

Australia - Queensland

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 May – 7 June 2015



Estuarine (Saltwater) Crocodile



Great-billed Heron



Plumed Whistling Duck



Red-winged Parrot

Report compiled by Carol Iles
Images courtesy of Geraldine and Ian Moore



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

This report covers the land-based part of the tour. The tour leader was Carol Iles (leader)

Day 1

Sunday 31st May

The group all met at 10am at Bay Village Resort, Cairns. After checking out we left for the north end of the Esplanade, following this to Centenary Lakes. Here we saw a number of water birds including Pacific Black Duck, Radjah Shelduck, Darter and Little Egret. We then moved on via Yorkeys Knob where we saw Bush Stone Curlews, to Cattana Wetlands, a reclaimed cane paddock and now a series of ponds. Here bush birds included Yellow Oriole, a female Leaden Flycatcher and White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike.

Leaving the coastal plain we turned west to climb the Dividing Range to Kuranda, passing under the wires of the Skyrail. Our first picnic lunch was eaten at the secluded Wrights Lookout where most birds were having a siesta, but a Dusky Honeyeater and some Silvereyes put in an appearance. Continuing west, just before Mareeba we turned onto the dusty Tinaroo Creek Road where we were able to stop as we liked and immediately encountered Pied Butcherbird and Great Bowerbird. Then a stop at a farm gate gave us our most productive half-hour yet with numerous species including Red-backed Fairy-wrens on wires and pipes, Rainbow and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets vying with Little and Noisy Friarbirds for nectar in the eucalypts, fluorescent green Red-winged Parrots, a perched Blue-winged Kookaburra, and a very surprised big male Agile Wallaby. We encountered our first Sarus Cranes before rejoining the highway, and then had a short stop at Tolga Scrub, a small remnant of the rainforest which once covered the whole Atherton Tableland, where hundreds of Spectacled Flying-foxes roost and where we surprised a few Red-legged Pademelons on the quiet track. Entering Yungaburra village, we paused at the Platypus-viewing blind, but were not in luck.

We reached our accommodation at Kookaburra Lodge and after checking in, had a lovely (big!) meal of barbecue ribs at Nick's Restaurant, and were persuaded to have the sticky date pudding too.

Day 2

Monday 1st June

We left at 6.30am and drove to Cathedral Fig Tree, stopping for a White-necked Heron en route. We drank coffee in the half-light, listening to Wompoo Fruit-Doves squabbling above us and watching a friendly Grey-headed Robin near our seats. The outer edge of the forest added more species including Golden Whistler, Bower's Shrike-thrush and Pied Monarch.

We returned to Kookaburra Lodge for breakfast, after which we left for Lake Barrine where we watched the gorgeous Cairns Birdwing and Ulysses butterflies in the garden, a huge Long-finned Eel which came up from under the moored tour boat, and Great Crested Grebes graced the lake surface.

Our second crater lake, Lake Eacham, was blissfully quiet in terms of people but a bit quiet for birds too, though the Saw-shelled Turtles and fish surfaced hopefully on our arrival. Moving on to the edge of man-made Lake Tinaroo, we encountered plenty of waterfowl including Australian Wood Duck and Purple Swamphen, plus scuttling Black-fronted Dotterels on the shoreline. At a second stop we found a roost of thousands of Plumed Whistling-Ducks, accompanied by our first Grey Teal.

More Plumed Whistling-Ducks greeted us at our lunch spot at Hasties Swamp (Nyleta National Park) as well as Magpie Geese, Australasian Grebes, delightful Pink-eared Ducks feeding by circling in pairs, and noisy White-cheeked Honeyeaters. Best of all, though, were the two Pacific Bazas spotted in a large eucalypt above the road.

After lunch we visited the Curtain Fig Tree where a male Victoria's Riflebird put in an appearance, high up with Australian Figbirds. Then, after an hour relaxing on our verandas, we returned to the blind on Peterson Creek in hopes of a Platypus. After a fruitless walk along the bank, in the fading light back at the bridge we found one cavorting just below the hide. At least we saw it!

Tonight we had dinner at Flynn's before an hour of spotlighting at the Curtain Fig, in the company of a pleasant Dutch couple, which yielded a tail-less Leaf-tailed Gecko, several Common Brushtails and a Green Ringtail Possum, as well as a Striped Possum, ripping its way noisily into a dead tree.

Day 3

Tuesday 2nd June

After a tasty 7.30am breakfast on our veranda, we set out to find ourselves a Lumholtz Tree Kangaroo, which we did, thanks to a worker at Nerada Tea. We followed this with a visit to Bromfield Crater where a Swamp Harrier cruised over the marsh and its distant ducks. Taking the back roads proved a good plan as a Grey Goshawk swooped over the road and landed close to us. On the road to Herberton we pulled over to watch a Square-tailed Kite rocking effortlessly over us, and later, from the front entrance of the historic old Royal Hotel where we had our lunch, we again sighted this species. In addition, we were serenaded by a territorial Grey Butcherbird almost close enough to touch.

Then it was on to Wondecla State Forest where most of the hoped-for species obliged. These comprised the hotly debated Fuscous/Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters (here a possible sub-species), Jacky Winter, Eastern Yellow Robin, Grey Shrike-thrush, Dusky Woodswallow and the elsewhere unpopular Noisy Miner. In addition we saw Comb-crested Jacana, Brolga, several Brown Falcons, and two Wedge-tailed Eagles seeing off a young White-bellied Sea-eagle. This proved our best 'raptor day' with nine species sighted. Unfortunately a family of Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos refused to allow close approach, giving only glimpses through the trees.

With birds still to see, it was time to leave for Mount Hypipamee where a male Golden Bowerbird proved the star. After a walk to the deep, eerie Crater we ate our picnic dinner in the welcome new picnic shelter and headed off to spotlight. Perhaps due to the showery weather, this was unusually quiet and yielded only Brushtail Possums, one of which was waddling comically along the road, one of the notorious Cane Toads, and a lone Cogger's (Northern Barred) Frog. Since everyone was still awake, we tried another venue near to Yungaburra and this was positively jumping with wildlife, giving us views of Red-legged Pademelons, two Giant White-tailed Rats, Brushtails and Green Ringtail Possums. Much better satisfied, we headed for bed.

Day 4

Wednesday 3rd June

After a 7.30am breakfast on the veranda accompanied by Silvereyes and a Pied Monarch, we took a short stroll in the village where delightful Double-eyed Fig-Parrots allowed us a lengthy look. Then, after checking out, we moved on and made our first stop at Rocky Creek memorial (site of a WWII hospital) where Scarlet Honeyeaters were numerous and unfortunately saw off our only Banded Honeyeater before everyone had seen it. Moving on,

we called at Mount Uncle Distillery before heading west. Our lunch stop was in the remarkable landscape of Granite Gorge where knee-high Mareeba Rock Wallabies snoozed between the enormous boulders, smug-looking Tawny Frogmouths sat motionless, just like another branch, and Squatter Pigeons waddled and cooed at our feet.

Next stop was for much larger macropods: Eastern Grey Kangaroos on Mareeba Golf Course, and Agile Wallabies on our way in to Mareeba Wetlands. En route we added Yellow-billed Spoonbill, White-faced Heron and Australian Bustard. Manager Greg told us an Echidna had been around, and then proceeded to heroically extract said prickly football from under the decking for us – our second monotreme of the trip. Welcome Swallows in the Visitor Centre and Green and Cotton Pygmy-Geese on the lake were some of the noted birds.

With the sun well over the yardarm we continued north on the highway, pausing to photograph an Eastern Osprey on its nest on Lake Mitchell, a huge man-made lake, before checking into Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge in Julatten where Carol's husband, Andrew was preparing our evening meal which we all ate outdoors under the canopy. A White-lipped Green Tree Frog was new here.

Day 5

Thursday 4th June

We began our day sitting quietly by Bushy Creek, waiting (in vain this time) for a Platypus to pass by, then wandered through the orchard where three Papuan Frogmouths were playing statues in a mango tree. At the edge of Kingfisher Park we heard a Metallic Starling which was a surprise for this time of the year: it was almost drowned out by rumbling 'tums', so we returned for breakfast on the veranda with Emerald Doves, Red-browed Finches, and Blue-faced, Macleay's, Lewin's and Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters at the feeders.

Since nearby Mount Lewis held the chance of several new species endemic to the Wet Tropics, we headed there and had a walk which resulted in us seeing White-throated Treecreeper (*race minor*), two pairs of Fernwren, Atherton and Yellow-throated Scrubwrens, Mountain Thornbill, Bridled and White-cheeked Honeyeaters, Eastern Spinebill and busy Chowchillas.

Driving down the mountain, we stopped at the handily located Highlander Tavern to order lunch to eat on the veranda at Kingfisher Park. After coffee we drove a couple of kilometres to Abattoir Swamp where flowering grevilleas were attracting noisy Brown Honeyeaters and where a male Rufous Whistler vied with them in song.

Moving on into Mount Molloy, a bird feeder gave us really good looks at Red-winged Parrots, including a couple of stunning males, and at the school we admired a Great Bowerbird's vast collection of pink, white and green 'bling'. Then we took a drive on the Peninsula Development Road that leads to the Tip - the tip of Cape York; Australia's northernmost point. Having only a few hours, however, we could only get as far as Maryfarms and Mount Carbine area but added charismatic Apostlebirds, comical Galahs, diminutive Diamond Doves, and got better looks at many other species including Australian Bustard and Fairy Martin.

With daylight still allowing, we drove to a local dam close to Kingfisher Park to look for a young Spotted Harrier which was spotted on a fencepost close to the road. To this we added an Australian Hobby which rocketed across the fields to land high in a distant tree, viewable through the telescope. With the light beginning to fade we returned to Kingfisher Park to sit by the creek and wait for a Platypus. A fortuitous flick of the torch caught

one directly below us, but prior to that we caught a quick view of a mammal far less often seen, a native Water Rat, swimming close to the bank below us. Dinner was taken at the nearby Highlander Tavern.

Day 6

Friday 5th June

We took a pre-breakfast stroll, catching sight of an Azure Kingfisher on Bushy Creek, Large-billed Scrubwren and Lemon-bellied Flycatcher new for the list, and Northern Broad-nosed Bats squeezed up together in the beams of the carport of a neighboring house. After breakfast accompanied by the birds on the veranda, we checked out, taking the back roads where possible to Mossman and crossing a ford at the South Mossman River before a short shop-stop at Woolworths.

Moving on, we stopped for a windy picnic lunch under the huge Beach Almond and Fig trees at Newell Beach where the Mossman River estuary gave us Crested Terns and a White-faced Heron. Still hunting for Beach Stone-curlew along the way, we stopped at several points before viewing the Barramundi ponds near Wonga. Radjah Shelducks, Pied Stilts and Gull-billed Terns dominated the scene, but new for the trip were Red-kneed Dotterels, a group of Wandering Whistling-Ducks, and a beautiful Black-necked Stork gliding over the open fields.

After an ice-cream we continued into Daintree to check in with Sally and Pete at Riverview Lodges. With light still for birding, we took a short stroll in the little village and tracked down our first Black Butcherbird and got better views of Yellow Oriole until the temptation to sit, drink in hand, on the wide veranda to watch hundreds of Cattle Egrets coming in to roost across the tranquil sweep of the Daintree River was just too strong to resist.

Dinner was only a few metres away across the road at the Daintree Store, newly decorated and with great fish and chips, among other tasty choices.

Day 7

Saturday 6th June

Today we had coffee and biscuits before walking down the steps to meet our boatman, 'Sauce' (Ian Worcester). The roosting Cattle Egrets were lifting off and a light mist was rising as we boarded at 6.45am for our birding boat trip on the Daintree River. The high tide kept us to the main river but that did nothing to prevent some excellent bird sightings, including Sacred, Little and Azure Kingfishers, Great-billed Heron, Helmeted (Horn-billed) Friarbird, Shining Flycatcher, Large-billed Gerygone, and a flock of eight Topknot Pigeons. We also saw a Common Tree Snake and a basking 3-metre Estuarine Crocodile. The weather was kind to us so we were well-pleased, but ready for our cooked breakfast at the Store by 9am.

Then it was time to drive, via the Ferry, across the Daintree, stopping at Alexandra Lookout for a perfect view of the Daintree River mouth and a new bird: an obliging Grey Whistler. Our next stop was Djindalba boardwalk where we saw what was believed to be a Marsh Snake hunting for lunch, before we sat to eat our own. New birds presented in the form of a Spectacled Monarch and a whooping male Superb Fruit-Dove.

At the Discovery Centre we strolled along the raised walkway but declined the climb up the tower. Back at the Visitor Centre we were treated to a close-up view of a young Green Python from the little reptile display. Then we drove on northwards via Thornton's Beach to the Ice Cream Company (for dessert) before taking a walk

further north at Marjja Boardwalk. This gave us our best bird of the day: 'that big chicken' which we were alerted to by a kind young foreign visitor proved to be an adult Cassowary, wandering along the tidal trickle through the mud and mangroves! With a brief stop at the beach to view Whimbrel in the telescope near crystal Cooper's Creek, we returned to the Discovery Centre as they were closing to hear that they'd had a Cassowary there too that afternoon. Happy enough with ours, we caught the ferry back to Daintree for drinks, bird-list and dinner at the Store as we'd liked it so much last night.

Day 8

Sunday 7th June

Some of the group went for an early leg-stretch down Stewart Creek Road, but perhaps the relative chill was keeping most birds in bed. After breakfast at the Store we checked out before our drive back to Cairns, stopping at a private pond where close-up views of Hardhead were nice. We had a moment's concern on seeing a road closed sign but it was for the following weekend's Ironman race so all was well for our scenic run along the coastal Captain Cook Highway.

At Rex Lookout we saw brave souls preparing to jump off under a hang-glider, and hundreds of Agile Wallabies were lounging on the vacant blocks by the highway north of Cairns. For our last new bird of the trip we had to settle for the introduced Nutmeg Mannikin before making it to the airport in good time for a flight to Brisbane, sadly without Carol, for the next leg of the tour.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!