

# Australia - Queensland

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 – 8 November 2014

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Report compiled by Carol Iles



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## Day 1

## Saturday 1st November

We all first met at Bay Village Resort for a 10am departure on a gorgeous sunny day. A search of the likely trees on the Esplanade failed to reveal a Rufous Owl, perhaps as it was market day, but Centenary Lakes and the water channels were rewarding, giving us Radjah Shelduck, Little Egret, Bush Stone-curlew and Black Butcherbird, among others. With the sun high we headed up the range to the cool of Kuranda village, bustling with weekend tourists. We drove out to quiet and little-used Wright's Lookout for our picnic lunch, high above the Barron River gorge.

Refreshed, we continued inland to Mareeba, making a stop at a Garden Centre where mature fig trees were the focus for several huge Channel-billed Cuckoos, before driving on to Rocky Creek, site of a WWII hospital. Its trees attract birds but the stars of the show were a snoozing Brushtail Possum and an enormous Lace Monitor or Goanna.

Back on the road we kept stopping for birds, but made it to Yungaburra to check in at the Kookaburra Lodge Motel, with time to settle in before going to watch a Platypus at the village's viewing area. Dinner was Buffet Night in the characterful (and that's not just the architecture), historic, old Eacham Hotel, known to most as the Yungaburra Pub, with its high ceilings, sweeping staircase and collection of old photos of the timber days. There was no line-dancing, but Dave 'in hat on synth' in the corner was determined to try and improve on Elvis.....

## Day 2

## Sunday 2nd November

Next morning was an early one, seeing us up at around 4am to drive, then wait over coffee in the dark, for the dawn chorus to begin at Lake Eacham. Although the unseasonally dry weather may have been muting some of the birds, that was more than made up for by the sight of a flock of Tooth-billed Bowerbirds feeding in the half-light low down in a tree, followed by a group of Victoria's Riflebirds, feeding, calling and chasing only just above our head height. We added to that views of Wompoo Fruit-doves, Barred Cuckoo-shrikes, Spotted Catbird and many more birds, as well as Saw-shelled Turtles in the lake, and all before breakfast with a Fairy Gerygone, on our veranda back at Kookaburra Lodge.

After breakfast, just outside the motel, we were treated to nice views of a Collared Sparrowhawk circling over us. Then, to beat the Sunday day-trippers, we made our first stop at tranquil Lake Barrine to catch up with a few waterbirds and bush birds such as Brown Gerygone and Large-billed Scrubwren. From here, it was on down the Gillies Highway, as far as the magnificent old Cathedral Fig Tree, before driving to the excellent new Malanda Visitor Centre, with lunch next to the waterfall, popular with swimmers on that hot weekend. Continuing through the rolling Tableland countryside, our drive to Nerada Tea Plantation rewarded us with good views of feeding Lumholtz Tree Kangaroo. On our return to Yungaburra, we made a stop at dramatic Bromfield Crater, a mini Ngorongoro full of distant ducks and Sarus Cranes rather than gazelles and lions.

Back at Kookaburra Lodge by 4.40pm, we had time to relax before our very tasty dinner at Nick's Restaurant in the village. A bit of spotlighting at the Curtain Fig helped walk off the food, and gave us our first views of Green Ringtail Possum, a very high-up Leaf-tailed Gecko and a Long-nosed Bandicoot that just kept on coming, right to our feet!

## Day 3

## Monday 3rd November

We'd elected to eat a leisurely breakfast at 7.15, before driving the 2km or so to Lake Tinaroo. Stops produced birds like Golden-headed Cisticola and Plumed Whistling Duck, and at least 17 Bush Stone-curlews, lounging about among the perfect camouflage of dead leaves. Flowering bushes near the shoreline allowed us great looks at a male Scarlet Honeyeater, while the lake let us add more waterbirds, such as Australian Darter, to the list. Leaving the water we made for the Curtain Fig again, this time in daylight, where a pair of Pied Monarchs put on a show. The lovely two-storey hide of Hasties Swamp was our venue for morning tea, as well as great birds like the rare Freckled Duck, Pink-eared Duck, Glossy Ibis and White-necked Heron. The plug-hole of the sink had its regular Giant Green Tree Frog, just managing to share the space on this occasion with a White-lipped Green Tree Frog! A quick stop in Atherton for picnic dinner supplies was followed by a tasty lunch, under the fan at Quincan Cottage in Yungaburra, and a short break at the motel.

At 2.30 we set off for Herberton and Wondecla, on the drier western edge of the Tablelands. New additions included Jacky Winter and Yellow-tinted Honeyeater as well as Comb-crested Jacana on a pretty dam. Driving on a circuit through massive Rose Gums, we were soon back into one of the larger remaining protected tracts of high-altitude rainforest at Mt Hypipamee, also known as the Crater. Here we first saw the tiny Mountain Thornbill, endemic to the Wet Tropics, heard the strange song of a Golden Bowerbird, and gazed down into the deep, still water in the Crater itself, before settling to eat our picnic dinner as the Grey-headed Robins and Brush Turkeys finally headed off to roost. In spite of a deafening chorus for the first 15 minutes from cicadas, our spotlighting proved very successful, with good looks at all the species we found, consisting of six Common Brushtail Possums (some the Coppery variety), and three species of Ringtail Possums: one Lemuroid, one Green and one Herbert River. We also saw a ground-level Leaf-tailed Gecko and a few fireflies. Taking the dirt road shortcut back to Yungaburra produced good sightings of four Eastern Barn Owls and a quick Red-legged Pademelon.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 4th November

Yungaburra has beautiful trees and gardens, attracting birds so, after our 7.15am breakfast, we took a short walk round, seeing birds such as Dusky Honeyeater, before checking out to head for Granite Gorge and morning tea with Mareeba Rock Wallabies and the likes of Squatter Pigeons and Great Bowerbirds, among the immense granite boulders. Continuing a circuit past mango and coffee farms to bring us out at Mareeba, rural centre for numerous cattle stations and agricultural properties, we stopped to purchase a hat and batteries as well as local fruit. After photographing Eastern Grey Kangaroos on the golf course and ticking off Australian Bustard, our picnic lunch was enjoyed, but not shared, with Emus outside the Visitor Centre at Mareeba Wetlands, where Double-barred Finches fed on seed, Welcome Swallows had their nests and Green Pygmy Geese and Black Swans were easily seen from the veranda. Returning to the highway, we continued north with views of Eastern Osprey at the nest, and various waterbirds on Lake Mitchell. This proved to be our best day for raptors with, in

addition to Osprey, Pacific Baza, Black-shouldered, Black and Whistling Kite, Brown Goshawk, Nankeen Kestrel, White-bellied Sea-Eagle and Wedge-tailed Eagle.

Continuing north through the tiny village of Mt Molloy, once a thriving copper and timber town, to the rural community of Julatten, famous for its unmatched variety of bird species, we checked in at 5pm to Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge, with time to relax before a tasty dinner on the veranda, provided by owners Keith and Lindsay. We followed this with a little spotlighting, adding Northern Brown Bandicoot, Fawn-footed Melomys and Agile Wallaby to our mammal list, before retiring.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 5th November

A 6am morning walk in and around the grounds of Kingfisher Park rewarded us with views of Noisy Pitta, Red-browed Finch and Metallic Starling, as well as a chance to compare and separate the notoriously difficult Graceful and Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters, and all before a 7.30 breakfast. An hour later we were on the Peninsula Development Road that goes to the tip of Cape York. With only a morning we had to limit ourselves to reaching Mt Carbine. Still, we added to our list birds such as Galah, Pale-headed Rosella, Tawny Frogmouth, Australian Pratincole, Apostlebird and, very luckily, the nomadic Banded Honeyeater. Then it was back to Julatten, where we took a side road with a nice dam that provided better views than we'd had of Wandering Whistling-Duck and White-necked Heron, before we returned to Kingfisher Park for Lindsay's delicious lunch.

In the afternoon we drove up the dirt road to the cool of 950m on Mt Lewis, and found Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, as well as "cleaning up" on the last of the Wet Tropics endemics such as Fernwren, Atherton Scrubwren, Chowchilla and Golden Bowerbird. A Red-bellied Black Snake provided the reptile tick for the day, while Musky Rat Kangaroo was a new marsupial for us. Returning to Kingfisher Park, we still had time to go in on a sadly futile search for the Red-necked Crake, but we were well rewarded with excellent views of a Platypus directly below us in the creek. Dinner was once again provided by Lindsay on the veranda at Kingfisher Park.

## Day 6

## Thursday 6th November

We worked up an appetite for breakfast by doing another early morning walk around Kingfisher Park to see residents such as Pale-yellow Robin, Little Shrike-thrush and Spectacled Monarch as well as the goofy-looking Papuan Frogmouth. On checking out, we visited some of the local side roads between Julatten and Mt Molloy, to see not only Brown Falcon, female Eastern Koel, Yellow-breasted Boatbill, Northern Fantail, Leaden Flycatcher, but also the gem-like Lovely Fairy-wren, matched in colour by the Queensland opal jewellery at the Opal Bar, which solved a few holiday present requirements! Then it was time to leave the Tableland, and drop down the hill to the Coral Sea coast, for lunch at Cooya Beach. We then hunted out Mangrove Robin, saw Bar-tailed Godwit and Australian Pied Oystercatcher, and were very happy to find Rose-crowned Fruit-doves active in some fruiting trees. The Mossman River estuary at Newell Beach gave us our first Striated Heron, Grey-tailed Tattler and an uncommon Common Sandpiper.

From here it was only a half-hour drive to Daintree Village to check in at historic Red Mill House and relax with a glass of wine. As the bird songs gave way to frog calls, and the resident White-lipped Tree Frog ventured out from our veranda cabinet, hundreds of Spectacled Flying Foxes slipped by silently overhead and tempting scents

drifted up from the barbecue, where owners Andrew and Trish were cooking dinner for us to eat on the veranda. After a long day, and with a dawn start next day, we were all happy to retire early.

## Day 7

Friday 7th November

Waking to the liquid calls of Yellow Oriole, Black Butcherbird and Helmeted Friarbird, we did the short walk to the boat ramp ready for our 6am boat tour with Ian "Sauce" Worcester. Even without birds, a boat ride on the Daintree and its tributaries is always a treat, but we were more than happy to see two Black Bitterns, a Great-billed Heron, two nesting Papuan Frogmouths, Shining Flycatcher, Azure Kingfisher, Black-fronted Dotterel, Brahminy Kite and Pacific Baza, plus sapphire-like Harlequin beetles feeding on the native Hibiscus. By 8.30 we were more than ready for the large, delicious breakfast provided on the veranda at Red Mill House. We then set off to drive to catch the cable ferry across the Daintree River. Instantly enveloped by rainforest, with occasional clearings around residences and at places like the Tea Plantation and the Ice Cream Factory, we drove north via the stunning Alexandra Lookout, to Cape Tribulation, whose title speaks volumes for the feelings of Captain Cook who named it. With no such tribulations, we could relax over our picnic lunch by the pretty beach before retracing our steps, with walks at places such as Marija Boardwalk, where some of us finally saw Superb Fruit-dove. The Discovery Centre rewarded our climb of the tower with close looks at feeding Double-eyed Fig-Parrot, but sadly no Cassowary wanted to join our list.

Returning to Red Mill House to relax, we then drove the short distance to the Daintree Eco-Lodge, for a very good a la carte meal to the sounds of trickling water and bleating Wood Frogs. Before most residents had fallen asleep, I heard the persistent whoo-hoo of a Rufous Owl and whisked my guests out to see it clearly by spotlight at the front gate, before collecting a group of grateful American birders in their pyjamas for a look!

## Day 8

Saturday 8th November

Next morning at 6.30am, we set off on foot along Stewart Creek Road, where we caught up with a statuesque Black-necked Stork, before enjoying our final breakfast on the veranda while the Orange-footed Scrubfowl toiled endlessly in the garden. Saying farewell to Daintree, we made a few stops en route to Cairns, for Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, better views of Mistletoebird and, in the nick of time, the much-sought Beach Stone-curlew. The end of the North Queensland section of my guests' tour drew near. There was just time for coffee with Silver Gulls and tuneful Varied Honeyeaters on Cairns Esplanade before I said goodbye at the airport, my tour over, but my guests simply on the way to the next part of their exciting exploration of Australia.

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