

# Queensland's Rainforests & Great Barrier Reef

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 12 September 2012

---

Report compiled by Carol Iles



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leader: Carol Iles

Participants: Stephen and Karen Cork

## Day 1

Thursday 6th September

At 9am at the Bay Village Hotel in Cairns I met my guests, Stephen and Karen from the UK, and their first request was that we go back to the Esplanade where they had been the day before. Unfortunately, as the tide was fully out the waders were well-spread and we were looking into the morning sun, though a Red-capped Plover was easy to see, as were Great Knot and a couple of Grey-tailed Tattlers. However we did sort out that the noisy birds are Varied Honeyeaters, and saw a Sacred Kingfisher and White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike before we had to leave for the Atherton Tableland. We made a short detour to photograph Agile Wallabies then carried on south along the coastal plain, seeing Cattle Egrets and Black Kites standing in the fields where sugar cane had been cut. Turning right up the Gillies Highway we encountered a bit of light rain to please the cycads on the slopes, ancient plants that have survived unchanged for millennia.

On reaching the top the weather improved so we made our first stop at Lake Tinaroo, a man-made lake providing drinking water and irrigation for areas to the west, and a refuge for wildfowl and waterbirds. As we drank coffee we identified around the banks Magpie Geese and Plumed Whistling-Ducks by the hundred, Australian Wood Duck and Australian Pelican while a little further along from our table we found Purple Swamphen, Black-fronted Dotterel and Black-winged Stilt. On the water, birds included three species of cormorant, Australasian Darter, and Great-crested and Australian Grebe, while close at hand we had Rufous Whistler, Little Bronze-Cuckoo, Mistletoebird and the ubiquitous Masked Lapwing, Willie Wagtail, Magpie-lark and Brown Honeyeater. A male Scarlet Honeyeater took some finding, feeding as it was in a red-flowered Callistemon bush, but proved worth the wait. A small inlet provided views of Grey Teal and Australian Pipit for the list, before we checked in to the friendly and comfortable Kookaburra Lodge Motel in historic Yungaburra, ideally placed for access to the best bird-spots on the southern Tableland.

After a quick and delicious lunch in the Whistle Stop Cafe we left for the drier south-western end of the Tableland, stopping along the way for a pale-phase Brown Falcon and Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike. At the crater of Bromfield Swamp we were treated to the sight of two Wedge-tailed Eagles chased by a Whistling Kite and a Black-shouldered Kite. Towards Ravenshoe we entered dry forest and found Noisy Miner, Brown Treecreeper, Pale-headed Rosella, Red-backed Fairywren and numerous Brolgas in the fields. As the afternoon waned we made our way to Mount Hypipamee and took a walk in the dusk to the Crater, our way magically lit by thousands of dancing fireflies (which are in fact beetles, but somehow that sounds less magical).

On our return walk a rustling in a tree alerted us to a Coppery Brushtail Possum which I was able to catch in my torchlight. We sat down to a picnic dinner but after we'd all got up to look at a Leaf-tailed Gecko I'd spotlighted a tree, we were fortunate to return to our food just in time to prevent two Common Brushtail Possums from helping themselves! Once we'd cleared everything away we walked the access road, looking for more possums. Using a red-filtered light we were able to find and watch a total of 3 Common Brushtails, a Green Ringtail, a Lemuroid and a Herbert River Ringtail, but the highlight was a Striped Possum on a fallen tree on the side of the road, intently gouging at the rotting wood with its bottom teeth to find beetle grubs, oblivious of us.

Back at the car park we followed the eye-shine to a large Northern Barred Frog which flattened itself to look just like a dead leaf. Reluctantly we finally headed back to Yungaburra and en route had sightings of Giant White-tailed Rat, Long-nosed Bandicoot and Eastern Barn Owl before getting to our rooms at 10pm.

## Day 2

## Friday 7th September

We made an early start to visit the Cathedral Fig Tree where Topknot Pigeons gave us great views, sitting in the early morning sun. As well as the magnificent old tree, we saw Grey-headed Robin, Superb Fruit-dove and several Victoria's Riflebirds. Then it was on to Lake Barrine's historic Teahouse for a filling breakfast followed by a leisurely cruise around the Crater Lake, getting close-up views of waterbirds including Hardhead, Great Cormorant and Eurasian Coot, plus Saw-shelled Turtle (terrapin), Eastern Water Dragon, Long-finned Eel and the magnificent Kauri trees.

Back on land it was just a short stroll, with stops to watch Brown Gerygones and Large-billed Scrubwrens, to the twin Bull Kauri trees (*Agathis microstachya*), endemic to this part of the Tableland. From here we moved only a few kms to Lake Eacham, another Crater Lake, similarly surrounded by rainforest rich in birdlife, but where our highlights proved to be a small Carpet Python, and a Little Pied Cormorant seen directly below the turtle-viewing platform, chasing small fish in the crystal-clear water.

After making purchases in Yungaburra and checking out the Platypus-viewing area which yielded us a nice male Leaden Flycatcher but no mammals, we took the back roads to Hasties Swamp, getting Sarus Cranes and a wonderful view of a Swamp Harrier perched on a roadside post just a few metres from the car. Hasties Swamp had its usual spectacular crowds of waterfowl, but it was the middle of the day so the best bird for us was a White-necked Heron, never common in this area.

We decided to hit Atherton for lunch and found some excellent home-cooking at Gallery 5, before driving up onto Halloran's Hill for the all-round views. We also saw Red-legged Pademelon and heard the liquid whistle of a Satin Bowerbird, buried in thick bush. Turning back towards Yungaburra we stopped at a secluded spot known for platypus and had one quick view, but then were pleased to notice a Common Tree Snake checking us out from the grass before disappearing fast. A further stop in hopes of Tree-kangaroo did at least give us looks at Red-browed Finches and Barred Cuckoo-shrikes feeding. Heading into Yungaburra we stopped at the well-placed blind and were amply rewarded with great views of at least two Platypuses swimming and feeding in the creek below!

Back at Kookaburra Lodge, we arranged to share our picnic dinner on the terrace and by 7.30 we were searching the trees near the Curtain Fig for marsupials. It turned out to be a quiet night with just two Common Brushtails and one Green Ringtail Possum, along with a "sneezing" Long-nosed Bandicoot and 2 Leaf-tailed Geckoes, so hard to distinguish from the spotty tree bark and given away only by their faint eye-shine. There was a repeated call like a juvenile Barn Owl and an Australian Owlet-nightjar gave us a couple of Michael Jackson-like "Aow!"s from a distance away. Returning to our hotel, we encountered a young cat in the middle of the road and a watchful Bush Stone-curlew. Karen seemed worried I might be about to run over the cat but I really was just ensuring it kept moving past the curlew! Later that night I heard the mewling of what sounded like a baby Stone-curlew so my concerns may have been well-founded...

## Day 3

## Saturday 8th September

Keen to make the most of their trip. Steve and Karen were ready for a 6.15am departure to do a short walk at Lake Eacham, before any other visitors. The rainforest across the flat calm lake was golden in the early morning sun and Brush Turkeys were the most common species up and about. We heard before we saw an Eastern Whipbird ripping noisily at dead palm fronds, giving us good views of what is often a secretive bird. Dark Musky Rat-kangaroos scampered away as we walked but some stayed for us to see well. A Tooth-billed Bowerbird, not yet calling, was great to watch, intent on his morning chores of rearranging the leaves of his “stage” or “court” before any ladies dropped in. A Yellow-throated Scrubwren hopped along the path ahead and a Little Shrike-thrush put in an appearance, as well as a beautiful adult Emerald Dove sitting on a speed bump in the empty road.

Hunger pangs drove us back to the lodge for our full cooked breakfast, served in the pagoda, before we checked out and took the back roads north. We were treated to lovely views of a pair of gorgeous Spotted Harriers, floating and plummeting over a roadside field, hassled at one point by a game little Black-shouldered Kite. Our next flying things were bats – Spectacled Flying Foxes at a rainforest roost. We met Jenny Maclean from the Bat Hospital in Atherton, engaged in the unenviable task of clearing tracks of Stinging Trees so volunteers could look for fallen baby bats. She told us there were also Little Red Flying Foxes but the track to them proved to be too overgrown. However along a more open, safe track we encountered yowling Spotted Catbirds and a Bower's Shrike-thrush.

Leaving behind the rainforest or “Big Scrub” as it was once known, we drove north through drier country, stopping briefly for distant views of two huge fledged White-bellied Sea-eagles near their nest, before encountering Squatter Pigeons on a garden driveway, wet and bedraggled after a bath. Having stopped, we also saw Rainbow Bee-eaters, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, and Double-barred Finches.

The unique landscape of Granite Gorge was our lunch stop with the ever-delightful Mareeba Rock-wallabies, Pied Butcherbirds, pugnacious Blue-faced Honeyeaters and a Great Bowerbird searching for pink things. Leaving there and dropping downhill towards the town of Mareeba, we stopped to view hundreds of Eastern Grey Kangaroos reclining in the shade, followed by two Yellow-billed Spoonbills and a lone Glossy Ibis on a muddy ephemeral pond.

Turning off the highway, we took the road in to Mareeba Wetlands, a reserve of lagoons and dry savanna woodland run as a charitable trust. On our approach we saw Nankeen Night-Heron, Double-barred Finch, Red-backed Fairywren, and a flock of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins, and while cooling down with an ice-cream at the Visitor Centre overlooking Clancy's Lagoon we got up close to Emus, Green Pygmy-geese, Comb-crested Jacana and Black Swan. On our road out, we stopped to look at Blue-winged Kookaburra, Pheasant Coucal and a surprise male Bustard which decided to flop down only metres away to take a dust-bath!

On the highway once more, we made a brief stop for views of nesting Osprey. Lake Mitchell provided repeats of many waterbirds as well as our first Red-winged Parrots and a regal Black-necked Stork. A detour to gain height for a view gave us the sight of a huge snake, undoubtedly a Taipan, making a quick getaway from our car. The sun was low by then so we drove the last few kms to the renowned Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge in the rural community of Julatten to arrive by 5.45pm.

Hosts Keith and Lindsay Fisher were there to welcome us and provided a tasty, home-cooked three-course meal, with the obligatory pause between courses so we could go and see the Eastern Barn Owls pop out of their roost holes, and the regular entertainment at the feeder from the resident Northern Brown Bandicoots, native Bush Rats and the rufous Fawn-footed Melomys. Happy with the Platypus and possum sightings already gained and tired after a busy day, rather than doing a nightwalk we decided to get an early night.

## Day 4

## Sunday 9th September

We awoke to a cloudy morning and after Stephen and Karen had eaten breakfast and made use of Kingfisher Park's laundry we took a short drive which gave us good looks at Dusky Honeyeater and a great view of a male Rose-crowned Fruit-dove, after which we headed up Mt Lewis, our best bet for so many of the Wet Tropics endemic birds, climbing to 950 metres through rainforest dotted with Mt Lewis palms. In spite of grey and windy weather we were able to see Grey Fantails of the *keasti* race, Mountain Thornbills, several groups of Chowchillas, a pair of Fernwrens foraging with Yellow-throated and Atherton Scrubwrens, a Tooth-billed Bowerbird singing above his stage of velvety ginger leaves, and later another feeding with two female or immature Golden Bowerbirds. A large, shiny Red-bellied Black Snake that we had seen slide into cover on our walk out, was once again laid on the path on our return, which pleased Karen but required us to detour off the path rather than disturb it. Back at the car, a pair of Topknot Pigeons sat for us and a dainty Eastern Spinebill flitted from the lantana before we left, just as the sun broke through and the mountain top revealed itself.

Driving south again we stopped in a remnant patch of gallery forest to see Yellow-breasted Boatbill and Spectacled Monarch. We also heard Blue-faced Parrot-Finch but decided not to stay and hunt this bird, so difficult at this time of year, moving instead to a garden where we had eye-level views of endemic Bridled Honeyeaters. Moving on to Abattoir Swamp we ate our picnic lunch to the calls of Striated Pardalotes high in the trees and saw numerous honeyeater species including Brown-backed.

After lunch we drove into Mt Molloy where while watching Chestnut-breasted Mannikins and glorious Red-winged Parrots we noticed two Great Bowerbirds, one intent on impressing the other with his rosette of pink feathers, fully opened on the back of his neck. As if that wasn't flashy enough, he pecked off a Hibiscus flower from the low bush next to him and continued his dance, flower clamped in his beak. After this we went to inspect a couple of bowers, decorated with sun-bleached snail shells, green glass, and anything pink, purple or red available.

Then, with the day cooling nicely, we headed out towards Mt Carbine, once the biggest producer of wolfram (tungsten) in the world. Rather than rocks, we looked at Australian Bustards (one in full display-mode), Little Friarbirds, scruffy but endearing Apostlebirds, two grey morph Tawny Frogmouths at eye level, and pink and grey Galahs, dashing madly between the trees in the cool of the early evening. Food was calling so we returned to Kingfisher Park for another very welcome meal from Lindsay.

Later our hopes of nightjars on a spotlighting-drive were unfulfilled but we did see Eastern Barn Owl, Striped Possum, Jungguy Frog, the unwelcome Cane Toad, and a very brief view by myself and my husband only, of a departing (Lesser) Sooty Owl.

## Day 5

## Monday 10th September

At 4.00am Karen and Steve's sleep was interrupted by the falling-bomb whistle of a (Lesser) Sooty Owl but our birding began at 7am with a short walk in the grounds of Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge, so rich in species. In just an hour we had some great sightings, including a Graceful Honeyeater in the orange blossom, a Spangled Drongo defending his supply of nectar against the Macleay's Honeyeaters on one of the orchard trees, a Noisy Pitta, (colourful and yet so cryptic in the shadows till it flew, flashing the electric blue on its wings and rump), and right at Reception two Pale-yellow Robins, the avian Pointers, kindly alerting us to the presence of a roosting Papuan Frogmouth.

After breakfast with the birds on the veranda we reluctantly left Kingfisher Park but didn't go far to find Scaly-breasted Lorikeets feeding in Eucalypt flowers, and noisy Metallic Starlings busily nest-building, while a female Olive-backed Sunbird sat tranquilly in her own hanging nest. A short drive further and I was happy to see Wood Ducks back after a long absence from the area. At the next spot a White-cheeked Honeyeater sat up for us, and some Grevilleas further on gave us more honeyeaters, including Yellow, Yellow-faced and male and female Scarlet. The "chup" call alerted us to a Northern Fantail flycatching behind us and as we were leaving a Grey Goshawk circled into view over the trees. Another short drive got us to a spot where I heard Lovely Fairywren but they moved away too fast to see. However we were rewarded with views of a Rufous Fantail almost at our feet. A patch of open country allowed us to compare Tree and Fairy Martins, as well as Australian Swiftlet, but the next area of rainforest was quiet so we set off down the hill towards the town of Mossman where White-breasted Woodswallows were wagging their tails on the power-lines.

After a quick bit of shopping we headed to the beach for lunch, sheltered from the wind by the Sea Almond trees. Further along in the mangroves we scoped three Beach Stone-curlews that came in to land on a sandbar across a sheltered inlet, and a Common Sandpiper bobbed along the near shoreline. Back out in the wind the scope was too wobbly so we couldn't be sure on the handful of roosting waders but the bills of Caspian and Crested Terns stood out well and an Osprey flew past. Our next stop gave us Snipe (most probably Latham's) probing in a grassy drain, a Brush Cuckoo on a fence, and the introduced Spotted Doves, while a fish farm proved good for Radjah Shelduck, Gull-billed Terns, Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and yapping Black-winged Stilts.

We moved along to Daintree, getting a warm welcome from owners Andrew and Trish at Red Mill House, with time for Karen and Steve to watch the Yellow Orioles and a Black Butcherbird from the veranda. We tried unsuccessfully in the gloom to find the calling Red-necked Crakes and moved gently away from two Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters settling in to a quiet roost site. After time to relax, Andrew and Trish provided us with a tasty barbecue dinner, while Northern Brown Bandicoots munched below the veranda, but having an early start next day we retired to our comfy beds soon after the meal.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 11 September

It rained fairly heavily in the night but the radar picture was clear at 6am so after coffee we were happy to board our boat with Ian "Sauce" Worcester for a birding cruise on the Daintree River. This trip is different every time, according to the tide, the weather and of course, the birds.

Heading upstream first, we saw a Large-billed Gerygone's hanging nest and met a Female Shining Flycatcher sitting prettily just above the waterline for us. At several places on the main river and in the side channels we encountered jewel-like Azure Kingfishers, one stationary long enough for photos. Two Double-eyed Fig-Parrots landed near their nest in a dead tree but the grey sky did make it hard to see colours, although their shape and call are unmistakable. Unmistakable too was the shape of three Royal Spoonbills flying over us and further downstream was a White-bellied Sea-eagle on upswept wings. Of most interest to me was the sound of a Channel-billed Cuckoo and sight of a female Koel flying away as both migrants are harbingers of the summer Wet Season when we have an explosion of bird activity. Since both these birds bear the nickname of Rain Bird we can't say we weren't warned of the sharp shower of rain that hit us as Sauce steered us back to the boat ramp!

After a sumptuous breakfast on the veranda of Red Mill House, we tore ourselves away at 10.00 to drive, via the ferry, across the Daintree into dense rainforest which has stood longer than any on the planet. We took a quiet side road and from the empty beach we saw a distant Brown Booby diving for fish and back in the forest, a Noisy Pitta with what looked like an enormous hawkmoth caterpillar in its bill. Our goal was to find a Cassowary but the closest we came was a pile of droppings, just seeds really, and that dreaded phrase, "You should have been here yesterday" from staff at our next stop, as one had spent 3 whole hours wandering about at the Daintree Discovery Centre. Big Bird did not deign to show up for us, sadly.

We continued our search on a walk but aside from the amazing profusion of plants, including Giant King Ferns, and *Bowenia spectabilis*, the smallest cycad in the world and *Lepidozamia hopei*, the largest, and despite there being many fallen Cassowary Plums around, our best sightings were several species of butterflies and a smug, shiny Major Skink, well over a foot long, basking in a tangle of dead sticks. We relaxed over a late lunch at one of the picnic tables before heading back towards the ferry, searching more of the back roads en route. Alexandra Lookout did give us a brown Victoria's Riflebird and from the ferry we saw two dapper Brahminy Kites soaring casually.

Pretty tired now after our early start, we returned for coffee at 4.15pm at Red Mill House, which turned into a relaxing pre-dinner wine on the veranda for Steve and Karen, before I drove us all to the beautifully laid out Teahouse Restaurant for dinner. The steak there was melt-in-the-mouth and the chocolate tart simply decadent so I for one was glad we'd done some walking to make space after our late and great breakfast! It was a perfect place for the final dinner of this section of the tour, and in addition to an eclectic mix of music over the sound system, a shower of rain set the Rain Frogs peeping. The Red-necked Crakes called on and off late into the night but nothing kept me awake!

## Day 7

## Wednesday 12th September

After the bush alarm clock of Laughing Kookaburras and a 6.30 breakfast, we said our goodbyes to Andrew and Trish. After a brief unrewarded look at the Fig-parrot nest, we hit the road south towards Cairns and the airport. We made a few brief stops but saw nothing new, even at Cattana Wetlands where I had hoped for finches but the day was hot by then. One final stop did, however, give Steve and Karen their last new bird with me in the form of a pair of Pacific Bazas which perched long enough to allow me to get them in the scope. We reached Cairns airport in good time for Karen and Steve to get some lunch before their flight to Brisbane and the continuation of their Queensland trip, staying at famous O'Reilly's in Lamington National Park. I was sorry to see them go...

## 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](http://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](http://www.facebook.com) is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!