

Inala Nature Tours

Cape York July 1st – July 8th 2024

Trip Report



Cover Photo: Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*)

Guides: Yu Ota & Catherine Young
Images: Catherine Young

Day 1. Mon 1 Jul 24. Fly Cairns to Lockhart River.

Landing in Lockhart River shortly after lunchtime, guides Yu Ota and Cat Young were waiting at the airport. We checked into our cabins, and after a quick late lunch headed out in the cars. We had hardly gone very far at all when a Pacific Baza swooped down from a roadside tree. We all hastily piled out of the cars and watched it hawking in the canopy before catching a large praying mantis and perching on an exposed branch to consume it. A quick stop by the Gordon River gave us our first rainforest birds for the trip including Spectacled Monarch, Australian Brush-Turkey, Australian Figbird and a magnificent Riflebird making its distinctive whistle-like call. A sound that became a soundtrack for the trip and will always take us back to the rainforest. Along the road we stopped for

Pheasant Coucal, Rainbow Bee-Eaters and little Bronze-Cuckoo. At Portland Roads the Sahul Sunbirds were putting on a show, dashing around over our heads and hanging upside-down on flowers. The Eastern Reef Egret was very successful catching fish at the edge of the water and a Rose-Crowned Fruit Dove treated us to excellent views! The pink and orange colours were a real feast for our eyes.



After a delicious dinner (and dessert!), we headed off to find some nocturnal wildlife. We had an incredible three Large-Tailed Nightjars, with the third sitting quietly by the side of the road, giving us all excellent views. A little further on we came across an Orange-Naped Snake that hurried across the road. In contrast a nearby large Brown Water Python didn't seem in a hurry to go anywhere. An excellent introduction to Cape York!

Day 2-4. Tue 2 - Thu 4 Jul 24. Lockhart River.

Over the next few days we settled into a pattern, up before sunrise for breakfast in the dark to make the most of the early morning in the rainforests of Katini-Payamu (Iron Range National Park). Followed by a siesta in the middle of the day and a few hours birding in the afternoon before dinner.

Early on the first day we ticked off a mega bird as we were successful in tracking down a Northern Scrub-Robin! An incredibly difficult bird to get a look at, we carefully followed its eerie call through the forest. Next on the list of Cape York endemics was the Filled-Neck Monarch. A gorgeous black and white bird with a vibrant blue eye ring. Above our heads a Black-Eared Catbird exploded from the canopy, perching for just a brief moment before vanishing into the forest again. A difficult bird to see at this time of year. Back down in the forest, tropical Scrub Wren were more accommodating, and we had excellent views of a male magnificent Riflebird. Over the mornings we heard Yellow-Billed Kingfisher many times but one call very close to the road had us all searching the roadside vegetation for this shy species! With no luck calling it in, we had almost given up when a guest spotted a bird high up at the top of a Melaleuca

tree. A stunning female! We listened as she and the male called to each other over our heads. What a treat! There is no easy birding in the rainforest but over the mornings we had great success with Cape York endemics including Yellow-Legged Fly Robin and Red-Cheeked Parrot as well as many Northern Sub-Species and a stunning female Eclectus Parrot at a nesting hollow.



In the afternoons we visited Quintell Beach, Chilli Beach, the sewerage works and a dam in an indigenous protected area where Yu Ota has permission to take guests. What a privilege to be there! Here we picked up several new species for the trip including Azure Kingfisher, Lemon-Bellied Flycatcher and excitingly, White-Striped Honeyeater! This beautiful Honeyeater is endemic to Cape York but is locally nomadic, moving to wherever the best flowering is. Despite being a normally elusive bird, with Yu's amazing spotting skills, fawn-breasted bowerbird almost seemed common. After many glimpses of Palm Cockatoos flying past (or away) we finally got lucky with a male feeding on beach almonds at Quintell Beach. Amazingly it largely ignored us as it foraged in the trees on the shoreline, even moving to the tree above us and practically dropping nuts on our heads. It was fascinating to look at the dropped shells that it had expertly sliced open with its bill and removed the nuts from.



At night driving back from Portland Roads, we came across two Short-Beaked Echidnas, an unusual sighting for Iron Ranges, as well as a Long-Nosed Bandicoot and two Eastern Grey Kangaroos. A Bare-Bellied Fruit Bat swooped over the cars and a Rufous Owl and Papuan Frogmouth were seen briefly in the headlights. Perhaps most memorable was standing by the cars in the dark, listening to the strange call of a Marbled Frogmouth close to the roadside.

Day 5. Fri 5 Jul 24. Lockhart River to Musgrave.

Up early again for our final morning in the Iron Ranges, a few of us headed back to the dam in the Indigenous protected area for one last look around. To our surprise we found a juvenile Dusky Moorhen, around 200km out of its species normal range. We also got further fleeting views of the very shy, White-Streaked Honeyeater and a great look at Lemon-Bellied Flycatcher.

After picking up the rest of the group, we were on the road again, with a quick stop at Tozers Gap lookout to admire the view (and the flowers). The change in vegetation signalled the promise of new birds and sure enough a stop by a quiet river gave us a bundle of trip first's including Striated Pardalote, Pale-Headed Rosella, Rainbow Lorikeet and our first good look at a Blue-Faced Honeyeater. The highlight of the day was a stop at a private billabong behind Archer River Roadhouse. Much excitement

ensued as the new species came rolling in fast - Agile Wallaby, Pacific Heron, Torresian Crow, Magpie Lark, Cattle Egret, Spotted and Plumed Whistling Ducks. The Spotted Whistling Ducks being a lifer for all. This species is a relatively recent self-introduction from Papua New Guinea, with increasing numbers throughout FNQ in the last 15-20 years.



Whilst driving through Coen we paused for our first Galahs feeding on the roadside. Their deep colour and dusty pink coloured crests marking them as the Cape York sub species *E.r.roseicapilla*. Continuing south, we had a number of great roadside sightings including multiple Brown Falcon, the quick flash of a Common Bronzewing and a little group of Squatter Pigeon (sub species *G.s.scripta* - red faced). After a long day of driving, the prospect of wine with dinner drew us towards our dining destination.

Day 6. Sat 6 Jul 24. Musgrave-Lakefield National Park

Today we set off early to explore the northern section of Rinyirru (Lakefield National Park). A couple of roadside stops in the tall forest before entering the park gave us our first looks at little Friarbird, Yellow-Tinted and Black-Chinned Honeyeater, as well as Grey Shrike-Thrush which had been teasing us by calling from a distance for a few days. Some in the group had a look at a Cicadabird and others a glimpse of a Red-Browed Pardalote.

We ventured into the park and quickly made our way across the open Nifold Plain, devoid of trees. Feeling as if we were on safari we spotted Australian Pratincole, Black-Necked Stork and many Brolgas, mostly in pairs or groups of three. Raptors were now highly abundant with Whistling and Black Kites especially common, but Brown Falcon and Nankeen Kestrel were also sighted on a few occasions. A small rise provided an excellent lookout, and we were able to see four Australian Bustards and a large flock of little Corella in the distance. Closer to us, a Golden-Headed Cisticola called from the long grass. A little oasis among the Kennedy Palms further along the road provided an almost overwhelming number of new birds in a short time. Not even a few short tropical showers could dampen our enthusiasm. On arrival a large flock of Red-Tailed Black

Cockatoo took off from where they had been feeding on the recently burnt ground. Nankeen Night Herons, Brahminy Kite and Australian Darter circled over the small billabong. Out on the water there were plenty of Comb-Crested Jacana, Egrets and Wandering Whistling Duck. On the bank a large flock of Star Finches sat sunning in a mostly defoliated tree while a White-Throated Gerygone sang sweetly just out of sight.



Lunch at another tropical lagoon provided further birding opportunities as we shared the superb location with around 50 Magpie Geese, a number of Plumed Whistling Ducks, Cotton Pygmy Geese, Australian White Ibis and Pacific Black Ducks. A call alerted us to the presence of a Black-Backed Butcherbird, and we soon found a pair of this handsome Cape York endemic. One last attempt in the tall forest for Red Goshawk and after some searching Yu found a female right by the road with a Rainbow Lorikeet in her talons! Just as we had settled our nerves, a male Red Goshawk flew by and perched just a little further along the road. What an amazing experience to see a pair of these stunningly rare raptors!



After a quick stop back at the accommodation, we were soon on the road again and on our way to Artemis Station. Stopping at a station dam we found Black-Backed Butcherbird for those who hadn't joined us in the morning, as well as our first Australian Magpies for the trip. With no Golden-Shouldered Parrots by the dam we headed to the feeding station where we quickly found a small group of juveniles in a nearby tree with a couple of young males amongst them. Although they hadn't yet developed their characteristic golden shoulders, the Parrot's blues faces, and red trousers were quite endearing. The station owners Sue and Tom have been managing Golden-Shouldered Parrot habitat on the extensive

cattle station for decades. Working with Queensland University and the Artemis foundation, their dedication has been successful in protecting this endangered species in this part of Cape York. As thanks, a small donation is made to the foundation from the tour.

Day 7. Sun 7 Jul 24. Musgrave to Cairns.

Up early for breakfast on our final day, a few in the group were off birding before the sun even came up. After packing up we jumped in the cars and made our first stop just down the road at a pond off the highway. As soon as we got out of the car, we heard a cacophony of Friarbirds and other Honeyeaters all around us. The little pond turned out to be a very busy place indeed! A pair of Forest Kingfishers harassed a lone Comb-Crested Jacana and we got our first good look at Yellow Honeyeater, Little Friarbird and Grey-Crowned Babbler. We didn't get very far down the road before we stopped for a pair of Bustards by the roadside, then for Brolgas, Red-Tailed Black Cockatoos and a trio of Australian Pelicans. In Laura we located a group of Red-Winged Parrots feeding on the passion vine and a large group of Black Flying Foxes roosting in a garden tree. Above the general store and along the mains street we found approximately 1 million Galahs (only a small exaggeration), including young being fed.



Our morning tea stop at Lakeland provided the opportunity for a group photo as well as a close look at a Great Bowerbird bower. Different species of Bowerbird collect different colours to display at their bower, with great Bowerbirds collecting white and often green too. It was fascinating to see the collection of white snail shells, rocks and a wallaby jawbone alongside a pile of green glass and toy soldiers. A Red-Backed Kingfisher perched on the AFL goal posts caused some excitement as it is uncommon in this part of Australia. A lunch stop at Palmer River allowed us to get acquainted with the local Apostlebirds and Bowerbirds before continuing on to Lake Michelle and then on to Cairns. Arriving early afternoon at the hotel, where

a few of us did a quick turn around and headed back out to look for Rufous Owl and Spectacled Flying Fox.

After that was our final dinner together and our final day checklist. Thanks, Yu Ota, for such an enjoyable run down of the daily birds every night! Helping us recap the day with what was seen and where. The final count for the trip was 153 species seen and 11 heard only. A very good number for 6.5 days of birding!

Day 8. Mon 8 Jul 24. Depart Cairns.

