

Australia. Part Two - Northern Queensland.

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Lands of the Southern Cassowary, Golden Bowerbird and Platypus. Beginning and ending in Cairns and incorporating the Daintree River, Mount Lewis, the Atherton Highlands, Paluma National Park and a trip out to the Great Barrier Reef, this two-week loop of the classic birding localities of the Wet Tropics was simply superb – a fantastic array of birds seen, including many not possible elsewhere in Australia.

DAY LOG

22 July. Kuranda, Cattana Wetlands, Port Douglas, Daintree River. Arrived in Australia at 5.00 am, picked up a rental car, ventured out into the warmth of the sub-tropics. Initial plans to spend a couple of days around Cairns had been scuppered by the Japan stopover, so instead we drove directly up to the forested slopes of Kuranda, one of the best localities for perhaps the most iconic bird of this coastline, the rare and mighty impressive Southern Cassowary. Even allowing for a coffee stop in McDonald's, it was only a 20 minute drive, so it was still basically dark when I pulled in at a small siding on the Black Mountain Road, explosive calls of Eastern Whipbirds ricocheting from the forest, a myriad of other weird and wonderful calls flooding out from deep undergrowth. Left my companion to sleep a while in the car and, as the light slowly crept in, took my first birding steps on this new continent. And how magical it was, every single bird a new species for me – Eastern Whipbird my first bird, Little Shrike-thrush my second, diminutive Double-eyed Fig Parrots my third. Pretty busy field guide it those first couple of hours, Black Butcherbird, Barred Cuckoo-shrike, Yellow-spotted Honey-eater, Varied Triller, a female Victoria's Riflebird, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher and so it went on. By about 9.30 a.m., with Australian bird list already burgeoning, thought it would be sociable to check on my companion back at the car. Arriving back at the car, 'Did you get your big bird?' she asked, of course referring to Southern Cassowary. Then rather gobsmacked, I listened to her account – she'd woken at 9.10 a.m., sat up and come face-to-face with a Southern Cassowary! Towering above the car bonnet, it had ambled right past the car and down the little siding that I'd parked on! Jeepers, probably the first person in history to score Southern Cassowary as their first bird in Australia! Well that was pretty gripping, even more so as the days passed without me finding this key species. Popped into the nearby Barren Falls briefly, my first Australian Brush-turkeys wandering around, then dropped back down to the coastal plain and to Cattana Wetlands, a small series of pools that should also provide some nice birds. Quite hot by now, and I found that a pool that often holds White-browed Crakes was basically dried up, but a nice wander followed – mostly common birds of the Wet Tropics, but nearly all new for me, Australian Darter, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Spangled Drongo and Pied Butcherbird, plus my only Little Bronze Cuckoos of the trip and a Sacred Kingfisher. As my initial ideas for a couple of easy-going days in the Cairns area were now out of the window, it was time to head north to rendezvous with a boat cruise planned for the Daintree River the following morning. Paused a while at the rivermouth at Port Douglas, successfully adding a stunning pair of Beach Stone-Curlews against the mangroves, as well as Bush Stone-Curlews on a lawn in nearby residentialia, then motored up to a campsite in Daintree village to put myself in position for next morning. To a sun setting over the forest-clad hills, Radjah Shelduck on the river, White-breasted Wood-Swallows, Rainbow Lorikeets and Sulphur-crested Cockatoo overhead, so ended the first day in Australia, magical. 23 July. Daintree River. The Daintree River, here lurk massive Saltwater Crocodiles, plus oodles of birds including the highly desired Great-billed Herons, Little Blue Kingfishers and Papuan Frogmouths. And so for one of the early highlights of the trip, dawn saw us on the Daintree jetty awaiting our river cruise into this paradise. Heavy mist over the river as we departed, Australian Darter and Little Pied Cormorants roosting on overhanging snags, a bevy of passerines in bankside vegetation, not least several Large-billed Gerygones, a couple of Little Shrike-thrushes and both Leaden Flycatcher and Shining Flycatcher. As we drifted downstream, a flash of colour as the first of several Azure Kingfishers appeared, plus a Forest Kingfisher on branches above and a couple of Striated Herons. Soon the sun was breaking through, pretty serene on the river. An Eastern Water Dragon strutting the banks, Varied Triller, Figbirds and Yellow Orioles in big trees, flocks of Eastern Cattle Egrets passing over, an Eastern Osprey patrolling the river. And then a real treat – in a tangle of branches, a mere metre above the water, two quite stunning Papuan Frogmouths. Gently floating in, we ended up perhaps three metres from these monster birds, the enormous broad bills sandwiched by glaring yellow eyes. An enjoyable hour or so more on the river failed to produce either Great-billed Heron or Little Kingfisher, but it did end on a high with a superb White-bellied Sea Eagle sitting in a tree just above the jetty back at Daintree village. Back on dry land, after Helmeted Friarbirds and some impressive butterflies in the village, I then ventured up Stuart Creek Road. A mosaic of habitats, including patches of riverine forest and plenty of rough pasture, oodles of birds – not least, a Pacific Baza in a tree, Rainbow Bee-eaters hawking the open areas, a flock of Australian Swiftlets, several Lemon-bellied Flycatchers and a couple of Spangled Drongos. In woodland at the road's end, I failed to find Lovely Fairy-wren, but I did see very one Fan-tailed Cuckoo, a couple of Spectacled Monarchs and my first macropod of the trip - an Agile Wallaby hopping along the roadside. On route back, one Black-necked Stork on a sandbank and four super-size Saltwater Crocodiles. With high desires still to see Southern Cassowary, I crossed the Daintree River in the afternoon to explore the forests of Cape Tribulation. Reputed to be a top locality for Southern Cassowary, several trails we walked, but very little did we see ...and certainly nothing measuring a metre-and-a-half tall! Still rather gripped by the tale of one from the car day before! For some reason, despite the pristine tropical forests and picture-perfect white sandy beaches, I didn't like Cape Tribulation, so just before dusk, we opted to exit and return for a second night at the campsite in Daintree village.

24 July. Daintree River & Kingfisher Park. Another fine morning on Stuart Creek Road. Retracing my route, I soon encountered the Agile Wallaby still on the same roadside, plus White-breasted Woodswallows and Rainbow Bee-eaters

hawking meadows and, new for the trip, Chestnut-breasted Mannikins and a Swamp Harrier. Up at road's end, still no Lovely Fairy-wren, but a nice bunch of species in the woodland - Fan-tailed Cuckoo again, plus Figbirds and four Yellow Orioles, a flock of 35 Topknot Pigeons and one Victoria's Riflebird, plus added extras including Brown Cuckoo-Dove, my first Pacific Emerald Dove of the trip and both Grey Fantail and Northern Fantail, the latter the only one I would see on this trip. Soon got distracted by butterflies, or perhaps frustrated a better word - numerous flying, but precious few settling and most staying high in the canopy. But for sheer 'wow' factor, against a dark forest interior, the spectacular vivid blue flashes of an enormous fly-by Ulysses Swallowtail took some beating! Others here, the also spectacular New Guinea Birdwing, the small but quaint Large Green-banded Blue and the far more sombre Orange Bush-Brown. Meanwhile, back at the campsite, as I paused to photograph Helmeted Friarbirds, yet more weird and wonderful butterflies - Ulysses Swallowtail and New Guinea Birdwing again, but also the spectacular if somewhat strangely named, Varied Eggfly. Then, via a supermarket and the first House Sparrows of the trip, it was a short drive to Julaten and the famous Kingfisher Park Lodge. Pretty basic set up in terms of accommodation, but a superb plot of land for birding - forest birds in abundance, but a pretty open mosaic of habitat with lots of forest edge, the result being it easy to actually see stuff. From the veranda as we checked in, a glance across to feeders beyond a lawn - one hundred or so Chestnut-breasted Mannikins and Red-browed Finches zipping in, a few Bar-shouldered Doves and Peaceful Doves plodding below. Settled into the bunkhouse, then pottered around the campsite, a gaudy Yellow-breasted Boatbill the first treat, then a right bevy of honeyeaters - the confusion trio of Lewin's Honeyeater, Yellow-spotted Honeyeater and Graceful Honeyeater, plus a half dozen of the right quaint Macleay's Honeyeaters, along with four Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, four Black-chinned Honeyeaters and a couple of Dusky Honeyeaters. Basically, birds everywhere, a well-placed drinking bowl attracted many of these honey-eaters in, as it did with other species. Also to the water bows, both Little Shrike-Thrush and Bower's Shrike-Thrush. Almost 50 species here during the afternoon, open country opposite also attracting Laughing Kookaburra, flocks of Scaly-breasted and Rainbow Lorikeets and, roosting in a tree aside a river, two Papuan Frogmouths. In more forested area, Pale Yellow Robin, Grey-headed Robin and my third fantail species of the day, one Rufous Fantail. Plan was to see Platypus at dusk - a little vantage point overlooking a stream at the end of the property supposedly pretty reliable. And so we sat there as it gradually got dark, studiously peering into a couple of backwaters, scanning every ripple with expectation. And darker and darker it got, a couple of Spectacled Monarchs put on a show, but as for Platypus, a big zilch. Or almost, just as got so dark that we could barely see anything, and unfortunately too far for my torch, something surfaced in the deep gloom - I think it was Platypus, but in reality it could have been anything! Walking back, now completely dark, a couple of new mammals for me - first up, Northern Brown Bandicoot, then a Red-legged Pademelon. Also one Papuan Frogmouth hunting in the property's orchard.

25 July. Mount Lewis & Abattoir Swamp. Another blank on Platypus at dawn, thereafter up to Mount Lewis for the remainder of the morning. Shrouded in dense tropical forest, this site supposedly offers some of the best birding in the Julatten area, species such as Blue-faced Parrot Finch and Atherton Scrubwren lurking on the mountain's flanks, plus the almost mystical Golden Bowerbird. Indeed, prior to 2013, a reliable bower for this much-desired bird was known on one of the higher trails, though this is no more and the species is once again something of dreams on this mountain. Hard-going I found the birding here, birds generally few and far-between and, even when seen, mostly hidden high in the canopy. From the track, Mountain Thornbill, Spectacled Monarch and Pale-yellow Robin all proved easy enough, plus the near endemic Atherton Scrubwren, but as for everything else it was a question of slowly plugging away. Added fly-over Double-eyed Fig Parrots, found a bunch of Topknot Pigeons in a tree, plus too a couple of rather elusive Brown Cuckoo-Doves lurking in dense vegetation. At the top of the track, I walked a trail as far as a couple of pools that used to mark the locality of the bower of the Golden Bowerbird. Predictably, I did not see Golden Bowerbird. Less predictably, I basically saw nothing else either – in total, other than a few unidentified things flitting in the canopy, my totality was a couple of Pacific Emerald Doves flushed from the trail and a few Brown Gerygones. Spotted Catbirds and Yellow Oriole back at the road remedied the poor showing to quite some degree, a fabulous Tooth-billed Bowerbird doing so much more admirably – this being one of the top birds of the trip. Still have to say, this was not my favourite locality in Australia! On route back down, a assortment of stops added a few birds more, including Bridled Honeyeater, Brown Treecreeper, Golden Whistler, Grey-headed Robin and Yellow-throated Scrubwren, but overall pretty much the same as going up, not many birds. A bit of easy-going stuff around Kingfisher Park middle day, trying to photograph the Macleay's Honeyeaters and Bower's Shrike-Thrush etc, then a saunter off to Abattoir Swamp a little later. Very dry with no visible standing water, thus a total blank on waterbirds, but not all lost – one Swamp Harrier quartering, plus a whole bunch of honeyeaters on the short trail between the parking and hide, not least six Brown-backed Honeyeaters, two Dusky Honeyeaters and four Brown Honeyeaters. Managed another zilch on Platypus attempts in the evening, then an almost equally non-productive few hours driving up the Mount Lewis road after dark. Supposed to be chock-a-block with nocturnal mammals, assorted bandicoots and possums at the very least. I however saw not a single mammal! But then, just as my dislike of Mount Lewis was tumbling yet further, a major stroke of luck – a ghostly pale owl flew out in the headlights, swooped up and perched upon a branch ...one superb Lesser Sooty Owl, an amazing moment. And so ended the day, despite my negativity towards Mount Lewis, it had produced a few real crackers, both the owl and Tooth-billed Bowerbird in particular being among the highlights of the trip.

26 July. Kingfisher Park, Lake Mitchell & Mary Farms. An excellent day starting at Kingfisher Park, followed by a productive visit to Lake Mitchell and finally ending up at the twin roads at Mary Farms. And so it started in the morning, a now familiar dip on the Platypus. Fortunately things then improved with the two Papuan Frogmouths still in their roost, hordes of noisy Rainbow and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets hurtling around, plus a number of species that had so far eluded me - enormous Blue-faced Honeyeaters, along with Olive-backed Orioles and the bit more nondescript Fairy Gerygones and Grey Whistlers. Down at Lake Mitchell, glimmering blue water and umpteen birds attracted, but first (so I thought) the need for a bit a bush walk down a long hot track to get to the best viewing area - pretty good walk, four Red-tailed

Black-Cockatoos labouring across the sky, their deep wingbeats, size and apparent slow pace evoking an almost prehistoric feel. Yellow Honeyeaters singing, Golden-headed Cisticola dancing at from parched grass, a right cutie of a Spotted Pardalote appearing in bushes, plenty of good stuff here. Rufous Whistler also seen, plus Rufous-throated Honeyeater, Scarlet Honeyeater and more Blue-faced Honeyeaters. For all the riches of the bush, Lake Mitchel was even better - a vast area of shallow bays and emergent vegetation, the first 'wow' was the sheer abundance of gorky Magpie Geese, flocks of them all over, many also looking most ungainly in trees! Rather daintier, also 150 or so Green Pygmy Geese and at least 35 Comb-crested Jacanas. Also a good mix of the Phalacrocoracidae and Anhinga - all plentiful, Australian Darter, Little Black Cormorant, Little Pied Cormorant and Pied Cormorant. Also my first Black Swan of the trip, several Australian Grebes, assorted egrets and, in skies above, Eastern Osprey, several Swamp Harriers and a few Black Kites.

Back at the main road, I discovered my long hot walk had not been necessary - the gate was not in fact locked and birders are permitted to drive down! Thereafter, a detour of not too many kilometres took us to Mary Farms, a birding locality characterised by two parallel tracks running through open dry farmland, my first real open country birding on this trip.

The bird everyone hopes to see here is Australian Bustard, a number of these stately giants inhabiting the area. However, as it was now mid-afternoon and pretty hot, I was not entirely sure my strategy was very good.

I need not have worried - barely ten minutes after arriving, a shout from my companion and an order to reverse a little ...and there, poking up from long grass, the head of an Australian Bustard, and then another head! Two Australian Bustards that then proceeded to strut along an open fire break, very nice indeed.

Rufous Songlark and Australian Pipit also scrubbing around in the grass, Nankeen Kestrel and Brown Falcon circling overhead. Found another pair of Australian Bustards a little later, then yet another pair. The real treat however was a single individual feeding right on the side of the road - Australian Bustard at three metres distant, an impressive bird!

Also added an Agile Wallaby here, but then departed to return to Kingfisher Park for attempt number three on Platypus. And dip number three, a couple of hours staring at a darkening stream, no Platypus! Did see another Red-legged Pademelon, plus one Giant White-tailed Rat. 27 July. Schools, Golf, Boulders and Yungaburra Platypus. Another excellent day, only transferring about 100 km from Julaten to Yungaburra in the Atherton Highlands, but top notch from start to finish. Academia to start the day, visits to a couple of primary schools my priority for the day. Wandering around school grounds with binoculars in hand as kids mill into school might seem a good way to get in trouble, but not so at these schools - indeed, at one there is even a sign on the gate declaring 'birdwatchers welcome'. And the reason, Great

Bowerbirds - a splendid bird that seems to have taken a liking to school grounds to build the bowers! First stop was Julatten Primary School, a bunch of mums dropping their little darlings off. No need to actually enter the school here, as the Great Bowerbirds tend to hang out near a gazebo directly opposite - and that is exactly where I got my first glimpse, a chunky grey bird flying up and flitting over to the school where it perched a while on their fence. Unfortunately it then vanished and didn't reappear. No problem, a mere 10 km to the south is Mt Molloy Primary School ...and this is where the 'birdwatchers welcome' sign is hung upon the gate. So in I went, classes underway, a mere smile from the only person I saw. Walked round to the allotted spot - the base of a fence near an outbuilding. And there before me, a bower decorated with assorted blue and white paraphernalia, snail shells, bits of plastic, school chalk, the works.

And then in popped the Great Bowerbird, a spot of tidying up before disappearing into the bower's tunnel. Some moments later, out the other end he appeared, a bit more housecleaning and off he went. And so the process went on, the bird returning every few minutes to spruce up the bower yet more. Splendid stuff. Backdrop birds included White-cheeked Honeyeater, Straw-necked Ibis and Masked Plover. Next stop, a short stop again at Lake Mitchell - not the lake itself, but an arid gully a shot distance away. A walk of a few hundred metres and there I found the target, one White-browed Robin, a localised endemic to these parts and a nice one at that. Also here, Spotted Pardalote, five Noisy Friarbirds, several Blue-faced Honeyeaters, a Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike and a few Double-barred Finches. It was now midday and time to move further south. Having been in Australia for a week now, albeit mostly in fairly humid habitats with luxuriant vegetation, I was acutely aware that I was still 'kangaroo-less' - I had seen quite a few Agile Wallabies, as well as the tiny Red-legged Pademelons, but I wanted a 'proper' kangaroo, i.e. one of the big beasts with kangaroo in the name! For these, arid land habitats tend to be better, or for the lazy, the pleasant greens of a golf course in otherwise arid area! And so it was, my next destination - the rather ungreen greens of Mareeba Golf Course. Famed for its resident mob of Eastern Grey Kangaroos, it took all of two minutes to spot them - a great bunch of them chilling out on the manicured grass, ambling golfers strolling past, barely a glance exchanged between the golfers and roos. Got up close and personal with a herd of about 40, sitting myself down on the grass as several lolloped across, others stretching out and taking a siesta. Began to feel I was really in Australia! Little did I know, due to a lack of homework, that I would subsequently see hundreds of Eastern Grey Kangaroos in the later parts of the trip. Mareeba Wetlands, a classic birding locality in this neck of the woods, seems to have closed for an indefinite period of time, so decided I would add another mammal excursion at this point - venturing a dozen or so kilometres to Granite Rock Nature Park, the single best locality to see the highly range-restricted Mareeba Rock Wallaby. - this species literally occurs in a few isolated outcrops in the Mareeba area.

Vast granite boulders, squawking Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, a dozen or so tourists all gawking at ...Mareeba Rock Wallabies! Well that was easy, a half dozen were ambling around on the rocks not five minutes from the car park. Slightly less expected, also found a flock of eleven Squatter Pigeons here, feeding amongst farmyard geese and ducks in the adjacent campsite. Lay flat in my stomach to try and get a few photos, immediately got ambushed by the geese hoping for hand outs.

And so, having covered a grand total of little more than 60 km in more than half the day, it was time to finish the transit, motoring the final 40 km to the Atherton Tablelands and a couple of superb localities there, hopefully too a Platypus or two by day's end. Just south of Atherton, first treat was Hasties Swamp - a moderately slim slither of water, but absolutely crammed with birds! Vying for attention, at least 800 Plumed Whistling Ducks, 250 Magpie Geese and an impressive 80 or so Australian Swamphens, many of these strolling along the road. Plenty more birds among them too, ducks including Grey Teals, Freckled Ducks and Hardheads, while others included White-headed Stilt and a Pale-vented Bush-hen. Also had my first Sarus Cranes of the trip here, 18 flying over, plus a Brown Falcon, a flock of mixed Welcome Swallows and Tree Swallows and a variety of passerines, Eastern Yellow Robins particularly common. Could easily have stayed till dusk here, hopes of stuff coming into roost, but I still had a certain aquatic mammal bugging me ...and just a handful of kilometres away was the small town of Yungaburra, a locality where it is said 'you can't miss Platypus'. Problem one was finding accommodation, my visit coinciding with a traditional market, but that sorted headed straight for Peterson's Creek, the ultimate in des res for discerning Platypuses! A midget of a stream in reality, but with a nice walking path all the way along, we got ourselves in position at about 4.30 pm., the late afternoon sun still lighting the water nicely. White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike in the trees, Pacific Black Duck floating down the stream. And then we waited.

A bit of déjà vu setting in, I had peered expectantly at waters on six dawns and dusks in preceding days, and I was quite aware I had no further Platypus localities on my planned route. A half hour went by, the sun dipped a little. I took a stroll further along the stream. Then a sudden gasp, a Platypus paddling along on a broad meander! Oh jeepers, took a quick look, then sprinted back to my original point to collect my fellow Platypus spotter, aka Cassowary Gripper (for which I still had not totally got over). Got back to the meander ...and no Platypus! But worry not, suddenly it resurfaced and then proceeded to paddle right past us, a tiny little thing, far smaller than I had been expecting. Fantastic views, and then we found another, and another! Four in all that evening, all totally unaware/unconcerned by our presence, each paddling past on several occasions, sometimes as close as three or four metres. 28 July. Yungaburra. Stayed in the Yungaburra area, a fairly easy-going day starting along Peterson's Creek, before exploring several sites in the general area, including Crater Lake and Bromfield Swamp. Didn't find any more Platypus along Peterson's Creek at dawn, but did add a good bird mix, including Topknot Pigeon, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Spotted Catbird, Scarlet Honeyeater and commonplace Brown Gerygones, Pale Yellow Robins and Silvereyes. Also 12 Agile Wallabies in a meadow. A good range of stuff in the suburbia - Spotted Doves, Crested Pigeons and Laughing Kookaburras all common, plus other birds such as Figbird and

Varied Triller. Completed the Yungaburra tally with Australian Wood Ducks, Chestnut Teals and Pink-eared Ducks all at the edge of a lake in a well-to-do residential zone a few kilometres distant. Slight mistake in my planning when I arrived at Crater Lake - as soon as I got to the car park, I realised I actually wanted to be at Hypipamee, a locality that also has a crater lake, but as I then understood was quite far to the south! Still, took a stroll surrounded by rather many tourists, admired my first Great Crested Grebes (!) of the trip, plus rather better a White-throated Treecreeper in shrubbery near the car park and a Fernwren on the circular walk around the lake. Had a quick look at the endemic turtle species, then departed for my next locality, this time sorting my directions out better! And so a half hour later, I parked up on the slope directly above Bromfield Swamp. And what a glorious sight, a broad sweep of swampland stretching out below, grassland slopes rising to all sides. And much to my delight, thinking they only came to this locality to roost, a whole load of cranes ...56 Brolga and 12 Sarus Cranes to be exact, some even engaging in a bit of dancing. Adding to the atmosphere, Australian Swamphens dotted the marsh, a number of Swamp Harriers drifted about and a couple of Black-shouldered Kites hunted the grassland. Also Tawny Grassbird here. For afternoon entertainment, it was back to Peterson's Creek and my biggest identification botch up of the trip! In addition to the Platypus, Peterson's Creek is also one of the best localities in Australia to find the rare Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo. Highly restricted in range and notoriously difficult to spot, how cool it would be I thought to see a kangaroo that lives in a tree! So off we went, very slowly walking the streamside trail, carefully scanning the canopy for telltale signs, perhaps a tail hanging down or whatever. A half hour in, much to my amazement, we found one fast asleep in a very thick clump of vegetation, almost stuffed into a fork of a branch. Could see basically nothing, just blob of obscured brown fur and what appeared to be a tail. No problem thought I, just wait till it woke up, for surely it would do so before dusk. Ambled around for a while, had a Platypus swim by, showed a very grateful French lady the tree kangaroo and a couple of Australians, all went away happy. Still though it slept fast. As the sun dipped, it did indeed shift a little and I could even now see part of the face ...a face that didn't quite match what I was expecting. And then some doubts began to creep in. The tail seemed to be wrapped around the body, why was it not hanging down? And then, as dusk approached, it woke up and clambered a metre or two along the branch ...ah, it looked nothing like a tree kangaroo anymore. It was in fact a Lemuroid Ringtail Possum! A rather battle scared individual it has to be said, the face looking none too pretty. So, to the French lady and the two Australians, I do apologise for showing you a totally duff tree kangaroo! After dark, had one of my best mammal outings of the trip, first exploring the approach road to Mount Hypipamee, here finding Red-legged Pademelon, six Lemuroid Ringtail Possums and one Common Brushtail Possum, then meandering around in the surrounding area, the tops here being a Northern Bettong, a truly rare species. Also had a Rabbit!

29 July. Mount Hypipamee & Etty Bay. After an early morning around Yungaburra (Australian King Parrot the highlight), made a quick stop at Hasties Swamp again (Dusky Moorhen new), then a visit to Mount Hypipamee - mostly quiet, but an excellent fruiting fig with abundant Figbirds, Satin Bowerbirds and male Victoria's Riflebird, then cut down to the coast for the next leg of the trip. Way back at the beginning of this trip, literally in the first moments of daylight on the first day, a certain person travelling with me had scored a Southern Cassowary from the car while I had trudged the road looking for them. Eight days on, despite numerous road signs warning of cassowaries, not a sniff of one I had. Departing Hypipamee, and yet another cassowary road sign, it was time for my secret weapon - Etty Bay. Not really a 'secret' weapon though, as this beach is famous for its Southern Cassowaries that sometimes venture out onto the beach and hassle tourists, chasing them off or stealing food. And so it was, an hour or so later, we arrived at his picturesque bay, a small car park and campsite, forests slopes above and a sparkling blue sea beyond. Campsite area looked the optimal starting point for the cassowary I thought, remembering a video of the birds ambling around there, so off I went. My travel companion by contrast thought a nice bit of relaxing on the beach would be in order. And no guesses for what happened next! Moments later, back came my travel companion with a grin and a repeat of the question from day one "So, have you seen your big bird?", followed by "It is on the beach!" And indeed it was, an absolutely mega of a bird, an adult female sauntering along the sand, literally sending folk scurrying as it strolled past and took great interest in everything in its path. Females being the bigger and brighter of the sexes, this one was a giant - perhaps 1.8 metres tall, massive casque, colourful neck and face, impressive dangling wattles and, not what you would want lashing out at you, huge colossal feet! Occasional attacks by this species have resulted in serious injuries from the dagger-like claws, little wonder most folk wisely gave this bird due respect. Rather amusing, one unfortunate guy sunbathing on the beach didn't see the bird approaching and opened his eyes only when the cassowary was already towering above him and jabbing with its beak! Beach guards quickly intervened and pushed the bird back with plastic chairs as shields. Overall however, it seemed fairly passive, so after a while watching in awe, I settled down to allow it wander close - a true privilege to be in the company of such a special bird.

Stayed with the bird a couple of hours and more, certainly one of the highlights of this trip to Australia. As sun began to descent, off the bird went, melting back into the tropical forests. Pottered around the general area to round the day off, Bush Stone-Curlews alongside a railway, Brown Goshawk overhead, a minimum of 50 White-breasted Wood Swallows gathering on electric wires.

30 July. Mount Claro & Tyto Wetlands. With a few days to spare, I decided to make an unplanned addition to the trip - 120 km south to the town park in Ingham to see its mixed colony of flying foxes (four species, up to 20,000 individuals),

then potentially another 150 km south to visit Paluma National Park. Not the most amazing morning however - after picking up a AUS \$265 speeding ticket on route, I arrived in Ingham to find the park eerily quiet. Turns out the bat roost is summer only, not a single bat was in residence! Darn, the day was not shaping up as I had expected! With vague memories of a colony of Sharman's Rock Wallabies existing somewhere near Ingham, I popped into the local McDonald's to utilise the Wi-Fi and do a bit of research. Indeed, my memory banks were working well - albeit over 75 km to the west, one of the few colonies of the highly localised Sharman's Rock Wallabies did indeed reside not too far from Ingham, at a place called Mount Claro to be exact. And what a totally amazing excursion it turned out to - in the hot arid interior, with bucketloads of dust rising behind the car, this felt classic Australia... and just to prove the point, I needed to come to a screeching halt a few kilometres short of Claro when a pair of Emu appeared aside the road, my only ones on the whole trip. Iconic Aussie birds, I was truly impressed by these! At Mount Claro, more a elevated pile of boulders than a true mountain, I hiked a kilometre or two through withered grassland and open eucalyptus forest, a few Eastern Grey Kangaroos bounding as I did, plus Noisy Miners commonplace and a Rufous Whistler in trees. At the rocky outcrop, most impressive, a Wedge-tailed Eagle launched into the sky and glided away. Amazing, what a place! Up the boulders I went, sun burning down. And then a thump on the rocks and a small marsupial vanished off through a crevice - one Sharman's Rock Wallaby! Pretty shy creatures, I saw five in total, all but one scampering off as soon as they saw me. As for the one though, he decided to be rather more cooperative, cautiously sitting atop a boulder and watching me. Ten kilometres back, as I stopped to scan a pool, more luck with a massive flock of Galah Cockatoos - at least 50, the whole lot was feeding on the ground aside cattle, quite a sight. And in among them, a family of Apostlebirds, another excellent species and the only ones I would see on my trip. Five Australian Wood Ducks, three Squatter Pigeons and a pair of Pied Butcherbirds also here. And with that, back to Ingham I went. I would spend the last hours of the day at Tyto Wetlands, a place that turned out to be far better than I had been expecting! A series of freshwater pools, I ended up with no less than seven new species here, both waterbirds and non-waterbirds. On lily-pad pools, a mix of Magpie Geese, Hardheads, Pacific Black Ducks and Grey Teals concealed the first treats - 17 Wandering Whistling Ducks and, alongside ten Green Pygmy Geese, two Cotton Pygmy Geese (these the only ones I would see on this trip). More new birds came thick and fast - a very welcome Blue-winged Kookaburra in a tree, a flock of 18 Crimson Finches feeding on the pool embankment, then a Fairy Martin amongst Welcome Swallows and Tree Martins. But for sheer wow, the top prize of the evening went to a real cracker of a bird - Red-backed Fairywren. As the sun began to dip, suddenly a whole bunch of these emerged from nowhere, jet black jewels with a contrasting splash of red across the back, a long tail setting it off. Atop stalks they sat, reeling of short snatches of song, very nice. Also seen, several White-gaped Honeyeaters, two Blue-faced Honeyeaters and both White-bellied and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrikes. As dark approached, something quite amazing occurred - in pastures near the car park, where there had been none on arrival, suddenly there were Agile Wallabies everywhere! 170 Agile Wallabies in a single field, quite a sight. Also 30 Bush Stone-Curlews, 60 Rainbow Bee-eaters coming into roost and a Large-tailed Nightjar calling from a small copse. With ideas to find Eastern Grass Owl after dark, I did a rather long drive through the extensive hectares of sugarcane fields south-east of Ingham - drew a blank on the main target, but did see a rather nice Eastern Barn Owl, as well as an unexpected Australian Bustard. Paluma National Park. 31 July. Paluma National Park, a little off the beaten track, but hopefully offering one more chance on the Holy Grail, the Golden Bowerbird. An uneventful drive down from Ingham, best sightings a stream of Black Kites emerging from roost, plus an Australian Hobby overhead. After ascending the required hairpins and steep gradients, arrived at the forested slopes of Paluma, the calls of Eastern Whipbirds echoing out, three Sulphur-crested Cockatoos flying in. Destination was the road to Birthday Creek Falls, Golden Bowerbirds having been recorded here in the past. Wandered a couple of kilometres, pretty good overall, with several White-naped Honeyeaters and Golden Whistler seen, plus a Rusty Antechinus scampering along an overhead branch. No Golden Bowerbird though. A few kilometres along, a small track leads off, zigzagging down a forested slope to Birthday Creek Falls themselves. A few birds down here, but overall quiet. But then, off to one side, a peculiar noise, a weird buzzy call. Hmm, thought I, taking a few steps to peer through the tangled undergrowth, that had to be my target. And indeed it was, sitting quietly on a low branch, one superb male Golden Bowerbird! As it vanished off, I thought I might get better views from another angle, so took a few places through the forest, then promptly stumbled across the bower! With the adjacent forest floor largely cleared of leaves and detritus, the bower consisted of a pair of scruffy towers built up a couple of spindly saplings, the bases of both towers decorated by a collection of small white petals and other blue and white objects. The next twenty minutes or so were perhaps the most magical of the entire trip to Australia - I sitting on the forest floor, the stunning Golden Bowerbird paying no attention whatsoever, emerging from the depths to tend the bower, carefully place plucked petals and generally inspect his handiwork. Bird of the trip! As he perched upon a low branch in quiet song, so I retreated, Paluma had done it's magic. Added a few Australian King Parrots as I departed, then decided to change plans again, returning north to Ingham and thereafter continuing right up to Cairns. Pretty long drive, arrived just after dark. Cairns. 1 August. After missing out on Cairns at the beginning of the trip due to my unscheduled stop in Japan, this was a segment of the trip that I was looking forward to - the legendary Esplanade, the botanical gardens and Centenary Park and the famous roost of flying foxes in the city centre. And so it was, dawn at the northern end of the Esplanade, no sign of Mangrove Robin, Mangrove Honeyeater or Mangrove Gerygone in the mangroves, but two quite resplendent Beach Stone Curlews strutting the mudflats just adjacent, a treat against the rising sun. Also one Collared Kingfisher at the mangroves edge and several Sacred Kingfishers out on the mudflats. Running almost 2 km north to south, the Esplanade is Cairns' crowning glory, waterside parks and lawns rich in birds, bordered by superb mudflats that hold amazing numbers of Palaeartic waders at peak times of year. Early August is not peak time of year, a mere fraction of the waders having already returned from their breeding grounds, but excellent it still was - with the rising tide, no less than fifteen species of waders edging ever closer, nice views indeed. Among more familiar species, Australian Pied Oystercatchers, White-headed Stilts, Eastern Curlews, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Terek Sandpipers and

Grey-tailed Tattlers, also a bunch of Gull-billed Terns, plentiful Silver Gulls and quite a few Australian Pelicans. Also plenty on the Esplanade itself - all oblivious to passers by, Peaceful Doves, Willie Wagtails and Magpie-Larks two a penny, plus a flock of 18 Nutmeg Mannikins. Wonderful birding in a most civilised setting! Eventually, as I now watched from the very southern end of the Esplanade and the tide had pushed everything up to within easy viewing, I realised that I was not going to see any additional species. Decided I still had time to catch the remainder of the tide at another nearby coastal locality, Machan Beach. And what a good decision this was - while the number of species was not high, those present were almost completely different - huddled around a small sand spit, no less than 80 Red-necked Stints, nicely complemented by 20 very nice Red-capped Plovers, a single Lesser Sand Plover thrown in for good measure. Just offshore, a small roost contained a mix of Caspian and Crested Terns, a few Whimbrel too. By now the tide was turning, the sun very pleasantly warm too. Not the best time of day to do so, decided then to explore the botanical gardens ...and predictably saw very little, a coffee at the coffee shop just about the best sighting, though a few stunning Ulysses Butterflies also vied for top spot. By contrast, nearby Centenary Park was super - nothing amazingly rare, but three Bush Stone-Curlews two Radjah Shelduck, a number of Magpie Geese and a roosting Royal Spoonbill among mixed Straw-necked and White Ibises. Also Australian Brush-turkeys, Orange-footed Scrubfowls and Black Butcherbirds, as well as abundant Magpie-Larks, Willie Wagtails and Common Mynas. For the finale of the day, and very much the piece de la resistance, I headed to downtown Cairns, to the city library to be exact. And here, adjacent to a busy intersection with buses trundling by, a sight to behold - a line of trees chock-a-block with flying foxes, a mega 40,000 Spectacled Flying Foxes to be exact! A gentle pong and not a negligible noise as the bats chattered and squabbled, these big beasts were pretty amazing, wingspans of 1 metre and creamy rings surrounding beady faces. Stayed till dusk for the traditional fly-out, the massive bats heading out into neighbouring suburbs and forest to feed. As dusk fell, so they began to depart, great waves of them leaving as it grew ever darker ...a wonderful end to the day. Kuranda & Cairns. 2 August. Return to Kuranda, essentially a final attempt to find a Chowchilla - a species I had managed to miss at all forest sites visited so far. To cut the long story short, I yet again failed to locate this species bird. Nor did I encounter Southern Cassowary again, despite wandering the area that my companion had spotted one at the beginning of the trip. What I did see however was a rather nice female Victoria's Riflebird, two Double-eyed Fig Parrots, a very smart Pied Monarch and the usual Silvereyes et al. After a few hours here, I then nipped back to Cairns to again catch the rising tide on the Esplanade - again excellent, I managed both Mangrove Robin and Eastern Koel in the mangroves, then a number of new birds on the mudflats, including two Eastern Reef Herons, a Greater Sand Plover, a couple of Great Knots and, my only ones of the trip, singles of Common Tern and Little Tern. Highlight of the day though, a result of checking the thick mango trees that line the promenade, was the very welcome discovery of a roost of Nankeen Night Herons. In their subtle hues, these were superb birds indeed, no less than 14 in the single tree. Also welcome, vying for attention with hordes of Rainbow Lorikeets, a flock of about 30 Metallic Starlings gorging themselves on small berries - abundant during the Australian summer, but then retreating up to Papua New Guinea, I had not seen any to this point, possibly these being newly arrived. Other bits and bobs seen included a Grey Goshawk and a White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, plus a couple of Bush Stone-Curlews and two Laughing Kookaburras in a small park during a failed attempt to find a roosting Rufous Owl (found the tree, just no bird). And then, after a bit of shopping to get a new spotlight, I concluded the day with another visit to Centenary Park. Plenty of good birds again, one notable addition being a most stately Black-necked Stork.

3 August. Day of the Great Barrier Reef. This was a day I had been looking forward to! Many operators do trips out to the Great Barrier Reef, but for the birder it really has to be the Seastar, not only is this a small boat with a small group, but it is one of the only operators to visit Michealmas Cay, a sand atoll full of breeding seabirds. Basically, the boat spends the morning at Michealmas Cay, then motors out to the outer reef for an afternoon of snorkelling on Hastings Reef. After a leisurely stroll along the esplanade, Beach Thick-knees and Striated Heron on the mudflats, the Nankeen Night Herons tucked up in their roost, we boarded the Seastar at 7.30 am to begin the hour cruise out to Michealmas Cay. Other than a Crested Tern or two, nothing much on route out, but as we neared the Cay, the skies above the sand were abuzz with birds, this was going to be good! At the island, while most of the boat opted for snorkelling in the shallows, I got myself dropped off on the beach of the island. And it was heaven – the closest birds mere metres away, thousands of Common Noddies vying for space with hundreds of Sooty Terns. Amongst them, dozens of stunning Brown Boobies and, less expected, a single Masked Booby too! And quartering the skies, adding a dramatic twist, five Great Frigatebirds and four Lesser Frigatebirds, simply stunning. Birds everywhere, the flocks of Common Noddies in particular impressive, many hundreds roosting on the beaches, as well as nesting across the island. Scanned the flocks with intent, but failed to find any Black Noddies. After an hour or so just soaking in the atmosphere, the boat offered me a trip round the Cay on their small launch – excellent, 14 Black-naped Terns roosting on a sand spit at the far end of the island, plus one Caspian Tern, a Lesser Frigatebird battling a Crested Tern till it disgorged a fish and my only Ruddy Turnstones of the trip, two singles on the beach. And nice added touch from Seastar. Lunch on board, then across to Hastings Reef. One distant Masked Booby here too, but otherwise very few birds. Under the water however, stunning – fish of all sizes and colours, one pretty impressive Green Turtle, one Hawksbill Turtle, one Whitetip Shark. A couple of hours in the water, then a cruise back to Cairns. Tried in the evening to again find the roosting Rufous Owl, failed again. It had however been a most impressive way to end this leg of the trip, early next morning we would fly to Brisbane. For 'Part Three' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) South-east Queensland