

Queensland's Rainforests & Great Barrier Reef

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 8 September 2012

Report compiled by Carol Iles & Ellen Terrell



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Participants: Richard and Penny Scriven

Day 1

Saturday 1st September

The Atherton Tableland section of this tour began when the guests Richard and Penny arrived in their hire car at midday to meet me at the Gem Gallery in the historic village of Yungaburra. It was a beautiful sunny day, so after coffee amongst the incredible opal jewellery, we elected to take lunch to eat on the shore of nearby Lake Tinaroo (man-made but a great birding spot) in order to start ticking off birds without delay! Naturally waterbirds such as Little Black and Little Pied Cormorants and Pacific Black Duck featured immediately, while over lunch Australian Pelican, Wood Duck, Australian and Great Crested Grebes, Purple Swamphen and hundreds of Plumed Whistling-Ducks were noted and a Caspian Tern gave us a fly-past. Brown Honeyeaters serenaded us from the flowering bushes but the star of the show was a Little Bronze Cuckoo which perched and posed only a few feet away. For the encore we were given great views of a diminutive but gorgeous male Mistletoebird. A short drive along the entrance road gave us a view of a male Scarlet Honeyeater, well camouflaged though he was amongst the equally red Bottlebrush flowers.

After that we left for Lake Eacham, one of the volcanic Crater Lakes on the Tableland. From the edge we watched Saw-shelled Turtles and an unexpected Red-claw Crayfish, a native species but apparently new and unwelcome in Lake Eacham National Park. On a short walk along part of the Circuit Track we were fortunate to find an Eastern Whipbird and its very young chick, a Tooth-billed Bowerbird singing above his "stage" of leaves, and a foraging Musky Rat-kangaroo, one of the few diurnal Australian mammals. On our return to the car we encountered a flock of Barred Cuckoo-shrikes, feeding in a conveniently low tree with Australian Figbirds and a sleek White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike.

As Richard and Penny wanted time to relax before dinner, we left the lake to head for our accommodation at the lovely Rose Gums. From the veranda of their treehouse, they were treated to a great view of a perched Topknot Pigeon, as well as Lewin's and White-cheeked Honeyeaters feeding in the flowers below. After dark we headed for the in-house restaurant where we all ate too much due to the temptation of the beautiful food. The torchlight stroll back to the guests' treehouse was punctuated by the rustling of Northern Brown Bandicoots, intent on finding their own kind of grub!

Day 2

Sunday 2nd September

After a distinctly cool night at 730 metres, the day dawned sunny with some early morning cloud drifting up the mountainside from the coast. I was woken by the repeated one-note whistle of a Grey-headed Robin, conveniently positioned under my window, making sure we got away as arranged at 7.00am to visit the majestic Cathedral Fig Tree where we were alone with the birds. These included a dainty Pale-yellow Robin, his chunkier cousin, a Grey-headed Robin on its nest, and a male Victoria's Riflebird whose iridescent blue throat and tail contrasted so vibrantly with his unbelievably black, black plumage as he stood on a swinging vine. A Wompoo Fruit-dove defied our attempts to get a decent view so we left for our second Crater Lake, Lake Barrine.

As it was Fathers Day, Lake Barrine Teahouse was busy, even at 8.45am! ...so we elected to take our cruise around the lake and enjoy the big breakfast afterwards, especially as we were all still living off the dinner of the night before! After coffee we boarded the boat with the dozen or so others and sat upstairs for unimpeded views of the lake and its wildlife. The boatman's commentary was pleasant and informative but more importantly he was keen-eyed. Waterbirds included Hardhead, Australasian Darter, Eurasian Coot, and Moorhen, while under the water we saw huge Long-finned Eels and more Saw-shelled Turtles. On logs over the water we encountered Eastern Water Dragons, and on the bank our boatman spotted a little Scrub Python (or as it used to be more descriptively called, Amethystine Python), and a large Red-bellied Black Snake.

Back on land for breakfast we watched a female Olive-backed Sunbird adding further material to her hanging nest, safe from predators on the veranda. It was just a short walk to see the Twin Kauris, 2 massive old trees, so we walked further along the lake track and got eye-level views of Brown Gerygone and Large-billed Scrubwren among others.

We moved on to check a local pool in vain for Platypus but did see a male Red-backed Fairywren, his waistcoat glowing like a fiery ember in the gully our road crossed. We took the back roads to Hasties Swamp, shadowed at one spot by a flying Grey Goshawk and stopping en route for a Brown Falcon, Brolgas and Sarus Cranes. On arrival at the swamp we found a roosting Nankeen Night-Heron above the superb two-storey hide which we had to ourselves. Over drinks and snacks we viewed the thousands of Plumed Whistling-Ducks, along with one lonely Grey Teal, a Snipe (likely Latham's), Black-fronted Dotterel, and best of all a Little Kingfisher which from sitting on a post below us, flew to the tree just outside the window of the hide, next to our cups of tea! From the road out we spotted a White-necked Heron and at a small farm dam we had our first White-faced Heron and a majestic female Black-necked Stork. Every cow along our route through the farmland had its accompanying Cattle Egret and often a Willie Wagtail was perched on a bovine head!

As the guests wanted an afternoon break we returned to Rose Gums, with the inevitable bird-stops en route including a Pheasant Coucal creeping across the road ahead of us. After a couple of hours' siesta we met again at 5pm to visit a likely Platypus spot but saw only birds, which included Crested Pigeons, Bar-shouldered Doves, and Fairy Martins which were flying into the concrete culverts where they nest. However, the well-placed blind in Yungaburra then afforded us great views of at least two Platypuses, feeding in the river below so we were happy to leave and seek dinner at a local restaurant, the Vienna Inn.

We succeeded in finishing by around 7.15 so we had a good 90 minutes to search for nocturnal animals near the Curtain Fig Tree with a red-filtered light. We were lucky enough to find a Long-nosed Bandicoot, revealed by its characteristic sneeze, 2 Coppery Brushtail Possums, 5 Green Ringtail Possums (one with a large baby), and best of all, not one but two separate Lumholtz's Tree-Kangaroos, one of which gave us a perfect view, low down and clear to see. What a great way to end the day! Actually, that wasn't quite the end, but as we drove back to Rose Gums we were unable to identify the owl which took off from the road right when we met the only other car we saw on that whole trip. You win some, you lose some!

Day 3

Monday 3rd September

I was woken by the dawn chorus in good time to meet the guests on their treehouse veranda for breakfast from the ample Rose Gums hampers.

However, any birder expecting a breakfast uninterrupted by birds should stay in bed! Between mouthfuls we had great views of Pied Monarch, plus Chowchilla, Macleay's and Lewin's Honeyeaters and Little Shrike-thrush. After bacon and eggs we walked to reception, (delayed by Dusky and Bridled Honeyeaters feeding just outside), to see Rainbow Lorikeets and King Parrots descend for their treat of sunflower seeds, then went to watch Musky Rat-kangaroos neatly sidestep the Brush Turkeys to grab a treat from a specially designed protective cage. After photos we took a short walk to see one of the giant Rose Gums (*Eucalyptus grandis*) on the property before checking out, then headed for the Malanda Falls Cafe where the guests were delighted when the owner, Paul English, began singing an old English folk song to which Richard and Penny added their excellent voices. Paul was so helpful regarding where and how to look for Tree-kangaroos that after seeing Spotted Catbirds and Mountain Thornbills in the forest beside the cafe the guests elected to stay for delicious local-grown coffee, while watching a short video of the Tree-kangaroos. Paul has a wonderful old working pianola, a penny whistle and a lovely voice and my guests said they would happily have sung folk songs with him all day, had there not been birds to see!

The short drive through open fields to Bromfield Swamp gave us a Spotted Harrier, and a Wedge-tailed Eagle sat on the Crater's slope long enough for great looks through the 'scope. Turning north we came across hundreds of Sarus Cranes and Brolgas by the main road, before taking a back road to enjoy the sight and sound of hundreds of roosting Spectacled Flying-foxes in a patch of rainforest. From there north and west to Granite Gorge, the habitat becomes drier, a change reflected in our bird list which included Squatter Pigeon, Pale-headed Rosella, Grey-crowned Babbler and Blue-winged Kookaburra. The delightful Mareeba Rock-wallabies were there as usual, and we saw a roosting Tawny Frogmouth and a Frill-necked Lizard up a tree, thanks to the site owner. Our late picnic lunch was accompanied by the liquid tunes of Pied Butcherbirds, the less musical shrieks of Blue-faced Honeyeaters, and the chortling of Noisy Friarbirds.

On our drive out towards Mareeba we added flying Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos and a hunting Collared Sparrowhawk, before stopping to view hundreds of lounging Eastern Grey Kangaroos and a couple of Bush Stone-curlews standing like statues in the shade, while three Little Corellas did a very fast fly-past. Back on the highway north we paused at Lake Mitchell to look at Ospreys on a nest, our first Green Pygmy-geese and elegant Black Swans. We reached Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge in the rural community of Julatten in time to walk down to the orchard and see a roosting Papuan Frogmouth before it left to hunt for the night. Hosts Keith and Lindsay Fisher laid on a tasty three-course meal, with the entertainment provided by the seed-raiding Fawn-footed Melomys, native Bush Rats and Northern Brown and Long-nosed Bandicoots. With an early start planned we decided to leave a spotlighting walk until the following evening and retired to sleep, in spite of the crowing of the roosting Orange-footed Scrubfowl.

Day 4

Tuesday 4th September

After breakfast at dawn, we left to find some local Red-legged Pademelons, (small wallabies, not fruit!) and also spotted a scolding Yellow-throated Scrubwren, before driving a couple of kilometres to a track where we were lucky enough to see a male and female Lovely Fairywren, and a pair of Yellow-breasted Boatbills building a nest. Nearby Abattoir Swamp provided a honeyeater-fest of ten species, including Yellow, Yellow-spotted, Yellow-faced, Brown-backed and White-throated as well as more views of Scarlet (- no amount is ever enough!) A Northern Fantail flitted around and a Striated Pardalote (race *melanocephalus*) came low enough to save our necks.

Next we drove south before turning west to Mt Carbine and the community of Maryfarms, where, in spite of the sun and temperature climbing, we saw a Brown Falcon, male and female Australian Bustards, two Diamond Doves, Red-backed Fairywrens, Leaden and Lemon-bellied Flycatchers and a female White-winged Triller. Morning coffee was followed by eye-level views of two Tawny Frogmouths, a flock of dishevelled Apostlebirds and the implausibly bright Red-winged Parrots, with a large Agile Wallaby making a quick exit.

Turning our backs on the Tip of Cape York, a tempting few hundred kms north, we drove to the old mining town of Mount Molloy where a Great Bowerbird was in attendance at his bower full of bling, and Double-barred Finches called, their chalk-white faces reminiscent of Marcel Marceau. After a short detour to look at another Green Pygmy-goose, where both Tree and Fairy Martins were flying around, we returned to Kingfisher Park at 1.15pm to give Richard and Penny free time for computers and siesta. The Red-browed Finches, doves and honeyeaters at the feeders and bird-baths had other ideas of course.....We arranged to reconvene at 4pm in order that the guests could have a real walk. The foot of Mt Lewis Road seemed like a good option and combined exercise with some nice birds, such as the keasti subspecies of Grey Fantail, a White-throated Treecreeper (race minor), a male Riflebird feeding on Celerywood fruit, and 2 Wompoo Fruit-doves at their nest.

After dinner on the veranda, with furry creatures eating their own dinner nearby, Richard and Penny joined me and my husband Andrew for a night-walk, beginning with a quick view of an Eastern Barn Owl flying out of a roost hollow in a Forest Red Gum (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*). We moved to another tree and this time found a Barn Owl looking out of a hole. Our walk continued, with close views of a White-tailed Rat, both Bandicoots, Spectacled Flying-fox, Jungguy, White-lipped and Red Tree Frog, catfish in the creek and the star of the show, a Duck-billed Platypus whose ripples I followed with the torch before finally catching up to it! Although we didn't see one, we did hear the dramatic falling-bomb whistle of a (Lesser) Sooty Owl. Since it was 9pm by then, we thought it was time to retire.

Day 5

Wednesday 5th September

After a short walk to look at the Olive-backed Sunbird's nest hanging in our car-port my guests and I parted company, they for Red Mill House in Daintree Village and the continuation of their trip in the capable hands of Ellen Terrell, and I for Cairns to meet my next guests. The total number of birds seen on this section of their trip was 143.

Day 6

Thursday 6th September

We had a quick cup of tea on the verandah of Red Mill House before making an early morning start for a trip on the Daintree River with Ian Worcester (known locally as 'Sauce'). We passed Masked Lapwing and Straw-necked Ibis in the open paddocks and Bar-shouldered Dove near the path on the walk down to the jetty. It was an absolutely beautiful morning on the river which started off with Little Pied Cormorant and Darter preening in the morning sun, large flocks of Cattle Egrets flying upstream to pastures in the valley beyond, and Pied Imperial Pigeons in fruiting rainforest trees along the edge of the river. We set off upstream for some distance, with good sightings of Azure Kingfisher and Spectacled Monarch in the quieter stretches, with Brown-backed Honeyeater, Olive-backed Sunbird and Large-billed Gerygone all busy building nests; and repeated brief views of Shining Flycatcher hunting insects through the mangrove edges.

Then we turned around and headed downstream to Barratt Creek, passing Royal Spoonbill and Whistling Kite overhead, and a very large, healthy Saltwater Crocodile was sun-baking on the river's edge. Along the way we saw Noisy Friarbird, Spangled Drongo, large flocks of Rainbow Lorikeet all feeding on flowering trees, plus Varied Triller, Great Egret, and Striated Heron flying low across the river. The quieter stretches of Barratt Creek yielded good views of Double-eyed Fig-Parrot, Yellow Oriole, Figbird, Yellow-spotted, Dusky, Macleay's & Graceful Honeyeater, Little Shrike-thrush, Barred Cuckoo-Shrike, plus a fleeting glimpse of Mistletoebird and another reptile sighting – this time an Eastern Water Dragon sun-baking on a log. Heading back upstream, dozens of White-rumped (Australasian) Swiflets were hawking insects, swooping low to the water's surface. A lucky sighting of Great-billed Heron hunting on a mudflat finished the morning's trip, then we headed back to Red Mill House for a late breakfast on the veranda to watch the resident pair of Orange-footed Scrub-fowls still tending their mound in the garden.

After breakfast, we took our picnic lunch with us and headed north over the Daintree River to Jindalba boardwalk. However by now the day was very warm, with not much activity from birds. We enjoyed the rainforest walk with some good views of Spectacled Monarch again, plus Little Shrike-thrush, Varied Triller, Rainbow Lorikeet and Pale-yellow Robin.

We continued travelling north to Thornton's Beach for a walk to the mouth of Cooper Creek, with Collared Kingfisher, Eastern Reef Egret, Crested Tern and Whimbrel along the shore. Good views of a pair Red-capped Plover were had, with the female feigning a broken wing to distract our attention from her tiny chick. We returned to the shade for our picnic lunch, then back to the Discovery Centre for a walk on the boardwalks and canopy tower in the cool of the afternoon. We enjoyed watching large flocks of Shining (Metallic) Starlings noisily feeding in the canopy of a fruiting rainforest tree, plus Varied Triller nearby and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos drifting across the distant landscape. We then went back across the river to Daintree Village for dinner.

Day 7

Friday 7th September

We had a leisurely breakfast this morning, before setting off for Cairns. We called in to Wonga Barramundi Farm for good sightings of Radjah Shelduck, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt, Common Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern, Great Egret, Black-fronted Dotterel, with Black Kite and White-bellied Sea-Eagle overhead, and continued on through Mossman, down the coast road to the northern beaches of Cairns. A quick look at the Yorkey's Knob Golf Club pond found a small flock of Nutmeg Manikins, Rainbow Bee-eater, Varied Triller, Brown, and Yellow Honeyeater in the trees and Pacific Black Duck, Darter, Little Pied Cormorant and Australasian Grebe in the water. We continued on to Cattana Wetlands for picnic lunch in one of the bird hides, but again, very little movement in the midday heat, apart from Comb-crested Jacana, Green Pygmy Goose, Great Egret, Straw-necked Ibis, Fairy Martins and Magpie Geese.

We headed on to Bay Village in Cairns for an afternoon break, then a short walk along the Esplanade in the cool of late afternoon. As the tide was turning, we enjoyed views of Striated Heron, Red-capped Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Eastern Curlew, Silver Gull, Royal Spoonbill and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper before walking back to Bay Village at dusk.

Day 8

Saturday 8th September

Another early morning start, this time down to the wharf on Trinity Inlet, Cairns, for a day trip to the outer reef and Michaelmas Cay on board 'Ocean Spirit'. It was perfect weather for a reef trip, with an introductory talk and time to sort out snorkelling equipment en route. Gull-billed and Crested Tern, also Brown Booby were seen on the channel markers as we left the harbour. On arrival at the Cay, a female Great Frigatebird was flying over the nesting colony, consisting of thousands of Sooty Tern and Common Noddy in all stages of breeding – adults sitting on eggs, juveniles, and chicks being fed. Groups of Brown Booby were sitting slightly apart from the Tern colony, with Crested & Lesser Crested Terns along the shore and Silver Gull harassing the Terns. The day passed quickly, making time for birdwatching, snorkelling before and after lunch on board, and a ride in the semi-sub for underwater views of beautiful coral, brightly-coloured reef fish, giant clams and a couple of Green Turtles.

On our return, more Crested Tern and Brown Booby were seen on channel markers, plus a nice sighting of Osprey before docking. One last, brief walk along the Esplanade en route to Bay Village was taken for a chance of waders before darkness fell. Large numbers of Pied Imperial Pigeons, Rainbow Lorikeets and Shining Starlings were all noisily settling in to roost in trees along the Esplanade.

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