

INALA NATURE TOURS – TRIP REPORT

CAPE YORK & WET TROPICS SUMMER MIGRANTS & SPECIALTIES TOUR JANUARY 2024

Tour Leader: Steve Davidson

It's hard to think of a better place to be than Cape York at this time of year, but to be more specific - the incomparable Kutini -Payamu NP. Or Iron Range in the old parlance. Sure, it's muggy, hot and fairly uncomfortable, and it rains at inopportune times, and the mozzies are ferocious, but it has to be said that birding here in the Wet is just incredible.

On the four days we have just completed in the Lockhart River, Portland Roads and of course the fantastic Kutini-Payamu NP, we witnessed a veritable smorgasbord of birds the region has to offer the hardened birder. Highlights included sensational views of Papuan Pitta, Black-winged Monarch, Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher, Palm Cockatoo, Black-eared Catbird, Yellow-legged Flyrobin, Marbled Frogmouth and Northern Scrub-Robin, plus the startlingly bright Cape York form of Double-eyed Fig-parrot.

In addition to our time on Cape York, we had an extra few nights in the Cairns and Atherton Tablelands region, where a few of the specials of that rich area were seen, such as Tooth-billed Bowerbird, Victoria's Riflebird, Atherton Scrubwren, Bower's Shrike-thrush, Cotton Pygmy-goose, Pale-vented Bush-hen and Bridled Honeyeater. We even scored some rarities in the shape of Eastern Yellow Wagtail and Red-rumped Swallow.



Day 1, Wednesday 24 January: Cairns.

Kick off on the first Inala Cape York tour for 2024 was in the afternoon at our accommodation in downtown Cairns, where the 3 participants and myself met in the foyer and immediately went birding along the world-famous Cairns Esplanade, in what remained of the daylight. We soon had Torresian Kingfisher, Varied Honeyeater and Australian Swiftlet under the belt, with Terek Sandpiper, Greater Sandplover and Eastern Curlew out on the mudflats. A marauding Peregrine nearly took out a Black-tailed Godwit before our eyes.

Birding is hard work in this heat, and the first dinner of the tour was scoffed at the hotel that night, accompanied by cold beers.

Day 2, Thursday 25 January: Cairns to Lockhart River.

Getting up early for a pre-breakfast walk along the Esplanade paid off today, with walk-away views of a pair of ultra-confiding Double-eyed Fig-parrots at head height, a Gould's Little Bronze-cuckoo and Mangrove Robins singing at us from deep within their namesake.

Soon enough it came time to board the flight to Lockhart River, and a short one and a bit hours later we disembarked, greeted by torrential rain. Thankfully it didn't last long so in the remaining daylight we hightailed it our first site where we had a couple of Pied Herons, a Radjah Shelduck and Common Sandpiper on offer; the hoped for Spotted Whistling-ducks apparently absent. A nearby beach had Australian Tern and Eastern Reef Egret in the waning daylight.

An hour's drive (punctuated by 4 roadside Palm Cockatoos giving us the best FNQ vibes imaginable) saw us at our lodgings for the next four nights. A superb meal rounded out a long day.

Day 3, Friday 26 January: Kutini-Payamu NP.

A leisurely lie-in meant we didn't hit the road until 7am today, but we straight away had both Greater & Lesser Frigatebirds overhead at the point, 3 of the



Northern Scrub-Robin - Mark Ley

newly named Sahul Sunbird (part of a split up of the Olive-backed Sunbird complex across South-east Asia and Australia), and a fly-by Oriental Cuckoo that afforded no views for anyone; a situation thrice repeated over the next few days in this spot. At a large patch of monsoon rainforest and vine scrub along the road through Kutini-Payamu NP, near Portland Roads, we stopped to look at nesting Spangled Drongos, and soon hit onto a rich vein of bird activity. Adult Yellow-billed Kingfisher, Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher, Brown-backed Honeyeater and Noisy Pitta showed well here, but the star bird was the Papuan Pitta hopping about and then calling on a log for five minutes, mere metres away, smashing our collective retinas and providing immense satisfaction and relief for all. One of the biggest target birds of the trip under the belt on the first morning here...

Further along the road we stopped when another Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher flew across the road. It didn't reappear but we did see a pair of Tawny-breasted Honeyeater and two Rufous Shrike-thrush. And in nearby heathy woodland we saw our only White-streaked Honeyeaters for the trip; this strange honeyeater is one of only two bird species endemic to Cape York Peninsula. Heading back to Portland Roads for lunch and a siesta was a welcome respite from the heat. Later in the afternoon we headed down to the nearby coast, stopping along the way for a beautiful male Shining Flycatcher. On the low tide sand flats we saw several Pacific Golden Plover with small numbers of Greater & Siberian Sandpipers, a lone Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, and Roseate, Black-naped, Little, Lesser Crested, Great Crested and Common Terns.

Days 4-5, Saturday 27-Sunday 28 January: Kutini-Payamu.

The next two days followed a similar theme, with early rises and breakfast, then heading into the rainforest, woodlands, heathlands and along the beaches of this vast area, a short siesta in the heat of the day, followed by a late afternoon sojourn where we'd capitalize on a bit of evening bird activity. The highlights are



Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo – Mark Ley

as follows: Orange-footed Megapode (Scrubfowl), the purple-wattled Australian Brush-turkey (northern subsp purpureicollis), Pacific Emerald Dove, finally achieving good looks at Superb Fruit-dove – despite the rainforest everywhere seemingly filled with their calls, the bizarre Trumpet Manucode (one watched at close range, preening for a good ten minutes), a pair of Palm Cockatoo perched close by the road in the early morning sunlight, quietly regarding us and giving us the most incredible experience/ memories/warm and fuzzies, excellent views of another of our wet season targets – Black-winged Monarch – as well as other monarch action in the form of Frill-necked, Spectacled and White-eared Monarchs. We scored big with incredible extended views of a Northern Scrub-robin that sang, perched in full view, 4 metres high in a tree for a good ten minutes; completely counter-intuitive to their normal behaviour. Also, here we enjoyed amazing views of White-faced Robin, a small party of Green-backed Honeyeater, both Yellow-spotted & Graceful Honeyeaters, Grey Whistler and our only Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo for the trip.

One morning we had extended views of another normally-incredibly-stubborn regional specialty with a Trumpet Manucode sat up for us for at least 5 minutes preening in the open.

Repeat visits to the Treatment Ponds paid off when we were finally able to lock onto a big flock of Spotted Whistling-ducks; this species is more or less resident in north Queensland after introducing itself here from PNG about 25 years ago. Other birds at the ponds included several Pied Heron, Radjah Shelduck, Plumed Egret, Red-backed Fairy-wren, Comb-crested Jacana and a magnificent adult White-bellied Sea-eagle.

Fawn-breasted Bowerbird is a tricky species at the best of times, and this trip was nothing out of the ordinary – unfortunately only brief views were attained by a couple of us opposite the Lockhart River airport one afternoon.



We had excellent views of Magnificent Riflebird - with a female followed incessantly by a recently-fledged juvenile.

Over the course of a few nights we headed out looking for nocturnal birds as well, and were able to get great views of Marbled and Papuan Frogmouths, and a brief Large-tailed Nightjar.

Day 6, Monday 29 January: Lockhart River to Cairns.

This was our final morning in Kutini-Payamu NP, and we were still missing a couple of regional endemic species, so after breakfast we started making our way toward Lockhart River airport, with a few stops planned. First of which was on an open hillside not far from Portland Roads where, by a pure stroke of luck, we happened to all be out of the vehicle when a small flock of Double-eyed Fig-parrots flew into a tree by the roadside. These are the distinctive subsp *marshalli*, aka Marshall's Fig-parrot, found only here on Cape York and in PNG. 4 males and 3 females gave us incredible views as they fossicked about the canopy for a good 5-7 minutes before they eventually barrelled away. Next on the agenda was to hopefully track down what is probably the hardest bird to seen in this area – the Black-eared Catbird. At a site where they'd been seen recently we tried, and failed. Incredibly, at another site further along the road, we lucked out as we stopped to look at birds in a roadside fruiting tree, and there was an adult Black-eared Catbird. It did not hang around unfortunately, but long enough for us to get a decent view of what is ostensibly one of the more difficult birds in Australia.

Time ticked away and check-in at the airport loomed; however we still had one more bird to try for. Luckily for us this one was far more visible and obliging – a pair of Yellow-legged Flyrobin that afforded great looks of their namesake, plus all their other features.

It was a very successful morning and needless to say a fitting end to our four-day stint in Kutini-Payamu NP. It is such an amazing place to watch wildlife...



Black-winged Monarch – Alfred Schulte

At midday we boarded our flight for Cairns, and with no stops en route were back there early afternoon. A short walk produced around 30 Pacific Swift, a Large-billed Gerygone and a calling Common Cicadabird. It was a stinking hot and humid afternoon so we retreated to the hotel, in readiness for tomorrow's drive up into the Atherton Tablelands to commence the next leg of the tour.

Day 7, Tuesday 30 January: Cairns to the Atherton Tablelands.

After an early breakfast we set off to the south of Cairns, with our first birding location amongst a maze of sugar canefields and turf farms. First birds here were Plumed Whistling-ducks, Crimson Finch, Pacific Golden Plover and Chestnut-breasted Mannikin. Then a fine adult Eastern Yellow Wagtail appeared – part of the reason we stopped here. It was seen foraging amongst the piles of fertilizer and mulch before a pipit chased it off. Also in the area were a Singing Bushlark, Tawny Grassbirds and Golden-headed Cisticolas, as well as another 10 or more Australian Pipit. It was already steaming and the temperature was soaring out in the open fields, so we piled back into the car and headed for the hills. Once up at around 900m in altitude, the temperature was noticeably cooler, and we birded along some back roads near Malanda, looking unsuccessfully for Blue-faced Parrot-finch, but finding a family of four Grey Goshawk, Collared Sparrowhawk, Brown Goshawk, a sparkling male Red-backed Fairywren with his harem of females, and a flock of at least 8 Crimson Rosella, aka Tropical Rosella. This is the geographically separated subspecies *nigrescens*, and is quite an uncommon bird up here, in stark contrast to the southern taxa. It is also unusual in that the juveniles moult straight into adult plumage and don't seem to have the green and red intermediate plumage that the southern birds do. Further along this same road in a patch of high-altitude rainforest we encountered Atherton Scrubwren, Yellow-throated Scrubwren, Pale Yellow Robin, Rufous Shrike-thrush and a Grey Fantail of the altitudinally-restricted subsp *keasti*.



Eclectus Parrot – Alfred Schulte

We stopped in at nearby Mt Hypipamee NP late morning, and despite the heat building and cicadas kicking off managed to find a nice suite of high altitude birds – Spotted Catbird, Mountain Thornbill, White-throated Treecreeper, aka Little Treecreeper (high-altitude subsp minor), Lewin’s Honeyeater, Bridled Honeyeater in good numbers, a pair of Macleay’s Honeyeater, Black-faced Monarch, Australian Rufous Fantail and up to 4 Grey-headed Robin.

After lunch was hastily imbibed, we stopped at a small wetland on our way back to Yungaburra, and amazingly picked up Cotton Pygmy-goose, a bird I thought we may miss. Also here were a few Wandering Whistling-duck, a Pacific Baza passing over, and best of all – a Pale-vented Bush-hen that was yacking from dense grass right by the roadside; we eventually had brief views as it crossed a gap between clumps..

Coming into Yungaburra a raptor soaring over the road proved to be none other than a Square-tailed Kite! At our final destination for the day we looked for the recently reported Red-rumped Swallow that had been seen with Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins. No vagrant swallow was in evidence, but we did see a Channel-billed Cuckoo, Nankeen Night-heron, 50 Tree Martin and up to 270 Hardhead.

Day 8, Wednesday 31 January: Atherton Tablelands.

This morning after breakfast we visited a few locations in drier woodland to the north of the tablelands around Mareeba, taking in birds like Lemon-bellied Flyrobin, Bar-shouldered Dove, Scarlet Honeyeater, Double-barred Finch, Noisy Friarbird and White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike. In the rocky, boulder-strewn hills behind Mareeba we found small groups of the ubiquitous Squatter Pigeon, as well White-throated Gerygone, Pale-headed Rosella, Great Bowerbird, Grey-crowned Babbler, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Little Friarbird and a stunning male Common Cicadabird. Nearby we picked up Blue-winged Kookaburra and



Magnificent Riflebird – Pat Kelly

Torresian Crow. It was quite a delectable sample of tropical savannah birds, however it was no Blue-faced Parrot-finch. So we headed back up into some high altitude rainforest and roadsides to look for the right seeding grasses that the finches come out of the rainforest for. Alas our search was in vain this time, but we did see some cool alternatives, with Tooth-billed Bowerbird, Victoria's Riflebird, Varied Triller, Australian Golden Whistler, Spectacled Monarch and more Pacific Swift showing well.

A late afternoon stop produced the goods with a Red-rumped Swallow seen well for a few seconds with several Welcome Swallow before it took off, never to be seen again...

A night drive through some canefields near Atherton produced a number of Barn Owl on the roadsides.

Day 9, Thursday 1 February: Atherton Tablelands to Cairns.

The following morning we had an excellent session just wandering around the gardens at our accommodation, with standouts being White-throated Needletail, White-headed Pigeon, a singing Tooth-billed Bowerbird, Eastern Whipbird, 4 Victoria's Riflebird, Wompoo Fruit-dove and another 3 Crimson Rosella that flew over. And here the trip ended. We made our way down the Kuranda Highway and to the airport, dropping off our vehicle and saying our goodbyes.

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