



Inala Red Centre Tour

22-27 July 2024

Guide – Angus McNab



Image: Yellow rumped thornbill- Cindy Marple

Day 1 Mon 22 July 2024 – Arrive Alice Springs

It seemed everyone arrived with enough time to get out and see a few birds around Alice Springs, before we met for dinner on the first night. Upon introductions, it was a meeting of familiar faces, friends of friends (between multiple friends), and the meeting of new friends 😊 A delicious Italian style dinner, and a bit of preparatory information, and we were good to go the next morning.

Day 2 Tues 23 July 2024 – Alice Springs - Spinifex Country

Our first outing was out to the spinifex country, and into the small breakaways along Santa Teresa Road. On the way out we made some impromptu stops for a brown falcon, which got us horsfield's bronze-cuckoo, red-backed kingfisher, black-faced woodswallow, and zebra finch. We had stops for rufous Songlark, which got us brown Songlark, and budgerigars, and crested pigeons were common along the powerlines. Out in the spinifex we climbed the hills and were quickly onto a small group of cinnamon quailthrush which were a first big target for us. Budgerigars constantly flew overhead, and we could hear singing honeyeaters but our two other spinifex dwelling targets remained elusive. Walking back down in the flats we were fortunate as a target, the spinifex bird popped out in front of us. We watched for a few minutes as it perched in a few trees and sat in the relative open, which was unusual for this species.

Moving down the road we stopped in at Bourke's Swamp, a patch of woodland, that shows no resemblance to a swamp, but has a good variety of birds. With no trails to follow we walked from bird to bird to bird, which was red-capped robin to splendid fairywren to southern whiteface. The hour we were there vanished quickly as birds continued to appear, and we only ended up walking about 200m as there was so much to see.

After lunch we stopped in at the Alice Springs stabilisation ponds, a standard stop on any birding tour. There was a lot to be seen, with little corella, masked lapwing, and little crow the first spotted. The corvids around central Australia all look the same, so we spent time listening to each of the calls for ID confirmation. There were ducks, teal, grebes, swans, stilts, avocets, pipits, grassbirds, reed warblers, fairywrens, crakes, nativehens, dotterels, kites, and magpie-lark, amongst others. We slowly meandered our way around the facility looking in all the ponds to see what we could find. With a good diversity of birds under our belts we made our way out for the last little adventure.

A quick drive through the Ilparpa valley to finish the day didn't get us any pink cockatoos but we did get great looks at a group of grey-crowned babblers who put on a great show!

Day 3 Wednesday 24 July 2024 – Alice Springs – West Macdonnell Ranges

Heading out before sunrise we had a bit of a drive to get out to the West Macdonnell range, where we would be spending the day. Our first stop was Ellery Big Hole where we had our breakfast down at the 'big hole'. There were three little pied cormorants and an Australasian darter inhabiting the pool, which seemed odd as there is so little water out here it isn't really somewhere you'd expect these birds. There was also a sacred kingfisher, suggesting there are more than enough fish to go around. We watched, waited, and ate, listening to the budgerigars in the trees above. Zebra finches came and went but painted finches couldn't be heard coming down to the water. Suddenly there down on the waters edge was a pair of painted finches, that had got in unnoticed! We didn't get a long view but the pair flew back past us, without a sound... possibly the same way they got in.

We walked the dry river bed that runs from the gorge and the soft sand made walking a bit challenging but it was worth it with pied butcherbirds, weebills, and striated pardalotes in the big eucalyptus trees. Unfortunately the area east of the river had burnt in the last year removing a large swathe of spinifex that some of our targets previously lived in. We headed back to the car and were able to spot spinifex pigeons in amongst the rocks and a mistletoe bird foraged low in a mistletoe giving great views.

We briefly dopped in on the Finke River, but with so much water around we didn't stay long and headed into Ormiston Gorge. There was more flowering here and brown and white-plumed honeyeaters were common. We walked down to the gorge and came across two teeny tiny fledgling brown honeyeaters hiding in a mistletoe, whistling kites circled, and a pair of rufous whistlers made contact calls to each other as they moved through the vegetation. We climbed up to the lookout and had scenic views across the valley, looking down on the few people keen enough to swim in the frigid waters.

Heading out from the gorge we drove back and made a stop in at Serpentine Gorge, which required a bit more of a walk, but was well worth it for the view. Birds were quiet but we got nice looks at grey-headed honeyeater, budgerigars selecting nesting hollows, and an inland thornbill

that had us questioning what we were seeing for a period. The drive home was eventful in a good way with a central bearded dragon basking on the road, and a pair of pink cockatoo that were extremely confiding, allowing us to pull in close and get some great opportunities to watch as they fed on paddymelons!

Day 4 Thursday 25 July 2024 – Alice Springs to Ghan

We had a bit of a sleep in this morning as we waited for the sun to rise. Our first stop was nearby and we got out to Jessie's Gap to have breakfast with the bowerbirds. The bowerbird was late, but we enjoyed breakfast at a bower before we headed along the range in search of dusky grasswrens. There was a good morning chorus and we had lovely views of a pair of grey-headed honeyeaters before the contact call of our quarry was heard. Having mastered the art of ninja, a pair of grasswrens were spotted for a brief period before vanishing and reappearing 80 m back up the hill. We walked further down the track and found another pair who were a little more confiding and we were able to get better views as they moved through the vegetation. The western bowerbird did come to see us off before we looked at the rock art and headed south.

Stopping along the highway we were quickly met by a western gerygone and got eyes on splendid fairywrens and red-capped robins. A pair of mulga parrots were sitting low in some mulga, and although a little obscured, the male was stunningly bright.

Our next stop is an important cockatoo breeding area in the warmer months but seemed to be a haven for predatory birds during the cooler months. Brown falcon, nankeen kestrel, Australian hobby, and brown goshawk were all seen, at times multiple birds together as we wandered the dry creekbed and ate lunch. Smaller birds quickly went quiet when particular birds cruised overhead, whilst the torressian crows, and white-herons sat out in the open treetops.

Our final stop was another roadside nothingness, and whilst it doesn't look like much it has some pretty nice birds. Cinnamon quailthrush were spotted before we got out of the car, and once we were into the gibber we quickly had singing and spiny-cheeked honeyeaters, yellow-throated miners, budgerigars, and zebra finches, with black-breasted buzzard overhead. We spent quite a bit of time following a calling chiming wedgebill, that remained invisible and always somewhere in front of us. Diamond doves came and waddled away, brown falcons and crested bellbirds perched in trees, and the wedgebill flew back and forward essentially

unseen. We did get some looks at it before it vanished for the afternoon. We spotted Burke's parrots in a tree, and we followed them along for better looks, which led us to woodswallows, more zebra finches, and another 30min of walking. The weather was beautiful with clouds providing some shade, and there were flowers everywhere! It was a beautiful landscape, having had some good rain in recent times.

Day 5 - Friday 26 July 2024 – Ghan to Alice Springs

The clouds the night before did not prepare us for the conditions we had this morning... it was raining! Conditions were less than favourable, and unseasonal rain wasn't what we were after. Arriving out on the gibber, we spent two hours walking around in the drizzle and breeze. The wet vegetation soaked through our shoes, and we were a little damp, with very little to show for it. Nankeen kestrel, crested bellbird, southern whiteface, and white-winged fairywrens were all that was willing to brave the conditions. A single chiming wedgebill called sporadically, and despite our best efforts we really couldn't get our eyes onto it. It really wasn't working so we headed north in hopes of getting out of the weather.

Back up at the cannonball run monument we visited the opposite side of the road and things were instantly better. A black honeyeater, and juvenile black honeyeater were quick to appear. We spotted a number of smaller birds, zebra finch, brown Songlark, rufous Songlark, white-winged fairywren, before we got onto our main target. We were scanning the low vegetation with a faint whiteface call coming from somewhere nearby, and then four birds were spotted flying into a small bush nearby. We got great views as they sat in the bush and then flew down to the ground to forage



Our final stops were both within the Alice Springs Desert Park. Firstly at the main gate where we saw some beautiful Sturt's Desert Pea, and searched for grey honeyeater. The honeyeater wasn't to be heard but there were some nice birds around, including grey-crowned babbler, white-plumed honeyeaters, and splendid fairywrens were spotted and a pallid cuckoo called but couldn't be seen. Moving to another area we quickly got onto a different pallid cuckoo that flew down to grab some prey from a bush in front of us. Then just moments later we had a red-browed pardalote singing up in some eucalyptus trees on the edge of the trail. One last section of the park was searched, and we spotted galahs and crested pigeons, though it was very quiet and nothing was calling. Just before we turned to leave we found one last bird for the day, or so we thought. A slaty-backed thornbill was spotted and flitted between trees and branches,

as we watched and looked for identifying features we all could see a dark eye, streaked breast, and streaky forehead. Then as we watched the second and third thornbill appeared and as we looked we noticed the pale eye... and had to check what we had been seeing. After some more watching we determined there were two species, chestnut-rumped and slaty-backed thornbills!

Day 6 - Saturday 27 July 2024 – Depart Alice Springs

Our final morning and we had a bit of spare time before part of the group headed north to Darwin. We headed back to the Desert Park as there were a few species we hadn't yet seen. The weather was beautiful, and it was more enjoyable than the night before, more activity and more birds calling. We saw many of the birds we had seen before, with the addition of rainbow bee-eater and yellow-rumped thornbill. From here we drove over to the Old Telegraph Station and had a short walk up to the trig point to survey the surroundings. There were a number of parrots that we could enjoy up close, and then both black and white-backed magpies. Just as we were finishing up for the morning we found a single fairy martin, a pair of common wallaroos, and a common bronzewing basking in the morning sun.

I'd like to say thank you to everyone for what was a very enjoyable trip through the Red Centre. I think we did quite well with the birds and got almost all of the target species! I hope you enjoyed what is a very unique part of Australia and got everything you wanted from the tour!