Inala Nature Tours

TRIP REPORT

Steve Davidson and Dougal Gillman | Aug 15, 2025 to Aug 24, 2025

Wompoo Fruit-dove by C. Davidson

Wet Tropics

Day 1

Friday, 15 August Cairns

It was a large contingent of folks that all met for dinner tonight, as overflow from 3 separate tours all combined. The completion of the Inala/Naturalist Journeys PNG tour, the end of an Inala/NJ private tour and the start of the Inala/NJ QLD Wet Tropics Tour, all filled the outdoor seating area at the Holiday Inn Cairns Harbourside this evening, to discuss all things bird related, plus many other topics. It was a fun night.

Day 2

Saturday 16 August Cairns

Image: Double-eyed Fig Parrot by C Tzaros.

Having enjoyed a great night's sleep and an early breakfast, our group was keen to see some of Cairns's local special birds, so we set off at 6:30am. First bird we saw, literally as we walked out of the doors, was a hulking female **Grey Goshawk** in the hotel garden. A fantastic start. **Varied Honeyeater, Double-eyed Fig-parrot, Torresian Imperial-Pigeon, Sacred Kingfisher, Eastern Curlew, White-breasted Woodswallow, Metallic Starling, Scaly-breasted Munia, Australian Tern, Peaceful Dove, Australasian Figbird, Striated Heron** and **Sahul Sunbird** all then fell under our happy gaze. Down at

the north end, near the mangroves, we found a beautiful pair of **Torresian Kingfisher**, as well as some furtive **Mangrove Robins, Mistletoebird** and **Hornbill Friarbird**. A tip off from a friendly local took us to a nearby public park where a day-roosting **Rufous Owl** was next on the agenda. We were hitting big targets early, and it was fantastic…

Heading to Centenary Lakes next, we found a small pod of **Magpie Goose, Australasian Darter** and **Pacific Black Duck**, followed by **Little Kingfisher** - this was another major win, with it being a very low density species and never easy to find. It had been a hard-hitting morning, so we retreated to a nearby cafe for an excellent lunch and to recharge.

Out to the north of Cairns we found a bonanza of kites, with **Black, Whistling** and **Brahminy Kites** all together following a sugar cane harvest, as well as a pair of **White-bellied Sea-eagles** and big numbers of the obligatory **Eastern Cattle Egrets**. Down at the beach, we saw **Greater Sand-plover**, a cute **Red-capped Plover** family, **Australian Pied Oystercatcher, Caspian, Crested** & **Little Terns**, and **Australian Pelicans**.

Image: Whistling Kite by K Dick.

In the nearby littoral vine scrub, we found a pair of **Lovely Fairywren** (although decent views eluded a few of us), as well as **Rose-crowned Fruit-dove** and a **Hornbill Friarbird** feeding close by in a clump of flowering mistletoe. A smashing dinner in a downtown Italian restaurant, followed by sweet, sweet slumber, rounded out our first brilliant day in the Tropics.

Day 3

Sunday 17 August Cairns to Chambers Rainforest Lodge, via the Cassowary Coast.

An early departure straight after breakfast was necessary today in order to travel for around 90 minutes to get to the Cassowary Coast and search for its namesake, the rare and very localised Southern Cassowary. Along the way we propped for our first **Laughing Kookaburra**, as well as **Golden-headed Cisticola** and a small flock of **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin**.

Arriving at our destination in a small national park on the coast, we found some good birds like **Spectacled Monarch, Yellow-spotted Honeyeater, Macleay's Honeyeater** and **Rufous Shrikethrush**. But not our quarry. Another sweep of local roads was in order, and just as we completed our first run, an eagle-eyed member of our part saw two big **Southern Cassowary** on the edge of the rainforest. What a sight they were! One bird moved back into the forest fairly quickly but the other, a magnificent female, stayed around for about 30 minutes, allowing copious oohs and aahs and lots of pics. She really did look imperious. Much relief was felt by all of us; this was a big target and it was achieved magnificently. Furthermore, a bit of icing on the cake was some follow-up birding back along the road in the lowland rainforest - giving us unfettered views of a gorgeous pair of **Lovely Fairywren** (much better looks than yesterday), as well as a very cute **Fairy Gerygone.**

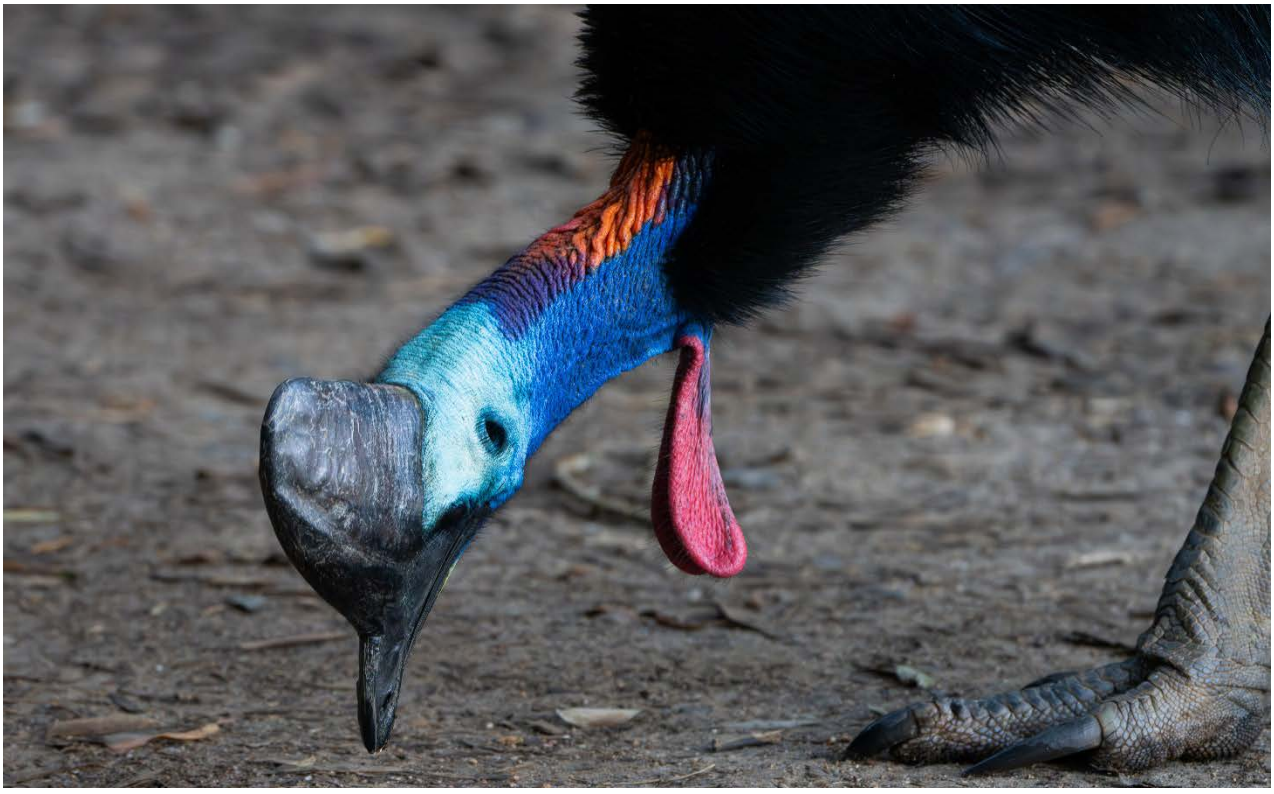

Image: Cassowary by D Gillman.

Making our way up the range, we stopped for a leg stretch, picking up our first **Pied Currawong, Lewin's Honeyeater** and a brief fly-over by a small group of **Crimson Rosella**. The climate is definitely cooler up at around 800-900m above sea level, so things were very comfortable. We took a side trip to one of the backwaters of Lake Tinaroo that has lots of muddy margins and shallow water. Plenty of waterbirds here, with **Plumed Whistling-duck, Australian Wood Duck**, over 100 **Hardhead, Grey Teal, Pied Stilt**, two migrant **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** and up to 4 **Latham's Snipe** freshly arrived from Japan. Flowering shrubs nearby held **White-cheeked, Dusky** & **Brown Honeyeaters**, whilst in the long grass several **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin** munched on seed.

We then settled into our accommodation in the rainforest. After dinner, a quick stint of lamping gave us a couple of **Striped Possum, Krefft's Glider**and **Northern Long-nosed Bandicoot**.

Days 4 - 6

Monday 18 & Tuesday 19 August Atherton Tablelands.

With our accommodation nestled in the rainforest, it isn't far to walk to start seeing some of the Wet Tropics specialties, and furthermore in the wider region it isn't far to drive to take in the myriad range of habitats and ecotones on the Atherton Tablelands. Over the next 4 days we did just that, compiling a considerable bird list in the process. The following are some of the highlights of our peregrinations…

Image: Male Golden Bowerbird by Y Ota.

Higher altitude rainforest held **Wompoo Fruit-dove**, **Topknot Pigeon** & **Brown Cuckoo-dove** in fruiting trees, **Pacific Emerald Dove**, **Shining Bronze-cuckoo**, **Fan-tailed Cuckoo**, **Spotted Catbird**, **Tooth-billed Bowerbird** singing above their simple display courts, **White-throated Treecreeper** (subsp minor), **Brown & Fairy Gerygones**, **Eastern Whipbird, White-eared & Pied Monarchs, Bower's Shrikethrush, Golden Whistler, Rufous Fantail, Grey Fantail** (Wet Tropics subsp keasti), **Grey-headed & Pale Yellow Robins, Eastern Spinebill, Yellow-throated & Large-billed Scrubwrens, Mountain Thornbill, Yellow-breasted Boatbill, Chowchilla, Atherton Scrubwren, Bridled & Scarlet Honeyeaters,** the amazing **Golden Bowerbird** at his intricately decorated bower, and the fabulous **Victoria's Riflebird.**

Freshwater wetlands, forest edge and agricultural fields yielded **Brolga** and **Sarus Cranes, Comb-crested Jacana, Australasian & Great Crested Grebes, Magpie Goose, Plumed Whistling-duck, Dusky Moorhen, Royal Spoonbill, Brown Goshawk, Pacific Baza, Barred Cuckooshrike, Silvereye, Eastern Yellow Robin, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, Pied Butcherbird, Pheasant Coucal, Golden-headed Cisticola, Scaly-breasted Lorikeet, White-headed Pigeon, Nankeen Kestrel, Rufous Whistler, Leaden Flycatcher, Little Bronze-cuckoo, Mistletoebird** and **Sahul Sunbird**. At night we managed to see a **Lesser Sooty Owl** as it left its daytime roost, heard a **Red-necked Crake** yakking away in the dark, and had glimpses of an **Australian Boobook** (Wet Tropics subsp lurida).

Mammals seen included the crazy **Giant White-tailed Rat**, **Green Ringtail Possum** (looking and acting a bit like a sloth), **Coppery Brushtail Possum**, **Musky Rat-Kangaroo, Red-legged Pademelon, Agile Wallaby, Spectacled Flying-fox, Dingo, Eastern Grey Kangaroo** and a couple of us saw a **Yellow-footed Antechinus.** Despite a lot of searching, we failed to connect with the iconic **Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo**. A couple of reptiles made an appearance as well, despite the relatively cool conditions. Near Malanda we found a **Yellow-faced Whipsnake** sunning itself, and at Lake Barrine there was a fantastically prehistoric-looking **Boyd's Forest Dragon**, truly a primitive beast.

Image: Green Ringtail Possum by C Davidson.

Day 7

Thursday 21 August Atherton Tablelands to Mossman.

Today our traveling party left the relative cool of the Atherton Tablelands and headed north, visiting more open woodland habitats and wetlands along the way, and losing altitude as we headed down the escarpment to the coast once more. In open, tropical woodland near Mareeba we connected with new birds in the form of **Spotted Pardalote, Weebill** (Australia's smallest bird), **Lemon-bellied Flyrobin, Squatter Pigeon, Pale-headed Rosella, Little** & **Noisy Friarbirds, Olive-backed Oriole, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Sahul Brush Cuckoo, Grey-crowned Babbler** and our largest bird of prey - **Wedge-tailed Eagle**. After a delicious lunch we stopped at Lake Mitchell, Mt Molloy & Julatten, seeing **Black Swan, Glossy Ibis, Green Pygmy-goose, Blue-winged Kookaburra**, more **Squatter Pigeons**, a **Great Bowerbird** at his fabulous bower, which glittered with all forms of trinket - both man-made and natural, **Brown-backed Honeyeater, White-bellied Cuckooshrike** and a couple of **White-browed Crakes** that yelled at us from deep within their swamp, but refused to show…

Image: Lemon-bellied Flyrobin by S Davidson.

Day 8

Friday 22 August Mossman to Cairns via the Daintree River.

A pre-dawn departure was necessary today in order to make our way to Daintree Village and to meet up with our skipper for the morning. Boarding of our vessel and departure ran smoothly, and in the fresh morning air we motored quietly out onto the beautiful Daintree River, surrounded as it is by mountains and rainforest. Almost immediately we saw a gorgeous pair of **Azure Kingfishers** - a much anticipated species that allowed fantastic photo ops, followed by the striking sexual dimorphism of male & female **Shining Flycatchers,** and a very close **Striated Heron**. A pair of **Radjah Shelduck** drifted by, and loads of **Australian Swiftlets** flew overhead. Next came a pair of busy **Large-billed Gerygone, White-bellied Sea-Eagle** high in the sky, **Black Butcherbird, Yellow Oriole, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Hornbill Friarbird** and then boom!! A mighty **Great-billed Heron** was right beside us on the riverbank, hunting in the streamside vegetation. Wow, what a bird…

Shortly thereafter we had another pair of **Shining Flycatcher**, followed quickly by two **Papuan Frogmouths**, sitting in very low vegetation over the water.

Image: Azure Kingfisher by Y Ota.

We sidetracked along a tributary of the Daintree, with the vegetation much closer and overhanging, where we found the incredible night of a **White-throated Nightjar** at its day roost on a large branch over the water - simply amazing in that this species is almost never seen during the day unless it is flushed from the ground. Nearby there were nesting **Large-billed Gerygones** and **Brown-backed Honeyeaters**, **Nankeen Night-heron**, a lovely **Gould's (Little) Bronze-cuckoo** (subsp ***russatus***), and a couple of the group saw a male **Superb Fruit-dove** for a brief second before it vamoosed…

A salty-looking **Saltwater Crocodile** floated past at one point, providing a touch of menace to the scene…

It was an amazing morning out on the water, and by the time we headed back to shore we were famished. So, we hit a local cafe for a slap-up breakfast and great coffee, before a little more birding along the riverbank to secure good looks at some **Cryptic Honeyeaters**.

On the coast where the river flows to the ocean, we found another **Saltwater Crocodile**, as well as more **Striated Herons** and a pair of **Common Sandpiper**. Lots of colourful crabs and mudskippers were in attendance also, running around the muddy banks, so we studied them for a while. The purple crabs were possibly **Broad-fronted Mangrove Crab, *Metopograpsus frontalis*** and nearby the small fiddler crabs were possibly **Orange-clawed Fiddler Crab, *Tubuca coarctata*.**

Thereafter, the slow journey back to Cairns along the coast road ensued.We made it back with a bit of time up our sleeves to check the coming tide for birds along the Esplanade, finding a few **Grey-tailed Tattler, Bar-tailed Godwit** and not much else. At one point a **Rufous Owl** flew through the gardens behind us, creating absolute pandemonium with the local birds, but was gone in a flash before most of us could get onto it…

A fine meal at a local restaurant resounded out a huge day, and with the anticipation of a trip out to the Great Barrier Reef next morning, we hit the hay early.

Image: Saltwater Crocodile by R Cooper.

Day 9

Saturday 23 August Michaelmas Cay on the Great Barrier Reef.

At 7:30am we arrived at the docks in Cairns, ready to board our charter for our trip out to the outer reef and Michaelmas Cay - a sandy atoll where large numbers of tropical seabirds' nest. Motoring out, we started seeing the odd **Great Crested Terns**, followed by the first **Brown Booby** of the morning.

Eventually pulling up to the Cay, we could hear the cacophony of hundreds of seabirds on the island. Several **Sooty Tern** & **Common Noddy** flew by as we transferred to a smaller boat for a circumnavigation of the island, before disembarking onto the shore for an hour or so to view the birds up close. On the cay itself were several pairs of nesting and courting **Brown Booby** - the males face a vivid blue as part of their breeding flush, as well as thousands of **Sooty Tern** & **Common Noddy**, smaller numbers of **Great Crested Terns** and **Silver Gull**, two Ruddy Turnstone and a handful of the more pelagic **Black-naped Tern**. Overhead there was a juvenile **Red-footed Booby**, as well as two **Great Frigatebird** and a juvenile **Lesser Frigatebird** that flew in later. As we motored to another area for snorkelling over the reef, a lone **Little Tern** flew by.

Eventually the boat made its way back to Cairns, where we headed back to the hotel for the remainder of the afternoon, before our final dinner together, and the end of the tour.

Image: Michelmas Cay by A Schulte.

On behalf of Inala - thanks for touring with us.