

Birding North Queensland, Australia

By Keith and Kathryn Allen

Australia is the 6th largest country and its geographic isolation as the worlds' largest island has resulted in the evolution of some very unique flora and fauna. For the visiting birdwatcher Australia has 828 extant species of birds with the attraction that 45% are endemic to this country. The problem is that one is faced with the logistics of planning a bird watching holiday in a country with such huge travelling distances and seasonal variations in weather. From our research we decided to concentrate on an area within the territory of North Queensland. This north-eastern tip of Australia has 59% of the extant bird species with a good number of endemics and has two of the top ten prime birding locations listed by Australian Geographic (Aug 04, 2011), namely the Atherton Tablelands and the tropical rainforests around Daintree. The geographic location of North Queensland also means it gets migrant and vagrant birds from South East Asia. Unfortunately, one of the star migrant birds, the Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher, arrives in North Queensland during the rainy season. With the aim of avoiding the hot /wet tropical climate we flew to Cairns via Singapore at the end of August for a 3 week holiday staying at Kuranda, Crater Lakes, Kingfisher Park and Daintree with a trip to the Barrier Reef before returning home.

We arrived at Kuranda Birdwatchers' Cabin with the owner greeting us by frantically waving her arms and telling us to remain in our car. The reason for this soon became apparent as two very large birds appeared that could very well have been props from the film Jurassic Park. Our introduction to Australian bird watching was seeing the Southern Cassowary and understanding why this bird needs to be treated with respect. With a powerful legs and each having a 5 inch dagger like claw they can inflict serious damage. The Cassowary is an iconic Australian bird and important ecologically for the future of many rainforest plants and trees as they eat the fruits and consequently distribute the seeds. Some rainforest seeds will only germinate once they have passed through the gastrointestinal tract of this bird. Unfortunately, Cassowary numbers are declining due to habitat loss and birds being killed on the roads and by domestic dogs.

The grounds surrounding our cabin with its bird feeding stations gave us the opportunity to see several of the honeyeater species. These nectar feeding passerines are similar but unrelated to the sunbirds and flowerpeckers of other countries and are a result of convergent evolution. Australia has an extensive list of honeyeaters with some species having very subtle differences and a challenge to one's ID skills. Just how do you tell the difference between the Lewin's, Yellow-spotted and Graceful honeyeaters in the field? We were thankful for the Blue-faced, Crimson and White-cheeked species and the Eastern Spinebill (also a honeyeater) to make life easy. One bird that was unmistakable was the spotted catbird and not only by its plumage but also by its call. Hearing this bird call by your cabin window in the dawn chorus, just like a



Red-backed Fairy-Wren.



Azure Kingfisher.

cat, made you want to strangle it at times. Kuranda certainly threw up some surprises especially when we saw a Bush-stone Curlew enter the local pizza takeaway. In fact, these birds were prevalent through out this small town on the pavements and roads at night.



Golden Bowerbird.

One bird we were particularly looking forward to seeing was the Victoria's Riflebird, one of three birds of paradise in Queensland. When we arrived at Crater Lakes Rain Forest Lodge we were presented with our cabin keys, a breakfast hamper and a tub of live mealworms. The latter was not an Australian delicacy but provided to attract the Riflebirds. We were warned to open the tub of mealworms outside the cabin with the door shut as the birds would fly at you like a scene out of a Hitchcock movie. The female riflebirds arrived first and would take mealworms from your hand and leave their mark made by a long pin sharp beak. The male riflebird would then appear but unfortunately we were not rewarded with the mating display.

Crater Lakes was a good base to visit the Atherton Tablelands with a wide diversity of surrounding habitats including upland rainforest, wet sclerophyll forest, eucalypt woodlands, wetlands and farmland. Of the 12 endemic species of the wet tropics, nine are present in these upland areas including Tooth-billed and Golden Bower birds, Bridled Honeyeater, Fern Wren, Atherton Scrubwren, Mountain Thornbill, Grey-headed Robin, Chowchilla and Bower's Shrike-Thrush. We were fortunate to see all these endemics other than the Fern Wren.

The Bower birds were fascinating and unique in the trouble they take to build their elaborate bowers to attract a female. Locating the bowers, particularly that of the Golden Bower bird required a local guide and a trip up to the high rainforest area of Mount Hypipamee. We sat looking at the impressive structure made

from sticks glued together with spiders web and decorated with lichen for some time but there was no sighting of the bird. We walked back down the rainforest trail with a feeling of disappointment that quickly evaporated as this exquisite golden bird appeared in front of us. The bowers built by the Great Bowerbird were more easily accessible and we visited one just opposite a primary school. The bird would appear and fly into the school grounds collecting anything that looked colourful including Christmas tree decorations that it would use to decorate the bower.

While driving around the tablelands we would suddenly stop as we heard and saw flocks of birds that characterize the avian wildlife of Australia - Australian King-Parrot, Red-winged Parrot, Red-tailed and Sulphur-crested cockatoos. There were also the Galahs with their distinctive pink plumage and the very colourful Rosellas. Stopping at a campsite we photographed the Rainbow Lorikeets taking advantage of the water supply and in the same trees could eventually make out the camouflaged Tawny Frogmouths.

From Crater Lakes we headed north up to Kingfisher Park prepared with mosquito repellent. One of the key birds for us to see here was the Noisy Pitta. We were inspired to see at least one Pitta in our lives after reading the book, the Jewel Hunter by Chris Goodie. The Noisy Pitta as its name suggests can be located by its call but this skulking bird is difficult to see in the rain forest undergrowth. We were lucky to see two birds fly across a dried up stream bed and appreciate how colourful and challenging they are and what drove Chris Goodie to see all 32 of them.

Our final mainland birding destination was Red Mill House in Daintree and the opportunity to explore the wildlife of the Daintree River. We were advised to use the Daintree boatman Murray Hunt as he only takes out small parties and his boat can manoeuvre up some of the smaller creeks. We were not disappointed. Murray is a professional nature guide



Eastern Spinebill.

and managed to get us very good views of the Azure, Little and Sacred Kingfishers and excellent photography could be achieved. There was also good birding to had around Daintree village itself and the local pub did some of the best pub grub we have ever tasted. We were hoping that we could find our bogey bird for this trip at Daintree, the Lovely Fairy Wren. Australia has a variety of these Fairy Wrens with the Superb Fairy Wren having been voted in a national poll as Australia's favourite bird (Guardian on-line, 7th Nov, 2013). Unfortunately, this bird is not present in North Queensland but the Lovely Fairy Wren is still a stunning bird to see. We had been lucky enough to have good views of the Red-backed Fairy Wren on our first day but despite searching at known sites, the Lovely Fairy Wren continued to elude us. On our last day in Daintree we came across a Japanese bird guide with his clients observing activity in a tree and with his help we eventually got our bogey bird.

We finished Australia with a boat trip to the Great Barrier Reef and we were able to observe colonies of seabirds on a deserted sandy atoll. Our final list included Sooty and Crested Terns, Brown Booby, Common Noddy and the Frigatebird. We then put on the snorkel and fins to observe the fish and the disappointment of a bleached and dying Barrier Reef. Climate change and the run off of fertilizers and pesticides is having an impact on the Reef and Australia's coast line. More and more of the land in North Queensland is being turned over to agriculture and grazing with fields of sugar cane, bananas, avocados and tea stretching into the distance. This loss of habitat is having an impact on bird numbers and we found the birding and travelling involved quite challenging. We can only hope the 200 species we saw are still going to be there for future generations.

all photos by Keith Allen

Tony Gough's Diary

Tony Gough, a much-respected local birder and long-time member of our Group, thrilled us all with his wit and phenomenal birding knowledge. He died in 2015, and his extensive records have been painstakingly collated by Ian Hargreaves. Here is a further extract, one of many we will make available in the future.

Thursday 18th May 1967

I set off walking from Otley to go round the lower Washburn Valley – I only got as far as Lindley Bridge, however, when I ran out of time and walked back to Otley, 13:45 to 20:30.

The three young from the Song Thrush nest in Otley Park have fledged, leaving behind them the remains of one other squashed into the bottom of the nest. This explains, to some extent, why there was only three young.

I spent some time searching in vain for a nest when I saw a female Redstart among some trees by the road alongside Otley Plantation, where I found an empty Blackbird's nest behind the wall.

I didn't check all the hedgerow nests on the way up just a Chaffinch's where the female was sitting on four eggs.

Further up the road I ventured into the plantation, when I heard a Mistle Thrushes "rattling" as if mobbing – I saw not what. However, I did find an empty Whitethroat's nest in some low brambles and a Wren's nest in some tree ivy. The Wren flew from the nest and I counted six eggs with my finger. I also saw a male Bullfinch in the plantation.

I saw two Lapwings fly up from beside the boggy, rain-water pool in the fields coming to Farnley and marking where the last and most reluctant one rose from, I eventually discovered two small Lapwing chicks. The nest, about 100 yards away in an adjoining field, was empty and these young probably came from there. The nest did have three eggs, but I could easily have missed one of the chicks or perhaps it had met an untimely end. I first found this Lapwing's nest on 19th April when the eggs were already being incubated. 30 days ago, and just four days ago when I last looked the nest still had eggs so the young had hatched within the last four days and the Lapwing's incubation period must be around four weeks at least. I'd have a clearer idea if I knew when the eggs were laid, but surely it can't be much longer.

In finding these two chicks, I was just about to give up when I saw the pale buff neck band of one of them and almost immediately I saw the other nearby. Neither of the chicks moved, even when I threatened to tread on them, lowering my boot till it touched their down, but gently. They still didn't budge when I laid them in my hand, laying outstretched and flat, head, bill and neck flat and stubby little wings akimbo.

I searched for more young Lapwings in the next field, while 10 wailing adults flew around overhead. I only found one however, larger than the others I had just seen. This one, though it remained perfectly still during the search and allowed me to pick it up with no fuss, suddenly stood up on my hand and scrambled for "terra firma". Off it went on its long legs running across the field like a little, downy clown. Again the chick was by a wet, muddy patch in the middle of the field – the Lapwings seem to favour putting their young on muddy ground as soon as they can, perhaps feeding is better or easier there.



Lapwing eggs

photo: Paul King