

Queensland's Rainforests and Great Barrier Reef

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 21 August 2005

Report compiled by Tony Smith



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Tony Smith (Naturetrek)
Ellen Terrell (local guide - Cairns)
Glen Thredlo and Tim O'Reilly (local guides - Lamington)

Tour participants: Ruth Barrick
Mary Diserens
Neville Diserens
Alan Durdell
Helen Durdell
David Meads
Penny Raynor
Ted Raynor
John Roberts
Val Roberts

Day 1 – 3

Saturday 6th – Monday 8th August

London-Brisbane-Cairns

Extensions both pre and post tour are so popular on Naturetrek's Australian tours that it was no surprise that only three of us met at Heathrow on 6 August. Our Emirate's flight was slightly delayed but we were soon on the first leg of our journey, bound for Dubai. At Dubai Airport John, Val, Alan and Helen joined us. There was a brief touchdown at Singapore and then we were in the air again. Dawn on 8 August found us on our final approach to Brisbane where we landed at 08.30. We changed aircraft and at 12.30 we finally landed at Cairns.

Ellen, our guide was waiting for us and we were whisked off to our very comfortable hotel. Here we met David and Ruth, two more of our group, who had enjoyed a few days in Cairns already. Massive triple-decker sandwiches were placed before us but we were eager to get out and see some birds.

Cairns' famous Esplanade was only a couple of minutes walk from the hotel. We knew that the tide would be too far out for ideal bird finding conditions but our necessarily short visit was still worthwhile. Many herons and Australian White Pelicans were out on the mudflats and with them were Royal Spoonbills (4) and Australian White Ibises. Most of the waders were obviously beyond our vision on the distant tideline but we still enjoyed the Far Eastern Curlews with their impossibly long decurved bills, Whimbrels and Masked Lapwings. Several Gull-billed Terns were hawking over the flats and a couple of Caspian Terns flew by. In the fruiting trees along the Esplanade we soon found the highly local Varied Honeyeater as well as numerous Figbirds.

The afternoon was ebbing away so we quickly ordered a taxi. Having stopped briefly at a bookshop so that those who wanted to do so could buy a guide to Australian mammals, we arrived at the botanical gardens and centenary lakes. This beautifully preserved rainforest features many impressive trees and includes a paperbark swamp accessed by a boardwalk. Visitors can gain an impression of how most of coastal Queensland might have looked before the arrival of man. From the boardwalk we watched our first Australian Brush Turkeys stalking through the undergrowth. Much more was to be found in the forest edges around the lake. Honeyeaters included the large Helmeted Friarbird, the brilliant Yellow Honeyeater and the small Brown Honeyeater with its rich song. We watched a Brown-backed Honeyeater building its tiny nest that overhung the water's edge. Other

birds that were much appreciated included Brahminy Kites, Little Black Cormorants, some brilliant Rainbow Bee-eaters and our first Suphur-crested Cockatoo. Just before we had to leave we found the similarly plumaged Black Butcherbird and Spangled Drongo sitting in the same tree. Nearby was a party of juvenile Metallic Starlings. This bird usually migrates south to Queensland from Papua New Guinea to breed in the rainy season. This year had been a mercifully wet one after years of punishing drought. The appearance of these starlings, fledging much earlier than usual points, hopefully, towards a good season for the rainforest specialities of Queensland.

We then got a taxi back to the hotel where we met Penny and Ted who had arrived several days before and had been visiting Kuranda when we reached Cairns. There followed a superb oriental dinner, mainly Indonesian in content. Afterwards the group bravely attended the log-call and the briefing about tomorrow's trip to the Great Barrier Reef. However, I could see that jet-lag and almost no sleep on the plane for many had taken its toll. We soon dispersed for a well-earned night's rest.

Day 4

Tuesday 9th August

Green Island – Cairns Esplanade

Weather: Wind fresh SE and rising; sunny at first then showers.

This morning we were eagerly anticipating our first visit to the Great Barrier Reef. We sailed on the large and fast Ocean Adventure's catamaran to Green Island on the inner reef. The voyage lasted just one hour and we were soon alongside the jetty. We were hardly ashore when we experienced a major highlight. A Humpback Whale surfaced several times, breaching, blowing and on one occasion showing the extremely long flipper, typical of the species. The tide was high as we landed and large numbers of Eastern Reef Egrets were perched in the trees and standing in groups on the beach.

Green Island is covered in dense forest but a good boardwalk encircles most of the island. After a short walk around the central complex we began a trip in a glass-bottomed boat to view the marine life. Here on the inner reef the sea is extremely shallow and we were soon absorbed in viewing the fabulous array of corals as well as shoals of multi-coloured fish that included the engaging Batfish, Giant Trevally, Yellow-tailed Fusiliers, Sergeant-major Fish and tiny but brilliant Coral Fish.

This year there seemed to be even more tourists than usual and we struggled to find places to sit in the open-air restaurant. Nevertheless, we were soon enjoying a superb lunch that included some delicious seafood. Lunch was enlivened by the many birds that emerged from the forest to forage amongst the tables for scraps. Buff-banded Rails were incredibly common; Silvereyes appeared in noisy flocks; even Eastern Reef Egrets landed on empty tables to seize giant prawns that had been left by the visitors. For us, as onlookers, it was a somewhat chaotic if rather amusing experience.

After lunch we set off to walk a complete circuit of the island. Away from the noisy Visitors' Centre, the rainforest was quiet and peaceful. All the inhabitants both human and avian were tucking into the vast quantities of free food back at the restaurant. Only the silent, brilliant wings of tropical butterflies caught our eyes. Beyond the boardwalk lies the remains of an ancient and long defunct coral reef. This is often used as a high tide roost and today was no exception. We enjoyed close views of Crested Terns here, and a Little Tern landed

amongst them; Whimbrel stood waiting for the tide to turn and a Turnstone foraged along the water's edge. Two years ago I found a single Pacific Golden Plover here, in perhaps less than ideal habitat. Today another Pacific Golden Plover stood amongst the Whimbrel on the small roosting area.

As we continued on our walk one of the pair of resident Ospreys flew by, carrying a large fish but it was dwarfed when a pair of magnificent White-bellied Sea-eagles hung overhead in the fresh wind, providing us with superb views.

Another highlight of the day was the finding of a number of White-capped Noddies. Unlike the Common Noddy, these birds nest in trees rather than on the ground. Green Island is, therefore, ideal for them but they are scarce even here. On this occasion we were able to watch small numbers that were roosting on anchored boats just off the jetty.

Since nobody was interested in snorkelling or swimming we decided to catch the early boat back to the mainland. There was just enough time to visit the underwater observatory at the jetty. We had close views of a variety of fish and corals including the tiny but very charismatic Clownfish, a vision of orange, black and white that had recently starred in the immensely popular film "Finding Nemo".

We were soon at sea again. As we neared the coast, Ruth spotted an immature Black-necked Stork, a scarce species here. Everyone enjoyed views of this bird. Back at Cairns most of the group assembled on the Esplanade. As expected the tide was too far out. However, on this occasion we had the time to undertake a careful telescope search of the mudflats. A number of new birds were located, including Sacred Kingfisher, Red-capped and Black-fronted Dotterels, Lesser Sand Plovers, Terek Sandpipers and Great Knot. There was also another Black-necked Stork amongst innumerable pelicans, terns, herons and ibises. For many the sight of an adult Peregrine Falcon that flew down the main road and landed on the balcony rail of a block of flats was memorable.

At dusk we walked into town to witness the departure of the Spectacled Flying-foxes as they set off from their roosts to seek food. We assembled at Donnini's Restaurant to enjoy a delicious Italian meal.

Day 5

Wednesday 10 August

The Outer Reef : Michaelmas Cay

Weather: A change to warm sunny conditions and clear skies, with a light SE breeze becoming moderate in the afternoon.

Today was a real highlight with a visit to the outer reef and the seabird colony on Michaelmas Cay. We sailed in Ocean Spirit, a large and very comfortable catamaran that was also very fast.

As we left Cairns harbour we saw a few Crested Terns roosting on the navigation beacons but the rest of the journey was largely uneventful. Around 10.30 the low-lying shape of Michaelmas Cay appeared on the horizon. In contrast to Green Island, Michaelmas Cay is little more than a sandy islet rising only a few metres above sea-level with a sparse covering of grasses. Each year the geography of the island changes as it is shaped by storms. As we approached, Common Noddies and Sooty Terns began to appear in ever-increasing numbers. The

Ocean Spirit anchored close inshore and we watched as two Great Frigatebirds wheeled over a screaming mass of frightened terns.

For once birds took a back seat as we boarded a semi-submersible boat for a wonderful trip over a section of the Great Barrier Reef. The experience was akin to cruising in a submarine. Looking out through the glass windows we saw an array of corals including Spaghetti, Brain, Plate and Staghorn. Giant Clams lay on the sea-bed amongst the delicate waving shapes of Sea Fans. Fish were abundant and of every conceivable colour and size. They included emerald Parrotfish, golden Rabbitfish, a huge Buffalo Fish, striped Sergeant-majors and many more. Several Green Turtles were grazing on the seabed and we even countered an Epaulette Shark. The whole experience was quite extraordinary.

We enjoyed two sessions on the sandy beaches of Michaelmas Cay observing the terns and other seabirds. Unusually the two Great Frigatebirds stayed around and one even perched on a wooden post. Several thousand noisy terns provided a fine spectacle. Sooty and Common Noddies formed the bulk of the colony with smaller numbers of Crested Terns. The photographers had a good time with these very approachable seabirds. One puzzle baffled both Ellen and I. On our last tour, conducted at the same time of year the terns were mid-way through their breeding season. Today the adult Common Noddies assembled on the beach in large flocks but with no sign of breeding or of juveniles. The Sooty Terns were feeding many juveniles that had already fledged. Clearly the breeding season was virtually over. The answer to this was as follows:- here on the Great Barrier Reef the breeding cycle of the terns is only 8 months, so each year breeding activity takes place about four months earlier than the year before. A careful scan of the colony revealed two rare species – singles of White-capped Noddy and Lesser Crested Tern.

Later in the afternoon Ellen was able to arrange a boat excursion to the other side of the island that is not normally accessible to visitors. Brown Boobies were roosting here and with them were many beautiful White-naped and a few Little Terns. The return voyage to Cairns became a convivial affair with Australian folk music and free champagne. In the freshening wind the engine was switched off and we had the chance to experience a voyage on a quite large ship under full sail. It was a perfect end to another excellent day!

Day 6

Thursday 11th August

Cairns – Yungaburra

Weather: Warm and sunny with little wind; cooler in the evening.

After breakfast we checked out of the Bay Village and met Trevor who was to be our driver for the next phase of the tour. We stopped off for a final look at the mudflats off the Esplanade. On this occasion the tide had risen a little. As well as the usual terns, herons and pelicans we had more Great Knot and a small group of adult Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, just arrived from their breeding grounds in Siberia. The pair of Beach Stone Curlew was still in residence and the whole scene was overlooked by the pair of Peregrines from their lofty perch on a high-rise hotel. Best of all we finally located a pair of tiny Double-eyed Fig Parrots and had unusually close views of this hard to find bird.

Setting off through the suburbs we quickly left Cairns behind us as we drove south across the coastal plain. A brief stop at some paddocks produced a number of Agile Wallabies, our first species of marsupial. Roadside

birds included a pair of Bush Stone Curlews, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Forest Kingfisher, Brown Goshawk and Australian Black-shouldered Kite.

Further on there were many cane fields and though the Australian sugar industry is in danger of collapse, the nearby refinery was still pouring clouds of steam into the air. Another brief stop and we were watching a noisy roost of Spectacled Flying-foxes together with our first Yellow-spotted Honeyeater.

Our route now lay along the Gillies Highway, a steep and winding road that climbed ever upwards into hills covered in rich tropical rainforest full of cycads. Eventually the road emerged onto the green, rolling farmlands of the Atherton Tablelands. The landscape was reminiscent of Devon and even the soil was a rich red.

Soon we arrive at the small town of Yungaburra and checked into our comfortable accommodation at Eden House. While waiting for lunch we watched a brilliant male Scarlet Honeyeater feeding in a flowering bottle-brush together with Dusky and Lewin's Honeyeaters.

In the afternoon we drove over the farmlands looking for cranes. Soon we found a flock of about 120 Sarus Cranes in an area of fields. Raptors were also very common here on the tablelands and included Black and Whistling Kites, Black-shouldered Kites, Brown Falcons and Nankeen Kestrels. In some places there remained remnant patches of forest, now enjoying legal protection. In one such spot a superb Grey Goshawk was perched close to the road.

Recently Ellen had discovered a fine wetland on private land. She had obtained permission from the owner of Kaban Park Farm for us to visit the site. It proved a fantastic place. It was in fact a large lake, created by a dam, set in farmland and surrounded by eucalyptus woodland. Several hundred Brolga Cranes were feeding in the fields and we had great views of them flying in and dancing. The lake was covered in water lilies and also in wildfowl. There were hundreds of ducks including Wood Duck, Pacific Duck, Grey Teal and Hardhead; Comb-crested Jacanas ran about on the lily pads; Little Pied and Little Black Cormorants were roosting in some dead trees, the largest of which held the huge nest of a pair of White-bellied Sea-eagles with both adults in attendance. The woodland was also full of birds which included flocks of Pale-headed Rosellas, Crested Pigeons, Noisy Miners and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets as well as a family party of Red-backed Fairy-wrens.

It was hard to tear ourselves away but the light was fading as we finally reached Hypipamee National Park. We took a trail to view "The Crater" an impressive volcanic formation whilst Ellen and Trevor set up a sumptuous picnic dinner. We watched Grey Fantails and our first Grey-headed Robins and then ate in the dark.

Afterwards we tried spotlighting sessions along the approach road to "The Crater" and later at nearby Possum Valley. The day finished with good views of Common Brushtail Possums and the endearing Lemuroid Possum. It had been a long but very productive day.

Day 7

Friday 12th August

Atherton Tablelands

Weather: Sunny spells but often overcast.

Just before sunrise we were parked at the edge of the Danbulla State Forest, a large block of natural rainforest. We walked a trail leading to the famous Cathedral Fig Tree, an absolutely enormous strangler-fig. In the grey light of dawn there were no tourists here and the rainforest echoed to the calls of Spotted Catbirds, Eastern Whipbirds and Chowchillas. As we moved quietly along the trail we came across several Musky Rat Kangaroos foraging on the forest floor. This engaging little animal is the smallest and most primitive member of the kangaroo family. Around the Cathedral Fig Tree many birds were feeding on the fruit. They included Topknot Pigeons, Wompoo Fruit-doves and Spotted Catbirds.

As the sun rose we returned to the forest edge. As is often the case with rainforest birding, birds were often difficult to see but included the endemic Bower's Shrike-thrush, Eastern Whipbird, Brown Gerygone and Red-browed Firetail. The open grassland beyond the forest was not without interest. Some delightful Red-backed Fairy-wrens perched obligingly on a barbed wire fence together with Golden-headed Cisticolas.

We enjoyed an excellent breakfast at the café overlooking Lake Barrine. This large lake is also set in pristine rainforest. The only birds of interest on the water were Great Crested Grebes and our first Dusky Moorhens. As we made our way slowly along the trails we had time to enjoy the atmosphere of the forest and to admire a couple of enormous Kauri Trees. Birding continued to require hard work but with perseverance we recorded Chowchilla, Atherton and Large-billed Scrub-Wrens, Pale-yellow Robins and Victoria's Riflebird. Most appreciated was a superb Pied Monarch, a striking black and white flycatcher that showed well for everyone.

We stopped briefly at Eden House and then drove to Tolga where we admired a selection of beautiful artefacts made from discarded pieces of forest hardwoods. We were treated to a short demonstration of wood-turning and Helen was treated to the exhibition piece – a very nice spinning top. We enjoyed a quick but tasty lunch and were then on the road again.

Soon we arrived at Hasties Swamp, a marshy lake set in farmland and bordered by eucalyptus. A large, two-tier hide gave us excellent views over the entire wetland. Waterbirds were present in large numbers and great variety. Hordes of Magpie Geese and Plumed Whistling Duck crowded along the water's edge. Out on the open surface of the lake were Australian Grebes, Grey Teal, Hardheads and a flock of very attractive Pink-eared Ducks. A Kookaburra attempting to subdue a snake was watched with fascination by our group. Other highlights produced Azure Kingfisher, a Red-kneed Dotterel, a Marsh Sandpiper and a Wood Sandpiper, that is extremely scarce here and was a new bird for Ellen.

It was hard to leave but we had an appointment to keep at a quiet spot overlooking the Barron River. Here, in the evening, we enjoyed fine views of four Platypus diving for food. Nearby was a small roost of Rufous Night Herons and a group of three Cotton Pygmy Geese. It had been a very long day but immensely enjoyable.

Day 8

Saturday 13th August

Yungaburra – Julatten

Weather: A clear and sunny day, cold in the early morning and evening, otherwise warm.

Before sunrise we arrived at Lake Eacham, a beautiful lake set in pristine rainforest. As the sun appeared many birds became active around the edge of the main clearing. We were extremely fortunate to find a fruiting tree that was soon full of feeding birds such as Victoria's Riflebirds (including 3 males), Brown Cuckoo-doves, Wompoo Fruit-dove and Barred Cuckoo-shrike. Best of all was a single Tooth-billed Bowerbird, a species that is always hard to find at this time of year. Other notable species at Lake Eacham included White-throated Treecreeper, Little Shrike-thrush and a pair of King Parrots.

We returned to Eden House for breakfast and to collect our belongings and then set off again. Having collected our picnic lunch at Tolga, we made a stop at Rocky Creek War Memorial Park. Amongst the dry eucalyptus woodland were Spotted and Striated Pardalotes, White-throated Gerygone, White-throated Honeyeater and a Lemon-bellied Flycatcher. The rainforest and its birds were temporarily behind us as we drove northwards, through dry bush country more typical of the Outback.

The middle of the day was spent exploring Granite Gorge, a private reserve set in dry, rocky hills. This was unfamiliar habitat for us and new birds came thick and fast. Perhaps the most popular was a pair of Tawny Frogmouths that were roosting in a tree. Other new species included Squatter Pigeon, Grey-crowned Babbler, Noisy Friarbird and Fairy Gerygone. We were able to climb over the boulder-strewn lip of the gorge where we enjoyed close views of a group of confiding Mareeba Rock Wallabies. After a tasty picnic lunch we pushed on to Mareeba. The golf course at Mareeba is home to a group of about forty Eastern Grey Kangaroos. We had permission to enter the golf course to see these animals. Despite this there arose a slight altercation between us and an irate golfer who did not seem to realise that golf courses were established for the use of naturalists and wildlife!

We arrived at the Kingfisher Park in the late afternoon. The rainforest grounds of Kingfisher Park are always alive with birds and in the short time available we added Spectacled Monarch and Macleays Honeyeater to the list.

Dinner was served in the open air. After the soup course Keith, one of the managers, took us for a short walk to where we had superb views of a pair of Lesser Sooty Owls. The birds were nesting in a hole in a gum tree at the edge of the forest. The nest contained two youngsters, one of which also appeared at the entrance to the nest-hole. I confess to being extremely pleased to see this charismatic bird at last! Although Kingfisher Park is a well-known site for Lesser Sooty Owl, I had failed to see it during several previous visits. On our way back to tackle the main course of our dinner we stopped to view a Barn Owl.

As we assembled to call the log, the temperature plummeted and some of our group donned heavy coats, woolly hats and even gloves!

Day 9

Sunday 14th August

Mt. Lewis – Mareeba Wetlands – Mt Molloy

Weather: Very cool at both ends of the day, but generally clear and sunny with a fresh breeze.

Most of the group were up before breakfast and as the light improved we began birding the rainforest trails in Kingfisher Park. We soon located a gaudy Noisy Pitta that was hopping about in the middle of a broad trail oblivious to our presence. A Yellow-breasted Boatbill was calling close to the complex and most of the group caught up with this tiny but elusive bird. Other species seen included Lewin's, Macleay's and Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters, a nice Spectacled Monarch, several Yellow-footed Scrubfowl and Emerald Doves.

After breakfast we set off for Mt. Lewis that rises to 3,000 feet and is covered in dense, natural rainforest. Fortunately the steep access road was in good condition and we encountered no difficulty in reaching the clearing at the end.

Although the weather was not ideal – sunny, but cold and windy – we made the best of it. Around the edge of the clearing we found the spectacular White-cheeked Honeyeater as well as some dowdy Mountain Thornbills. Then we took a long trail through the heart of the forest to a small pool, the remains of a long-defunct tin-mining operation. Although birds remained hard to find, with patience we located some excellent species. One highlight was watching a pair of Chowchillas turning over the leaf litter on the forest floor. Behind them followed a couple of Yellow-throated Scrubwrens and a single Fernwren, a very localised endemic. The smaller birds were ready to pounce on any insects overlooked by the larger Chowchillas. We had a quick look at the bower of a Golden Bowerbird, watched several Large-billed Scrubwrens and photographed a large Black Snake by the pool before returning for lunch at Kingfisher Park.

After lunch we set off south to the Mareeba Wetlands Reserve. Set in dry eucalyptus woodland, this reserve features a large freshwater lagoon overlooked by a well-sited information centre and viewing platform. Large numbers of waterbirds were present on the lake. The more notable species included our first Wandering Whistling Ducks and Green Pygmy Geese as well as Cotton Pygmy Geese, Hardheads, cormorants and herons. By far the rarest species was Freckled Duck. A flock of six were present and showed well. This endemic species is elusive and nomadic, hard to see anywhere and yet this year several flocks had been found in Queensland, far to the north of their usual range. We walked along the lakeshore to get closer to the Freckled Ducks and on the walk we also saw a Leaden Flycatcher, several Double-barred Finches and a flock of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins. En route from Mareeba Wetlands to Mt. Molloy we made several stops and noted more mannikins and Double-barred Finches as well as our first Little Friarbirds and a fine Blue-winged Kookaburra.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the little town of Mt. Molloy. Ellen showed us two bowers of the Great Bowerbird and we saw at least eight individuals in the area. Other highlights included good numbers of Blue-faced Honeyeaters, our first Red-winged Parrots, a Collared Sparrowhawk and stunning views of a Square-tailed Kite, always a scarce bird here.

We returned for a dinner at Kingfisher Park that was attended briefly by a Fawn-footed Melonys. It was David's birthday and the meal ended with the demolition of a large and delicious birthday cake.

Day 10

Monday 15th August

Julatten – Daintree

Weather: Warm and sunny with no wind and clear skies.

Today the change in the weather made for a very pleasant day. We began with a good pre-breakfast exploration of the many trails around Kingfisher Park. The light was better than it had been yesterday morning and the colours of the Noisy Pitta were simply stunning. Most of the rainforest birds were becoming familiar to us but we enjoyed the Orange-footed Scrubfowl scratching in the leaf-litter, the Spectacled Monarchs, an immature Grey Goshawk perched in a tree and a fine range of parrots and honeyeaters. Down by the creek we located a Large-billed Gerygone that was new for us.

Having packed, we assembled for breakfast only to learn that a Lesser Sooty Owl was roosting on a beam of one of the open-sided shelters. We were treated to superlative views of this charismatic owl in broad daylight. Sadly it was now time to bid farewell to Keith and Lindsay who had been such wonderful hosts.

The road north took us through pristine high altitude rainforest. We stopped to take photographs from a lookout that gave wonderful views down to Mossman, the coastal plain and the Coral Sea far below. Soon we were driving through vast expanses of sugar cane. We stopped briefly at Mossman to refuel the coach. Mossman is a very pleasant little town but as its economy relies largely on sugar, its future is somewhat uncertain.

Driving further north we arrived on the banks of the Daintree River. Once we had crossed on the ferry we were again in a world of rainforest. Although some of the land here remains in private hands, the authorities have effectively blocked further commercial development by a refusal to install mains electricity. Our first stop was at Alexandra's Lookout that provided stunning views over the rainforest, the mouth of the Daintree River and some islands in the Coral Sea, far below. We enjoyed a picnic lunch at Jindalba and then set off on a circular walk through the rainforest. Progress here was easy due to a boardwalk that had a wealth of informative signs for the visitor. We enjoyed the sight of many butterflies including the spectacular blue Ulysses and the orange, black and white Lacewings. Although it was now the middle of the day and quite hot, a number of birds were seen including a Pied Monarch and several Little Shrike-thrushes.

Once back at the coach, it was only a matter of minutes before we arrived at the Daintree Rainforest Environmental Centre. This facility features a fine interpretive centre with every technological teaching aide, many boardwalks and overhead walkways and a massive tower reaching to a dizzy height above the forest canopy. Its many visitors can learn everything they might wish to know about Queensland's rainforests. Although we saw relatively few birds here, I think our group enjoyed the experience of seeing the various levels of rainforest at close hand. The photographers certainly enjoyed the opportunity to film White-lipped Green Tree Frogs roosting in the interpretive centre.

In the late afternoon we finally arrive at the Heritage Lodge and were soon installed in our very comfortable wooden chalets, hidden deep in the forest. We had enjoyed another memorable day.

Day 11

Tuesday 16th August

Daintree River – Cape Tribulation

Weather: Hot, clear and sunny with a freshening SE breeze in the afternoon.

Everyone was looking forward to our planned cruise on the Daintree River today. We left early and had time to drive around some of the backroads on an unsuccessful search for Cassowary. We met Leigh, our boatman, at 07.00. With a fine sunrise unfolding behind us we cruised slowly upstream. The tide was quite high but ebbing strongly. Leigh explained the ecology of the mangrove forest as we drifted up silent, secret creeks lined with tall trees. Several pairs of striking Shining Flycatchers flitted amongst the mangrove roots; brilliant Azure, Forest and Sacred Kingfishers perched along the water's edge, oblivious to our boat; several dowdy Common Sandpipers, a reminder of home, fed along the muddy edge of the mangroves. Many other birds were seen but there were three highlights. A White-eared Monarch showed well to everyone as it bathed, perching in low vegetation; a Yellow Oriole was new for the trip; finally, with the jetty in sight Leigh pointed out a large Papuan Frogmouth on its daytime roost in a riverside tree. This was our last chance of finding this sought-after bird and I was feeling distinctly edgy but yet again Leigh produced the goods, as he had on other tours.

Birds were far from being the only focus of our cruise. We saw some equally interesting reptiles. A slender Northern Green Tree Snake lay long an exposed limb, overhanging the water. A huge Amethystine Python was equally lethargic on its bed of vines. Finally, a massive and somewhat menacing Saltwater Crocodile was located at the water's edge. It was not easy to forget these top predators are potential man-eaters!

Once ashore we had a couple of quick looks for Cassowary and then ate breakfast at the Heritage Lodge. Next we called in at Marrdja Boardwalk Trail. I had never visited this locality but was very impressed by the excellent access to the mangroves and the high quality of the interpretive material available to the visitor. Within the silent mangroves birds were few. We found a pair of Large-billed Gerygones building a fragile nest. Then David struck gold by finding a Little Kingfisher beneath a bridge. This tiny mangrove specialist is always hard to find but this individual posed for half an hour. It even caught a tiny fish which it proceeded to kill and swallow.

Next we drove out to Cape Tribulation named by Captain Cook after his ship had been holed crossing the Great Barrier Reef. It was a beautiful spot with white sandy beaches, rainforest reaching down to the shoreline and fine views of the Coral Sea. Again we enjoyed a reptilian highlight when a huge Goanna (aka Laced Monitor) walked slowly across the picnic area, no doubt on the lookout for food.

Food was now on our agenda. We enjoyed a delicious lunch at the Dragonfly Café, set deep in the forest. The grounds provided views of brilliant Cairns Birdwings, Swallowtails and other butterflies as well as huge White-lipped Tree Frogs and Saw-shelled Turtles around the pond. A quick stop to view an impressive stand of Fan Palms and we were back at Heritage Lodge, ready to pack for the last phase of our adventure.

Day 12

Wednesday 17th August

Daintree – Cairns – Brisbane – Lamington

Weather: Spells of rain around the Daintree and at Cairns; sunny at Brisbane but distinctly cold at O'Reilly's.

We left Heritage Lodge at first light and crossed the Daintree River on the ferry. Despite a few spells of rain we enjoyed fine views of dramatic hills covered in rainforest, sandy beaches and offshore islands as we drove south down the coast to Cairns. We arrived in time for a quick look at the Esplanade. Perversely the tide was quite high but our scopes and tripods were stowed away in readiness for the flight. Nevertheless, we noted an increase in waders since our last visit including a number of Grey-tailed Tattlers and a Curlew Sandpiper, both new for the trip. We said our farewells to Trevor, our trusty driver, and checked in for our flight.

By 13.00 we were in the domestic terminal of Brisbane Airport and soon were setting off in a coach bound for O'Reilly's and Lamington National Park. Our route took us first along the heavily-developed coastal plain where industrial complexes, new housing and many theme parks could be seen. Soon we set off westwards into the hinterland. Our route now lay through a varied and pleasant landscape of cultivated valleys and steep hills cloaked in open eucalyptus forest. The last part of the trip took us up very steep mountainsides on a very narrow road to the forest. We saw a few birds, mainly at lower elevations and they included flocks of Galahs and a White-bellied Sea-eagle.

The journey took two and a half hours broken only at Conungra where Ruth was waiting for us with a delicious picnic meal. It was early evening when we arrived at the famous O'Reilly's Guesthouse. As the baggage was unloaded we took stock of dozens of Brush Turkeys jostling on the lawn together with our first Red-necked Pademelon, a tiny species of kangaroo. We settled into our comfortable rooms and prepared for dinner.

Day 13

Thursday 18th August

Lamington National Park – O'reilly's Guest House

Weather: Sunny, clear and calm but chilly in the early morning and evening.

This morning we met at 06.45 for a guided bird walk, led by Tim O'Reilly. Even before Tim arrived, the trees outside the guesthouse were full of birds, eagerly anticipating a handout. New for us were the gorgeous gold and black Regent Bowerbirds and many Satin Bowerbirds. When the food was put out a squabbling mass of bowerbirds descended on the fruit whilst Brush Turkeys patrolled the ground below. Crimson Rosellas, together with a few King Parrots were everywhere, but a shy Wonga Pigeon patrolled the edge of the lawn, keeping close to the bushes.

When the food was gone we joined other guests for a circuit through the rainforest. New birds came thick and fast, including Eastern Yellow Robins, White-browed Scrubwrens and lovely Eastern Spinebills. An Eastern Whipbird, normally an extremely skulking species gave extraordinary views.

After a sumptuous breakfast Glenn Threlfo, who was to be our guide for the day, joined us. After a short coach ride we entered the rainforest for a walk to Python Rock Lookout. The trail took us through some splendid rainforest but as usual birding in this habitat was sometimes hard. All three species of scrubwren together with

Brown Gerygone were common but we also located Brown and Striated Thornbills. The highlights were undoubtedly a pair of striking Crested Shrike-tits, amazing views of two pairs of Logrunners aggressively displaying at each other, and a Green Catbird.

Just before lunch we drove out of the rainforest to Luke's Ranch where we saw a pair of Peregrines over their nesting cliff and finally, a pair of magnificent Wedge-tailed Eagles. Lunch was a rather hurried affair as we were keen to get out again.

In the afternoon we birded Duck Creek Road. This, often, steep dirt track descends through rainforest until it meets the surprisingly sharp interface with open eucalyptus woodland. There was a great deal of activity in the eucalyptus. Both Red-browed and White-throated Treecreepers showed well as did Buff-rumped Thornbills. In many ways the most appreciated performer was a Paradise Riflebird that tantalised many of the group before it finally behaved itself! As we entered an area where the woodland was low and there were many areas of grassland, a couple of Red-necked Wallabies crossed the road. Glenn announced that this was a site for Spotted Quail-thrush. Having looked for them unsuccessfully here, I was more dubious. On this occasion we were lucky to have several views of this elusive bird in flight – the length of the grass precluded us from seeing them on the ground.

On the way home we stopped several times to enjoy stunning views over the blue mountain ranges, mostly cloaked in forest even now. It was the perfect end to a very successful day.

Day 14

Friday 19th August

Lamington – Beaudesert

Weather: Cool at first and then becoming warm and sunny.

This morning we had an early breakfast and at 08.00 met Tim O'Reilly who was to be our guide for the day. During the morning we gradually worked our way down Duck Creek Road to the lowlands. For many of us the day's major highlight came as soon as we entered the eucalyptus forest. Mary announced that she had just seen a Koala from the bus. After an emergency stop we soon found this fabulous animal sitting high in the fork of a tree. On my few previous encounters with Koalas the animals have almost always been asleep. This large individual was, however, wide awake and gazed imperiously out over his forest home.

Further down the mountain we stopped at a colony of Bell Miners. These attractive green members of the honeyeater family were very approachable and the forest rang with their chiming calls. One of our target species was Glossy Black Cockatoo, an endangered bird that lives almost entirely on the seeds of the Casurrina Tree. They are not easy to find but Tim located a pair feeding high up on a steep slope. It required somewhat of a strenuous scramble to find them, but fortunately they stayed around long enough for everyone to see them. As we returned to the bus a pair of Varied Sittellas appeared all too briefly. They were the only ones seen on the tour.

Eventually we left the forested slopes and arrived at the valley bottom. Here lush pastures alternated with dry eucalyptus woodland. We spent some time combing one such woodland at Nindooibah. It was now quite warm and birds were often difficult to find. Speckled Warblers hopped about in the leaf litter of the forest floor

but it took some time before everyone had satisfactory views of the tiny Weebills. We also located a family party of Variegated Fairy Wrens and enjoyed another encounter with Scarlet Honeyeaters and a superb Wedge-tailed Eagle. On the way back to the coach we all had good views of a Superb Fairy Wren, in this case an adult male.

It was now lunchtime and we ate a picnic in a park in Beaudesert. Birds were plentiful here in the flowering trees and included Blue-faced Honeyeaters, Noisy Miners and Galahs. After lunch Tim took us on an exploration of a number of wetlands. One of the first was the peaceful, lily-covered waters of Nindooinbah Reservoir. Around the edges we enjoyed views of Double-banded Finches. The reservoir held Comb-crested Jacanas and a Great Crested Grebe but the real find was a female Musk Duck, the first ever seen on this Naturetrek tour. Next we paid a visit to the local horse-racing track! Alongside the track was a long, water-filled moat that played host to hordes of Plumed Whistling Ducks and other waterbirds including the tour's first Great Cormorant. We also found Yellow-rumped Thornbills and more Superb Fairy Wrens.

After this we called in at a number of nameless lagoons, each one full of birds. One such lagoon had attracted our first Glossy Ibis, a couple of migrant Latham's Snipe and a small flock of Australasian Shovelers. At other wetlands we found Yellow-billed and Royal Spoonbills, more Glossy Ibis and even a couple of Little Corellas. This last full day of our Queensland tour is always notable for its particularly large numbers of birds, but today was rather special as we reached over 100 species.

As dusk closed in, we were still a long way from home but Tim drove exceptionally fast and safely – he certainly knew every bend in the narrow road as we arrived back at O'Reilly's at 18.15.

Day 15

Saturday 20th August

Lamington – Brisbane

Weather: Overcast with low cloud and mist drifting over the hills; quite cool. Long sunny spells later.

On our last morning at O'Reilly's most of the group were up and about early. The cold and rather gloomy start to the day certainly caused a major reduction in bird activity but both species of bowerbirds crowded into the garden, waiting to be fed, as usual. Everyone was free to enjoy the rainforest on their own way today. Some went for a walk on the Border Track, others visited the botanical gardens or spent the morning photographing the bowerbirds, Crimson Rosellas and King Parrots around the guesthouse.

I took some of the group down the hill to the loop trail leading to Python Rock. Albert's Lyrebird was our target species but we failed to locate "George", the resident male, despite walking a circuit of several miles. Nevertheless, we found a good range of species including a Green Catbird near the guesthouse, watched Logrunners scratching around in the leaf-litter and added a shy Bassian Ground Thrush to the trip list. In the forest we also encountered several Red-legged Pademelons as well as the similar Red-necked Pademelons that were usually to be seen around O'Reilly's. When we met for lunch it transpired that most of the group had had seen a similar range of species.

It was now time to say our farewells. Ellen had accompanied us from Cairns and a taxi arrived to whisk her away for a family reunion in Brisbane. Soon our coach arrived. Helen and Alan waved us off as they were staying on at O'Reilly's for a few days. We made a few stops along the way to watch Pretty-faced Wallabies but

we needed to press on as we had to drop off Mary, Val, John and Neville at a car hire agency in Brisbane. At Brisbane Airport we said farewell to Penny and Ted who were travelling on a later flight. Then it was time for Ruth, David and I to board our aircraft for the long flight home.