

# Queensland Wet Tropics Tour | Aug. 13 – 22, 2023 | Trip Report | by Angus McNab



With local guide, Angus McNab and participants Barry, Patty, Peder and Susan



Cairns Esplanade – A. McNab



Cairns – B. Scott



## Sun., Aug. 13

### Arrival in Cairns

Many of the group were tired having just arrived from Papua New Guinea, including the guide...This resulted in most of the group walking to the wrong restaurant. We got to where we needed to be and had dinner and introduced ourselves to the new members of the group before finishing the night very early.

## Mon., Aug. 14

### Exploring Cairns

Today started down at the Cairns foreshore and it was full of birds. The sun was shining, yet it was still cool enough to enjoy the sun's warmth. Birds came thick and fast – White-breasted Woodswallows, Silver Gulls, Rainbow Lorikeets, Australian Swiftlets, Welcome Swallows, Peaceful Doves, and Varied Honeyeaters were quickly spotted as we scanned the beach to find where the shorebirds were. We didn't see much but walked towards the group of gulls and terns towards the city end and it was worth it. Scaly-breasted Munia, Magpie-lark, and a fruiting tree full of Australasian Figbirds and Metallic Starlings provided a lot of entertainment as



Millaa Millaa Falls – A. McNab



the Swiftlets zoomed around at eye level. We walked towards the northern end of the beach and came across an extremely accommodating Double-eyed Fig-parrot which allowed us to watch from within 5m for at least 5 minutes. We were in turn watched by the many onlookers who couldn't see what we were looking at and gave us even stranger looks. Towards the northern end of the beach, we had a beautiful adult Black-necked Stork, Greater Crested Tern, Grey-tailed Tattlers, Sacred Kingfishers and a Superb Fruit-dove! The Mangrove Robin was less accommodating, but we'd try for that again later.

A quick break whilst a vehicle was collected and then we were off to the Cairns Botanical Gardens. We walked down through the rainforest board walk towards centenary lake spotting Australian Brush-turkeys, Helmeted Friarbirds, Macquarie Turtles, Rainbow Bee-eaters, and Australasian Grebes. Garden maintenance meant there was a lot of noise around the main section of the lakes but it didn't matter too much as there was still plenty to see. We tried for Papuan Frogmouths unsuccessfully but as we reached the end of the walk we heard a Green Oriole, which we also didn't see but it sparked a small flurry of activity with a Black Butcherbird and Barred Cuckooshrike coming out into view. We finished up at the gardens having a look through the orchid and fern garden and then headed to the boundary of the gardens to find a pair of Papuan Frogmouths sleeping in a Podocarpus.

Lunch was back down on the foreshore which looked very different with the tide having receded hundreds of meters out, leaving exposed mud flats. The aptly named, Muddy's café was surrounded by Common Myna and Rock Doves which were quick to look for scraps. We finished the afternoon in along the Mangrove Boardwalk enjoying one of Australia's most magnificent accessible mangrove forests. Birds were quiet but it was nice to be able to look at fully grown tree sized mangroves. Dinner was a busy, loud, and slightly confusing with member of three tours converging on a lovely little Balinese restaurant. It was nice to meet other nature lovers and share stories before we all go our separate ways the next morning.

## **Tues., Aug. 15                      Cairns to the Atherton Tablelands**

Heading out along the Esplanade again this morning we wanted to find the mangrove robin that evaded us the day before. There were plenty of people and birds along the foreshore, most of the birds we saw yesterday but we got better views of White-bellied Cuckooshrike and had a line of about 25 White-breasted



Woodswallows on a palm frond. Reaching the northern end of the beach a few fruiting trees were full of male and female Australasian Figbirds, Varied Honeyeaters were screaming, and the shorebirds of yesterday appeared to not have moved. Susie was quick to spot a Rose-crowned Fruit-dove hiding in the canopy and we got better views than yesterday. We wandered the mangrove edges, and in time most of the group caught a glimpse of the Mangrove Robin. It wasn't what we'd hoped but there may be time again, and we had to go. Passing the fruiting trees we found a Rose-crowned Fruit-dove perched in the sun, in the open and on full display! We managed to draw quite a crowd as we watched the bird preen, call, and sunbathe, it was quite exquisite. Venturing south we headed for Etty Bay in search of southern cassowary. Driving through the paddocks we saw Forest Kingfishers, Fairy Martins, Golden-headed Cisticola, Australasian Swamphen, and Glossy, Straw-necked, and Australian White Ibis. The beach was insanely busy, but the resident cassowaries were not where to be seen. We drove back to the Mourilyan Harbour scanning the surrounding vegetation, without luck, so tried once more unsuccessfully at Etty Bay.

We had to head to the Atherton Tablelands, so after lunch in Innisfail we drove up the winding road towards Millaa Millaa. We pulled in at one of the nicest waterfalls in Australia and soaked in the view as the water came out of the rainforest above. Some tourists tested the waters, but it looked a bit chilly for our liking. We spotted a Brown Gerygone as we ascended the stairs, and Lewin's Honeyeaters were calling but it was the quiet period of the day. So, we moved to our accommodation for the next few days and finished the afternoon, left to our own devices, with Victoria's Riflebirds calling, Spotted Catbirds lurking around the rooms, Grey-headed Robins, and Brown Cuckoo-doves nearby.

## **Wed., Aug. 16                      Lake Eacham | Mt Hypipamee**

We woke to a cacophony of bird calls this morning. There were all kinds of sounds – screeching Catbirds, screaming Victoria's Riflebird, the machine gun sounds of Lewin's Honeyeater, and the constant piping of Grey-headed Robins. We headed to breakfast at the top of the Gillies Range and spotted some Dusky Honeyeaters as we waited to eat. From there it was into the dense rainforest around Lake Eacham, the four-kilometre (not the 2 advertised!) walk took us on a slightly undulating track around the lake. Birds were challenging to get onto, but we got there in the end, some of which were Rufous Shrikethrush, Brown Gerygone, Australian Golden Whistler, Large-billed gerygone, Pied Monarch, Spectacled Monarch, and Grey-



headed Robin. We had lunch along Peterson Creek in the hope of spotting a Platypus. None were spotted during lunch, but a napping Brown Cuckoo-dove was sitting nearby. We wandered down the creek and before a Platypus was spotted foraging along the opposite bank. It was a bit hard to see and disappeared fairly quickly, so we continued on to look at the Spectacled Flying-foxes. A small number of these megabats were in the trees screeching at each other as we wandered by. A Rufous Fantail did a few flybys but as the day warmed the birds slowed. Wandering back along the creek a Platypus appeared and put on a wonderful show, diving, eating, and swimming right in front of us! The Curtain Fig was a quick stop in for us on our way back to the accommodation. This gigantic tree is quite an impressive sight. Not necessarily the biggest but very much one of the most impressive fig trees in not only the region but in Australia. We headed back to the accommodation for some down time before our night walk, but most people were out at some point or another, fortunately everyone made it out to see a pair of Wompoo Fruit-doves sitting in an extremely visible location...something uncommon for this species.

To finish the day, we drove out to Mt. Hypipamee and had dinner under the stars. On the way there we stopped for some flocks of birds flying in the sky, as we watched it turned out to be thousands of Magpie Geese that were landing in the field just near us. It was incredible to see them all fly and land in a single paddock. Arriving at our destination we planned a 1.3 km walk to see some nocturnal wildlife, and we did well with the walk but less well with the wildlife. A Herbert River Ringtail, a Green-eyed Tree Frog, and hearing a Lesser Sooty Owl was all we were able to detect. It was a nice walk and will be interesting to see it in the light, particularly the crater.

## **Thurs., Aug. 17                    Atherton Tablelands**

This morning we spent the early hours walking around the lodge. The chorus was extremely loud again and the birds were everywhere...but rainforest is rainforest and not all the birds were easy to see. The Shining Bronze Cuckoo couldn't have sat in a higher place if it had wanted to. The highlight for the morning though was a male Victoria's Riflebird on its display post. We watched and watched, as it stretched and looked around, but it was the call that was amazing. As it called, we had a prime view of the steam coming out of its mouth. This happened a few times and was something we hadn't seen before. There were a few noises of surprise as this happened which really showed how fantastic it was to see.



After breakfast in proximity to some baby Welcome Swallows we headed out to Malanda. Stopping for a Pied Butcherbird on the way meant we were able to get to our trail whilst the birds were still quite vocal. Spotted Catbird and Victoria's Riflebird were as loud as ever but it wasn't birds that first caught our eyes, but Red-legged Pademelons and Saw-shelled Turtles. Eastern whipbirds ran through the undergrowth and Brown Cuckoo-doves drank from the river. We played cat and mouse with a White-throated Treecreeper, who eventually let us see it as it worked its way up several trees. Crossing to another trail in the local area we watched the Grey-headed Robins appear and disappear, the Silveryeyes flit through the treetops (below us at a lookout) and the Wompoo Fruit-dove feed high above us. It was similar to this morning though it was a riflebird on a display post that was probably most exciting, although it didn't display it stretched and puff itself up for minutes as we watched. It called and called but no other birds responded. Our afternoon was spent at Hasties Swamp. As we drove out there some cranes were spotted in a field, and we stopped for a closer look. It turned out to be the same field the Magpie Geese were in the evening before, and the cranes were a mix of both Brolga and Sarus Cranes. The Sarus Cranes had young and as we scanned the surrounding area there were hundreds of birds across our field of view. Arriving at the swamp we were greeted with thousands of Magpie Geese, likely those we saw yesterday, and thousands of Plumed Whistling-ducks.

## **Fri., Aug. 18                      Atherton Tablelands**

Today was to be a long day and we started at first light at Lake Barrine. Arriving at the lake it was essentially bare. The Great Crested Grebes that are almost always there were not...it's the first time I've not seen them there, which is why we can never guarantee any birds. It turns out they weren't the only birds not there that morning. It seemed every bird had taken the morning off! It was extremely quiet, and the loop track wasn't very successful, though the two gigantic Kauri pines were something to see!

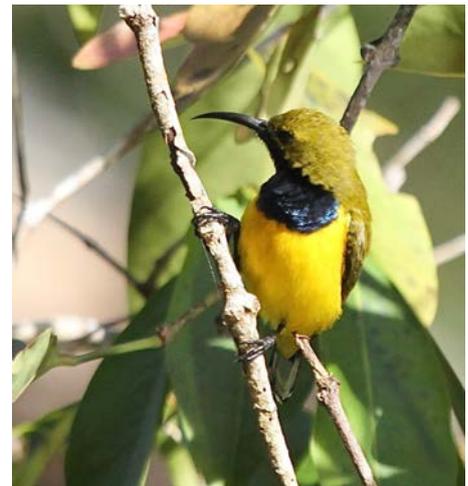
Breakfast at the Gilles café was a staple, and the usual suspects were still present. An Eastern Koel called once but wasn't seen, though a pair of Barred Cuckooshrikes were in the trees with a recently fledged Willie Wagtail. We had an hour's drive up to Granite Gorge, though it took a bit longer as a flock of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins, turned into a mini hotspot with Golden-headed Cisticolas, Brown Falcon, White-bellied Cuckooshrike, Pale-headed Rosella, White-throated Gerygone, White-throated Honeyeater, Hornbill Friarbird, and Black Kite all suddenly appearing. We arrived at the gorge and had a quick look at some of the captive birds before our first target appeared – Squatter Pigeon. We walked down the gorge and spent some time with the Mareeba rock wallabies, which were super cute. Some had pouch young, others were recently



Papuan Frogmouths – A. McNab



Great-billed Heron – A. McNab



out of the pouch, or were battered old males without ears. The weir behind the gorge was another hot spot with Spangled Drongo, Azure Kingfisher, Yellow Honeyeater, Olive-backed Oriole, Rainbow Lorikeets, and Olive-backed Sunbird zooming around, drinking, fishing, or washing themselves. We had lunch with a pair of Scarlet Honeyeaters, and managed to spot a Great Bowerbird, Wedge-tailed Eagle, and Striated Pardalote before we left. Although we'd seen it in the dark, we went back to Mt. Hypipamee to see it in the daylight hours. The crater is an impressive sight, and Dinner Falls is a beautiful waterfall – neither of which you can see in the dark. We lucked out on tree kangaroos again here but had a lovely walk in the rainforest. As it was our last night at Chambers Lodge, we had an early dinner and got back in time to get to the mammal viewing area. Krefft's Gliders came in as did the Long-nosed Bandicoot, which are both nice animals that are hard to get close to away from the feeder. With an early start tomorrow, we watched the mammals and made for bed.

## Sat., Aug. 19

### Atherton Tablelands to Mossman

This morning we were on the go from the start, take away breakfast, driving through the darkness and the fog we were headed to the northern Tablelands. To Mt Lewis specifically, where the rainforest here is at a higher elevation and provides access to a few birds we hadn't yet seen. We arrived at the clearing, but it was the wrong time of year for the Blue-faced Parrot-finches that famously live here. A pair of Victoria's Riflebirds were feeding on the forest edge, though a bird we may have had our fill of the last few days. We walked an old mining trail hearing Chowchillas in the distance, too far away to see. Atherton Scrubwrens, Wompoo Fruit-dove, Eastern Whipbirds, Spotted Catbirds, Victoria's Riflebirds were all calling but spotting birds in the dense rainforest was hard. We found a small group of Chowchilla that essentially ignored us as they foraged in the leaf litter. Yellow-throated Scrubwrens scolded us but predominantly remained out of view. Coming back out onto the road, the area was busy with other birders, and we wandered along, finding a small group of Mountain Thornbills, a White-throated tree creeper, and some Yellow-browed Scrubwrens that did not want to sit still.

We moved down the mountain and visited Abattoir Swamp. Numerous bottlebrushes were in flower and the honeyeaters were actively foraging. Bridled, Brown, Yellow, Brown-backed, Dusky, and White-cheeked honeyeaters were all spotted and photographed as we stood around the hide. Inside the hide we met a large Brown Tree Snake that was sleeping in the corner. We had distant views of female Red-backed Fairywrens and close views of Forest Kingfishers that Ken spotted.

Our next destination was very close by – a small area of private land that is a winter hang out for the Blue-faced Parrot-finches that are more commonly seen on Mt Lewis. We stalked our way in, and a beautiful



Cairn's Birdwing was feeding in some flowers. This large colourful butterfly was very cooperative for our viewing pleasure. A pair of the parrot-finches were quickly spotted, and we spent the next half our creeping along getting glimpses as they foraged in the grass and shrubs on the forest edge. Spectacled Monarchs and Grey Fantail flittered around distractingly, but we were able to get onto the parrot-finches before heading to our accommodation in Mossman.

## **Sun., Aug. 20                      Daintree River Cruise | Cairns**

There was no time for breakfast before we headed out with Murray the Boatman on the Daintree River cruise. Before we stepped on the boat, we had a White-lipped Tree Frog on the railing. It was non-stop once we boarded: Azure Kingfisher, little egret, Sacred Kingfisher, Forest Kingfisher, and an Estuarine Crocodile. We cruised downstream as the sun rose and the fog lifted, birds were singing, and most were in very viewable positions. A pair of Papuan Frogmouths were nice and low on the river and then a Little Kingfisher was spotted on the mangrove roots just 30cm above the water. We were fortunate it sat for probably 45 seconds, long enough for a good look at this blue and white golf ball sized bird. We were just reaching the furthest point of the river when Murray spotted a Great-billed Heron! It was quick to move behind the vegetation, but after a few minutes it came back out and stood in the open for us. We then moved down Barrat Creek, which was narrower and noisier bird wise: Shining Flycatchers, Macleay's Honeyeater, Black Butcherbird, Azure Kingfisher, and White-eared Monarchs were seen or heard. Bottlebrush and pencil orchids hung on the trees. On our way back to the boat ramps we stopped for a large crocodile named Hook, who was coming up to bask just as Murray said they would.

We made our way back to Cairns and had a short 1 hour stop at the Cattana Wetlands. It didn't take long to find a pair of Green Pygmy-geese hiding low on the water. Comb-crested Jacanas were abundant walking across the water lilies, while two Lace Monitors were foraging. One we saw at a distance, and one we had right up close as it dug through an Orange-footed Scrubfowl nest. Our final destination was a bit of a drive, but having missed Southern Cassowary the first day, we had to try again. We were just 1km from Etty Bay when we found them, an adult pair of Southern Cassowary walking along the edge of the road! The birds seemed almost totally unfussed by our presence and continued to wander and forage as we followed along from the opposite side of the road. We weren't the only ones watching the Cassowaries, at times other vehicles came and went as we all sat off the side of the road. We continued to drive down to Etty Bay and have a stretch of the legs, enjoy the beach, and put our feet in the water for a while before making the drive back north to Cairns.



## Mon., Aug. 21                      Great Barrier Reef Cruise

We were able to get a slight sleep in today, with a 7:20 departure from the hotel, heading down to the reef fleet terminal. Our destination Michaelmas Cay! Upon arrival to the terminal, we had at least seven Bush Stone Curlews in the carpark, standing awkwardly and looking as lost as ever. But before long we were on the catamaran bound for the little coral cay, that just pokes up from the larger reef system. The journey out was filled with safety briefings, informative talks, and some bird watching from the front deck. The birds were quiet and unfortunately there were no dolphins or whales but as the cay came into view there was a faint haze of birds floating above it. The group undertook different activities – semi-submersible reef viewing, snorkelling, and bird watching on the cay itself. There were thousands of Common Noddies, hundreds of Brown Boobies, Greater Crested Terns, and Sooty Terns. Hiding in the mix was a single Ruddy Turnstone, some Lesser Crested Terns, Black-naped Terns, and Black Noddies.

Under the relative cool water, we saw starfish, parrot fish, trigger fish, green sea turtles, and uncountable smaller colourful fish in and around the coral. The open sandy areas had a different range of fish, most silver, and the fish varied in size everywhere you looked. The journey home was mostly used for sleeping, catching the last warm sunrays of the day, and trying to jag any last-minute birds we could. After a tiring day we had our final dinner on the waterfront, and although a noisy start was a lovely dinner (once the crowds moved on).

## Tues., Aug. 22                      Departures

Our final breakfast was a nice way to catch up with everyone who could make it and say our goodbyes. I'd like to thank everyone for the trip, I had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed our time together. The Daintree River boat cruise and our experience with the Cassowaries were highlights for me, and I hope experiences you will remember!

*Photos: Double-eyed Fig Parrot (Barry Ulman - BU), Azure Kingfisher (BU), Southern Cassowary (BU), Magpie Lark (BU), Rose-crowned Fruit Dove (BU), Australian White Ibis (BU), Helmeted Friarbird (BU), White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (BU), Rock Wallabies (BU), Forest Kingfisher (BU), Australian Darter (BU), Olive-backed Sunbird (BU), Saltwater Crocodile (BU), Black-necked Stork (BU), Sulphur-crested Cockatoo (BU), Brown Boobies (BU), Sooty Tern (BU)*