. Both Mae Holo and Bubuli birdwatching businesses provide accommodation and cheap packages that include pick up at the Fera Airstrip to meals, accommodation and trips inland to watch the colourful birds.

One of the sought-after birds to watch is the elusive Black-faced Pitta which is only endemic to Isabel and Choiseul Islands in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville, now part of Papua New Guinea.

According to the 2016 International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, the Black-faced Pitta was reasonably common at a time, at least on Bougainville. Forty specimens were collected there before 1938. But since then, no recording was made until 1994 when three birds were heard calling at Tirotonga on Santa Isabel. Searches and interviews



*Gerard Kidia, owner of Bubuli Birdwatching.*

on Choiseul and Bougainville were unsuccessful until as late as 2014 when it was recorded in Choiseul.

In its latest assessment, IUCN stated the conservation status of this species is not well understood: It is categorised as 'Vulnerable' on the basis of its very small known population, but if research shows its population is falling, this would warrant the bird to be reclassified in a higher threat category.

More than 10 tourists have

come to the hilltop village of Tirotonga so far this year either through Mae Holo or Bubuli birdwatching arrangements. Apart from these two birdwatching businesses, fellow villager Freda Pooti offers descent accommodation with four rooms, kitchen and laundry facilities for tourists and guest alike who wish to visit Tirotonga Village.

Situated along the mountain range above Buala Town and surrounding coastal villages toward the east, Tirotonga Village is a picturesque home with mostly sago-palm thatched houses and few iron-roofing hamlets overlooking Maringe Lagoon that includes Fera Island which hosts the local airstrip toward the western tip.

The Maringe Lagoon which consists of Jhokau, Tasia, Fera and Sulei islands are surrounded by beautiful coral reefs, mangroves



*Tirotonga Village is a picturesque hamlet with mostly sago-palm thatched homes.*

and a few pockets of white sandy beaches especially around Fera Airstrip.

### **‘Visi’ Fishing Technique**

Whilst in Buala Town or birdwatching at Tirotonga Village, tourists can listen to stories, experience or even witness a traditional fishing technique still practised by the nearby coastal village of Nareabu.

No tourists or guests have actually been invited to see this fishing technique let alone document or film ‘visi’ as it’s called, but by paying a courtesy visit to the chief and elders of Nareabu Village, you can be allowed to see the preparation and might even be invited to the actual fishing method that only uses traditional vines and coconut leaves.

Nareabu Village chairman and Chief Reuben Tatemana said ‘visi’ is a fishing technique that has been passed down from their ancestors and can only be done on special occasions such as a huge church gathering, wedding or during Christmas.

Tatemana said preparation for the ‘visi’ usually takes place two to three weeks before the actual fishing expedition.

“Men, women, young people and basically the whole Nareabu community partake in the preparation on an allocated day as agreed by the elders. What happens is that we will plait fresh coconut leaves along a 200 to 300 metre vine using ropes extracted from a local tree,” he explained in his local ‘Cheke Holo’ language of Isabel Province.

Whilst the coconut leaves are sewn into the long vine strip, women and girls are not allowed to step or stand over it. Up to two or three 200m-300m fishing net-like coconut leaves would have been prepared before the ‘visi’ fishing day takes place. Only men and boys are allowed to perform.

On the selected day for the ‘visi,’ one or two canoes with outboard motor powered engines would load the traditional net and transports it to the preferred location within the reefs of Maringe Lagoon. It can only be done on certain periods of the day and night when it is between low and high tides.

A person referred to as ‘jahoi’ would pull the first end of the vine, whilst the other end is tied to a canoe and the rest of the men would help in pulling the

traditional net starting from the deep end of the reef toward the shallow part.


At the shallow part, a group of men and boys would be standing with a ready-made hand woven net made from local vines to block the fish been chased ashore and surrounded by the coconut leaves net-like pulled at both ends and in the middle by the rest of the men.

Both ends of the traditional coconut leaves net would be pulled closer and closer so as to narrow the gap for the school of fish to be caught in the middle, blocked also by the woven net held steadfast by the other party in the shallow part of the reef.

Varieties of fish would be trapped inside the small space as the nets closed in. The men would then pick the fish trapped inside the space surrounded by both the net-like coconut leaves and the woven net. Fish caught through the ‘visi’ are actually terrified by the sound of the coconut fronds been pulled ashore and trapped as the men pulled and narrowed the long vine with coconut leaves toward the shallow reef.

The first canoe load of fish back to Nareabu Village would be shared amongst fellow villagers. The ‘visi’

would continue two or three times into the day even during the night and the early hours of the morning. These later catches would then go toward the stock of feeding hundreds or even thousands of people coming for the special occasion they have organised at Nareabu.

A pre-dominantly Anglican Church followers on Isabel Province means Nareabu Village celebrates Saint Barnabas as its Patron Saint around June each year, so you might be lucky to see the preparation of 'visi' or experience it yourself if you seek the permission of Chief Tatamana. 



Freda Pooti's accommodation in Tirotonga.

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