

## **Australia 2004 April Brisbane**

### **Fruit-doves, Fantails and Fairy-wrens**

**This is a report on a brief sojourn in the Brisbane area as part of a more extensive birding trip in Australasia**

Those taking part were Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and friends Brian & Joanna Anderson. Brian is a wheelchair user being unable to walk or stand so the trip represented some logistical problems which were overcome through planning, goodwill and Brian's willingness to sacrifice dignity and comfort in pursuit of a long list! This was my third trip to Australia but my first to the Brisbane area and I had particular target birds in mind to extend my world list but, as always, never went in pursuit of one rare or difficult to find species at the expense of more common lifers, or, indeed variety. So many birds are special to Australia that seeing many species again was welcome.

### **Background**

Through Fatbirder I had corresponded with and briefly met Roy Sonnenburg of [Brisbane Birding Services](#) fame, and had heard so many good things it was obvious that time spent with him guiding would pay great dividends. What I hadn't realised was that his "homestay" [93 Huet Street, Nundah, Brisbane 0732 566 952] run by his wife Helen, would be so comfortable, offer such good garden birding or such excellent dining. Not being fully accessible they could not accommodate Brian & Joanna who stayed in a couple of motels neither of which was worth recommending. However, they took their meals at Roy's B&B and were ferried back and forth by Roy. The B&B is 10 minutes from Brisbane airport and Roy also offers a free pick up and drop off service. I can highly recommend the standard of accommodation, excellent meals, great garden birding, and every other aspect of their B&B as well as Roy's services as a guide. He is an ornithologist whose survey and conservation work is in demand yet at heart he is a birder who, like the people he guides, just loves seeing the birds. Having spent two weeks in New Zealand before going to Brisbane we had planned to take the first day easily with a late start and a touristy city tour but Roy offered to show us the city himself with the common city birds being pointed out along with the "sights". This was a great idea which should be adopted by other tour operators. Many of us obsessed birders resent the time spent sight-seeing but feel obliged to do it anyway. Combining sight-seeing with birding is a great way to "get your eye in" and familiarise oneself with the common birds one will see over and over during the stay.

### **Day by Day**

#### **Day 1**

Day one started with a late breakfast when Brian & Joanna joined us, but we had already had an hour or two sitting on the veranda drinking coffee and enjoying some of the birds in the garden which just so happens to back onto a very large park. There were delightful close up views of Rainbow and Scaly-breasted Lorikeets and a Kookaburra that came and sat on the veranda rail! Noisy Miners [actually a honeyeater] were the commonest visitor along with Spotted Dove; other notables being Grey and Pied Butcherbirds.

After breakfast we took Roy's "tuppenny tour" of the City. This enabled us to familiarise ourselves with Blue-faced Honeyeaters, Galahs, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Willie-wagtails Welcome Swallows and both Tree and Fairy Martins to name just a few. The late afternoon was spent back at the B&B planning our next two days.

## Day 2

Day two started with Mount Glorious, followed by [Maiala National Park](#), Lake Sampsonvale, Dayboro, North Pine CP, Redcliffe Peninsular, Margate, [Tinchi Tamba Wetlands](#) ending in the suburb of Deagon.

Mount Glorious is a very scenic wooded highland area 45 minutes from the city and adjacent to Maiala NP. we spent time near the village where light housing development has only served to improve habitat and we were enthralled on the lanes by many small passerine species as well as being surrounded by huge and beautiful butterflies. Birds seen included Red-browed Finch, Satin Bowerbird, Eastern Yellow Robin, Brown Thornbill, Large-billed Scrubwren, Yellow-throated Scrubwren, Rufous Whistler etc. as well as a chorus of calls identified for us by Roy.

From Mount Glorious we travelled for the nearby Maiala National Park in search of Noisy Pitta [which eluded us] along a quiet track through a heavily wooded part of the park. At the track entrance and in the more open areas we had brief views of Eastern Whipbird, excellent views of displaying Rufous Fantails as well as being delighted by such birds as Grey Fantail, Eastern Yellow Robin, & Red-browed Finches etc. We took a break here for a welcome snack. The bush walk also gave many of us our first encounter [of many] with the local mosquito troupe.

Elsewhere in the area we managed Wompoo Fruit Dove and, at Camp Constable, several Bronze Shining-cuckoo which gave terrific views as well as several honey-eater species. We also had some flyby Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos.

Near Samford, we forded the Pine River in the 4x4 which is impassable at times. The bushes along this track were alive with small passerines including Scarlet Honeyeater and no less than three species of fairy wrens in the same bush; Red-backed, Superb and Variegated all about us martins and swallows reaped the air-born harvest of small insects.

We called in at North Pine Country Park where Koala can often be found – and were lucky enough to get our first ever sightings in the wild.

We took lunch sheltering from a shower at Dayboro and a trip to the public toilets was serendipitous as a group of honeyeaters in a treetop included White-throated as well as some Double-barred Finches.

After lunch we moved on to Lake Sampsonvale where the lake held a variety of common species including four varieties of cormorant, Australian Pelican, Australasian Grebe, Plumed Whistling Duck and a couple of Darters. Bushes around the nearby cemetery held Tawny Grassbird as well as calling cuckoos which we never managed to see.

From here we went on to the Redcliffe Peninsular – a series of coastal suburbs including Margate [our home town in the UK]. Beaches held several Crested and Caspian Terns, Silver Gulls and Pied Oystercatcher and a fishing Osprey which took a crab.

In the late afternoon we moved on to Tinchi Tamba Wetlands – where a boardwalk goes through the mangroves on the river banks offering a chance of estuarine species as well as mangrove specialities. Here we had Mangrove Honeyeater, Golden Whistler and a variety of woodswallows as well as our first glimpses of Rainbow Bee-eaters. There were few wader species or herons other than Whimbrel, Greenshank and distant Terek Sandpipers with a few kingfishers on the opposite side of the river.

Roy deliberately took us back through Deagon as dusk fell – and we were treated to the site of thousands of fruit bats [of three species] swarming out of their daytime roosts – an excellent end to a terrific days birding.

### **Day 3**

Day three started damp as we travelled up to [Lamington National Park](#) and “[O’Reilly’s](#)” resort where one can feed hundreds of King Parrots and Crimson Rosellas which come out of the trees to take seed like pigeons in Trafalgar Square. We were unashamed tourists delighting in filming ourselves with parrots on heads and hands whilst Brush Turkeys cleaned up the leftovers. Our intention was to walk the trails in search of Logrunners et al but this proved very difficult as it is such a tourist magnet that noisy parties of Asian tourists abounded. We did manage stunning close-up views of Eastern Whipbird and a few Brown Gerygones before giving up and going elsewhere.

We took the back road down the other side of the mountain “Duck Creek Road” in search of some open woodland species which, at first, proved very elusive. Despite our best efforts and the evidence of Roy’s ears we never connected with pardalotes – birds I have managed to hear but not see on three visits to Australia ranging over three states and one territory. We picnicked at the top of the hills and did manage good views of White-throated Treecreeper. After lunch as we descended we did come upon a party of Bell Miners and were treated to their superb calls as well as getting great views. I managed a fleeting view of a Musk parakeet too. Here birds were much more in evidence notably the always charming flocks of Red-browed Finches.

As we left the woodland we caught up with several new dove species including our first Common Bronzewing and Brown Cuckoo Doves with a supporting cast of Peaceful Doves, Bar-shouldered Doves and Crested Pigeons. We also began to come across raptors with Wedge-tailed Eagle and spotted Harriers putting in appearances.

We drove along Kerry valley and found not one but two Black Falcons and their nest site. On the road near Beaudesert we lucked upon a small party of Grey-crowned Babblers. We also stopped to view a distant Beaudesert Marsh with Comb-crested Jacana, a variety of herons and egrets and our first Jabiru of the trip.

Our last scheduled stop of the day was at Kalbar Cemetery – where we successfully searched for Zebra Finches and Yellow-rumped Thornbill amongst others.

We approached Brisbane in the dark and, just two streets away from Roy's house we passed a night football game just catching site of some nightjars catching moths around the floodlights. A swift U-turn allowed us to get good sightings and positive ID – White-throated Nightjar – a new patch tick for Roy and a small re-payment for all his efforts on our behalf.

### **Brisbane 2004 – Birds Seen**

1. GREAT CRESTED GREBE *Podiceps cristatus*
2. AUSTRALIAN GREBE *Tachybaptus novahollandiae*
3. AUSTRALIAN PELICAN *Pelecanus conspicillatus*
4. DARTER *Anhinga melanogaster*
5. PIED CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax varius*
6. LITTLE PIED CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*
7. GREAT CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*
8. LITTLE BLACK CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*
9. PACIFIC (WHITE-NECKED) HERON *Ardea pacifica*
10. WHITE FACED HERON *Ardea novaehollandiae*
11. GREAT EGRET *Ardea alba*
12. LITTLE EGRET *Ardea garzetta*
13. INTERMEDIATE EGRET *Ardea intermedia*
14. EASTERN REEF EGRET *Egretta sacra*
15. STRIATED HERON *Ardea striatus*
16. CATTLE EGRET *Ardea ibis*
17. AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBIS *Threkiornis molucca*
18. STRAW-NECKED IBIS *Threskiornis spinicollis*
19. ROYAL SPOONBILL *Platalea regia*
20. BLACK-NECKED STORK *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*
21. WANDERING WHISTLING DUCK *Dendrocygna arcuata*
22. PLUMED WHISTLING DUCK *Dendrocygna eytoni*
23. BLACK SWAN *Cygnus atratus*
24. PACIFIC BLACK DUCK *Anas superciliosa*
25. MALLARD *Anas platyrhynchos*
26. GREY TEAL *Anas gibberifrons*
27. CHESTNUT TEAL *Anas castanea*
28. AUSTRALIAN WOOD DUCK *Chenonetta jubata*
29. OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*
30. BRAHMINY KITE *Milvus indus*
31. WHISTLING KITE *Milvus sphenurus*
32. WEDGE-TAILED EAGLE *Aquila audax*
33. SPOTTED HARRIER *Circus assimilis*
34. AUSTRALIAN HOBBY *Falco longipennis*
35. BROWN FALCON *Falco berigor*
36. BLACK FALCON *Falco subniger*
37. NANKEEN KESTREL *Falco cenchroides*
38. AUSTRALIAN BRUSH-TURKEY *Alectura lathami*
39. DUSKY MOORHEN *Gallinula tenebrosa*
40. PURPLE SWAMPHEN *Porphyrio porphyrio*
41. EURASIAN COOT *Fulica atra*
42. BROLGA *Grus rubicundus*
43. COMB-CRESTED JACANA *Irediparra gallinacea*

44. PIED OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus ostralegus*
45. MASKED LAPWING (PLOVER) *Vanellus miles*
46. WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus*
47. LITTLE CURLEW *Numenius minutus*
48. COMMON SANDPIPER *Actitis hypoleucos*
49. GREENSHANK *Tringa nebulara*
50. TEREK SANDPIPER *Xenus cinereus*
51. SILVER GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*
52. WHISKERED TERN *Chlidonias hybrida*
53. CASPIAN TERN *Sterna caspia*
54. CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii*
55. FERAL PIGEON *Columba livia*
56. SPOTTED TURTLE-DOVE *Streptopelia chinensis*
57. BROWN CUCKOO-DOVE *Macropygia amboinensis*
58. PEACEFUL DOVE *Geopelia placida*
59. BAR-SHOULDERED DOVE *Geopelia humeralis*
60. COMMON BRONZEWING *Phaps chalcoptera*
61. CRESTED PIGEON *Geophaps lophotes*
62. WOMPOO FRUIT-DOVE *Ptilinopus magnificus*
63. YELLOW-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO *Calyptorhynchus funereus*
64. SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO *Cacatua galerita*
65. GALAH *Eolophus roseicapilla*
66. LITTLE CORELLA *Cacatua tenuirostris*
67. LONG-BILLED CORELLA *Cacatua tenuirostris*
68. RAINBOW LORIKEET *Trichoglossus haematodus*
69. SCALY-BREASTED LORIKEET *Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus*
70. MUSK LORIKEET *Psitteuteles versicolor*
71. AUSTRALIAN KING PARROT *Alisterus scapularis*
72. CRIMSON ROSELLA *Platyercus elegans*
73. PALE-HEADED ROSELLA *Platyercus adscitus*
74. SHINING BRONZE-CUCKOO *Chrysococcyx lucidus*
75. PHEASANT COUCAL *Centropus phasianinus*
76. WHITE-THROATED NIGHTJAR *Eurostopodus mystacalis*
77. LAUGHING KOOKABURRA *Dacelo novaeguineae*
78. COLLARED KINGFISHER *Todirhamphus (halcyon) chloris*
79. RAINBOW BEE-EATER *Merops ornatus*
80. WHITE-THROATED TREECREEPER *Cormobates leucophaeus*
81. GREY-CROWED BABBLER *Pomatostomus temporalis*
82. EASTERN WHIPBIRD *Psophodes olivaceus*
83. SUPERB FAIRY-WREN *Malurus cyaneus*
84. VARIEGATED FAIRY-WREN *Malurus lamberti*
85. RED-BACKED FAIRY WREN *Malurus melanocephalus*
86. YELLOW-THROATED SCRUBWREN *Sericornis citreogularis*
87. WHITE-BROWED SCRUBWREN *Sericornis frontalis*
88. LARGE-BILLED SCRUBWREN *Sericornis magnirostris*
89. BROWN GERYGONE *Gerygone mouki*
90. BROWN THORNBILL *Acanthiza pusilla*
91. BUFF-RUMPED THORNBILL *Acanthiza reguloides*
92. YELLOW-RUMPED THORNBILL *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*
93. LITTLE FRIARBIRD *Philemon citreogularis*

94. BLUE-FACED HONEYEATER *Entomyzon cyanotis*
95. BELL MINER *Manorina melanophrys*
96. NOISY MINER *Manorina melanocephala*
97. LEWIN'S HONEYEATER *Meliphaga lewinii*
98. YELLOW-FACED HONEYEATER *Lichenostomus chrysops*
99. MANGROVE HONEYEATER *Lichenostomus fasciolaris*
100. WHITE-THROATED HONEYEATER *Melithreptus albogularis*
101. WHITE-NAPED HONEYEATER *Melithreptus lunatus*
102. BROWN HONEYEATER *Lichmera indistincta*
103. NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*
104. EASTERN SPINEBILL *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*
105. SCARLET HONEYEATER *Myzomela sanguinolenta*
106. EASTERN YELLOW ROBIN *Eopsaltria australis*
107. GOLDEN WHISTLER *Pachycephala pectoralis*
108. RUFOUS WHISTLER *Pachycephala rufiventris*
109. AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE-LARK *Grallina cyanoleuca*
110. RUFOUS FANTAIL *Rhipidura rufifrons*
111. GREY FANTAIL *Rhipidura fuliginosa*
112. WILLIE WAGTAIL *Rhipidura leucophrys*
113. SPANGLED DRONGO *Dicrurus bracteatus*
114. BLACK-FACED CUCKOO-SHRIKE *Coracina novaehollandiae*
115. FIGBIRD *Sphecotheres viridis*
116. WHITE-BREASTED WOODSWALLOW *Artamus leucorhynchus*
117. GREY BUTCHERBIRD *Cracticus torquatus*
118. PIED BUTCHERBIRD *Cracticus nigrogularis*
119. AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE *Gymnorhina tibicen*
120. PIED CURRAWONG *Strepera graculina*
121. TORRESIAN CROW *Corvus orru*
122. REGENT BOWERBIRD *Sericulus chrysocephalus*
123. SATIN BOWERBIRD *Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*
124. RICHARD'S PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae*
125. HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*
126. RED-BROWED FINCH *Neochmia temporalis*
127. DOUBLE-BARRED FINCH *Taeniopygia bichenovii*
128. ZEBRA FINCH *Taeniopygia guttata*
129. WELCOME SWALLOW *Hirundo neoxena*
130. TREE MARTIN *Hirundo nigricans*
131. FAIRY MARTIN *Hirundo ariel*
132. TAWNY GRASSBIRD *Megalurus timoriensis*
133. SILVEREYE *Zosterops lateralis*
134. COMMON STARLING *Strurna vulgaris*
135. COMMON MYNAH *Acridotheres tristis*

## **Australia 2004 April Top End**

### **Kites, Crocs and Crakes**

**This is a report on a brief sojourn in the Darwin area as part of a more extensive birding trip in Australasia**

Those taking part were Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and friends Brian & Joanna Anderson. Brian is a wheelchair user being unable to walk or stand so the trip represented some logistical problems which were overcome through planning, goodwill and Brian's willingness to sacrifice dignity and comfort in pursuit of a long list! This was my third trip to Australia but my first to the Darwin area and I had particular target birds in mind to extend my world list but, as always, never went in pursuit of one rare or difficult to find species [with one exception] at the expense of more common lifers, or, indeed variety. So many birds are special to Australia that seeing many species again was welcome.

## **Background**

I had corresponded with Mike & Gina Ostwald of [Mary River Park](#) for some years and decided to use Mike's services as a guide and to stay at Mary River Park for two nights during a four night stay in the area. For the other two nights we booked in at the Mirambeena Hotel which we were told was of a good standard and had gardens good for birds. The plan [later changed] was to bird our way, with Mike, to Mary River Park, spend a day in the area and then a day birding our way back to Darwin. I had previously visited Broome and Cairns but this was my first visit to the Northern Territories "Top End".

On arrival at the airport there were no suitable taxis available and we sweltered for 30 minutes whilst waiting for an adapted taxi to arrive. [We made sure to book the same very helpful lady for our early morning departure – what is more being an idiot I gave \$100 too much by mistake and the taxi driver came back to give me my money back – thank you mam – City Radio Taxis 8981 3777]. Our enforced wait did mean we managed to add a couple of birds to the list including our first White-gaped Honeyeater.

The Mirambeena was indeed a very nice hotel with a good [albeit somewhat pretentious] restaurant and a pool surrounded by tropical vegetation. In our time there the only bird that showed itself was a Yellow Oriole on our first day there – a welcome colourful lifer. The desk, portage and room service were all exemplary and the food good so I can recommend the hotel. Furthermore the hotel had a suitably adapted "Handicapped" room which Brian and Joanna used. However, it was the furthest room from the lift which seems rather odd.

## **Day by Day**

### **Day 1**

Next morning at 7.00am we were met by Mike in his four-wheel drive vehicle. This was a little smaller than Roy's and proved a bit cramped in the back for three people. Mike has a sister who is a wheelchair user and had no ramp but readily took to lifting Brian bodily into the back seat whenever necessary. Whilst Brian thanked him for this self-sacrificing method it is not ideal either from the disabled birder's point of view [independence is always better] but also from a health and safety point of view – such lifting is always at the lifters own risk.

We began a long but fruitful day's birding with a ride down to a car park near to Buffalo Creek. Our intended goal was a jetty used for launching boats but the tide was so high and the river in spate so this was well under water. Here we had very good views of Red-headed Honeyeater, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher, Little Friarbird and both Forest



and Collared Kingfisher amongst other birds. Nearby we had some fleeting glimpses of Yellow Oriole, Rose-crowned Fruit Dove and good views of Black Butcherbird, Sacred Kingfisher and Dollarbird. As is so often the case all the kingfisher species were on telephone wires. We also managed a poor view of our first Orange-footed Scrubfowl which was roosting high in a bush. Some of us had a Weebill here but it was so high in the trees that it was difficult to see from inside the vehicle and flew before some could get out.

Our next stop was the [Botanic Gardens](#) in search of a couple of owl species. Only one was roosting during our visit but we had stunning close-up views of Rufous Owl. We used the park facilities and Joanna was surprised to find that her cubicle toilet bowl had a large resident frog!

Next port of call was a concrete path near a new housing development in Bayview. The path follows the edge of the mangroves and we arrived on a falling tide. Undoubtedly the best bird here was only seen by two birders, I was lucky to look where Maggie pointed to a Chestnut Rail as it went into the edge of the mangroves working its way along parallel to the path before disappearing into the shrubbery. This is a much desired bird and is certainly a very handsome one. As is so often the case Maggie spotted the bird of the day – we are thinking of hiring her out for birders trips as, among other birds, she is always first to spot any raptor. The supporting cast included some Common Sandpipers and frequent views of Double-barred Finches flitting among the mangrove bushes.

By this time the sun was really hot and we decided to take lunch back towards the city and welcome cold drinks.

Our next stop was at Palmerston Sewage Works in search of waders and herons which were conspicuous by their absence. We took a difficult drive around the perimeter and were rewarded with some good views of small passerines and an obliging Oriental Cuckoo. There were also more good views of Red-headed Honeyeater, Little Friarbird, Blue-faced Honeyeater, White-eyes, Brown Honeyeater and others. A couple of White-faced Herons were about the only water birds in sight although, like such facilities the world over, there were plenty of common hirundines about too.

The next stop was specifically to target one species – Rainbow Pitta – as I have long wanted to see any member of this family. We went to a renowned spot at Howard Springs Nature Park 35 kilometres south of Darwin, where a pool fed by a spring is surrounded by Monsoon rainforest. Here we walked a trail which was remarkable for the number and tenacity of its mosquitoes. I had not known what to expect and wore shorts – a BIG mistake. The trail follows the spring-fed stream and we were treated to excellent and frequent views of Shining Flycatchers and glimpses of other birds such as White-winged Triller, Black Butcherbird and Northern Fantails. Maggie and I had the very briefest of views of a rainbow Pitta on a stump six inches off the ground suddenly visible in a beam of sunlight that turned its green back almost yellow. But it disappeared almost as soon as it appeared and we were left feeling as if we had seen a phantom. Whilst Mike went on in search of better views we retreated as, by this time, my legs were literally running with blood from the numerous bites despite my having



smothered my legs and arms with insect repellent. Was the briefest of glimpses of a Pitta worth all this – you betcha!

En route we stopped briefly at the small town of Humpty Doo for better insect repellent and Mike bought some Lamingtons [a uniquely Australian cake] for us to eat at our next destination. We then moved on to our final target for the day – Fogg Dam. This is one of the world's great wetland sites with the entrance road affording terrific close views of herons, waders, waterfowl and passerines culminating in a parking area with an accessible platform [with two tiers] overlooking ponds and with views across hundreds of acres of marsh and reedbed.

From the viewpoint we had excellent close views of Crimson Finches collecting nesting material oblivious to our presence as well as an aerial display by numerous Rainbow Bee-eaters. But the attraction at Fogg Dam are the large numbers of herons and other water loving birds. In front of us were many Comb-crested Jacanas, a whole flock of 40 Royal Spoonbills collectively pond-dipping, and heron after heron including Great, Intermediate, Little and Cattle Egrets, Pied Heron and Nankeen [Rufous] Night Herons, Australian Ibis and Black-necked Storks all vied for attention. Overhead were Whistling and Brahminy Kites and small groups of Magpie Geese – surely as ugly as Friarbirds or Vultures. There were, of course, a number of cormorant species seen too.

This really is one of those unforgettable places ranking with 90 Mile Beach, Townsville Common and Cairns Foreshore as among Australia's very top birding destinations. We drove on along the Arnhem Highway to Mary River Park as dusk gathered. For many kilometres every fourth or fifth power pole had a roosting Whistling Kite. When we arrived we were warmly greeted by Gina and shown to our accommodation, which proved the first downer of the day.

The accommodation had been described as “budget, air-conditioned en-suite cabins”. Clearly our imaginations had misled us as what we found were similar to caravans – two rooms without a connecting door [i.e. a separate, not ensuite, shower/toilet] with good, fierce air-conditioning with beds and bedding reminiscent of an army barracks. Each stood on a concrete plinth with a steep ramp and unfenced platform. The gloom of dusk was reflected in the mood of the birders – and the next 20 minutes was spent hunting down the resident bugs, spiders and moths and, in our case, one cockroach.

It would be unfair to blame Mike & Gina Ostwald rather than our own imaginations for the disappointment. The extreme heat and humidity called for a cool shower and a cold drink but the stained shower and resident insects were somewhat off-putting. We had expected basic, clean and comfortable accommodation – what we got was tantamount to air-condition camping with walls, the sort of place one would expect when on a fishing weekend with the lads, not for a family holiday. Most of our reaction was down to the gap between expectation and reality but we felt disappointed. Middle-aged wimps as we are we decided immediately to cut our two night stay in half. We told our hosts of this decision and felt backs go up in response. We then had a cold beer in the dining room and waited on an evening meal to be cooked bar-b-q style in the dining room-cum-bar-cum-pool room. This was reminiscent of a factory unit being

very large with an extremely high ceiling where the fans circulated the mass of insects that swarmed to the lights through the screens.

We heard no barking owls as we headed to our cabins but did hear the heavy thud of a fellow guest as she took a tumble on an unlit step in the path; badly grazing knees and elbows and look rather shaken.

## **Day 2**

Breakfast was a basic meal [after which Brian and I watched high-flying Forked-tailed Swifts and a Square-tailed Kite as well as having terrific views of Blue-winged Kookaburra from the veranda] which we followed with a River Trip with Mike in search of birds before being joined an hour later by other nature enthusiasts who were more intent on finding crocodiles.

The trip proved good for new species but poor for bird numbers over all. We managed to twice have good views of Black Bittern flying for cover and numerous Shining Flycatchers crossing back and forth in all their sexually dimorphic splendour whilst cuckoo-shrikes and friarbirds also obliged on many occasions. We saw a couple of Azure Kingfishers and many Black and Whistling Kites as well as one White-bellied Sea Eagle that flew low and for'ard for some time. We also had our only trip tick of a roosting Pacific Baza. Undoubtedly the best birds of the boat trip were a pair of white morph Grey Goshawks with their fully fledged chick all three of which gave excellent views. Other participants were treated to views of small but no doubt deadly Saltwater and Johnson River Crocodiles.

After a light salad lunch we set off to bird our way back to Darwin.

The plan was to try the Bird Billabong first [an area of lily-adorned water which was still too wet to get very close to] for Partridge Pigeon and then try the Marraki Track for finches and Red-Backed Kingfisher. We had no luck at the Billabong so proceeded to the Track which is a dirt road going many kilometres into the bush and eventually fording [in the dry season] the Adelaide River.

This proved an excellent choice and we managed quite a few species of finch such as Double Barred and Red-browed as well as several new species such as Long-tailed Finch and Masked Finch. What is more we did find one Red-backed Kingfisher that was pretty confiding and allowed some good close views. Other notable species were Rufous-banded Honeyeater, Jacky Winter, Grey-crowned Babbler and our only White-bellied Cuckooshrike, Varied Lorikeet and Northern Rosellas of the trip. As we began to drive back down the track we stopped to watch a Jacky Winter catching flies when two Partridge Pigeons walked slowly across the road in front of us, stopping to observe some British birders before steadily walking on their way [apparently this is their preferred mode and they are known to walk many kilometres rather than flying].

En route to our hotel we took a look at the Charles Darwin NP which didn't turn up many birds but did give us good views of a Frilled Lizard displaying on the side of a tree and some Antilopine Walleroos.

### **Day 3**

Our final day in Darwin [which was to be followed by a wee small hours departure] was spent resting up and re-packing. [Apart from the previous days spent in the Brisbane Area we had been to NZ for two weeks and our companions had been out of the UK for a month previously so some R&R every week was needed – birding takes so much concentration it is far more taxing than work – especially when it is 35c and 110% humidity!]

## **Australia 2004 April North Queensland Fairywrens, Falcons and Frogmouths**

**This is a report on a brief sojourn in the Cairns & Daintree areas as part of a more extensive birding trip in Australasia**

Those taking part were Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and friends Brian & Joanna Anderson. Brian is a wheelchair user being unable to walk or stand so the trip represented some logistical problems which were overcome through planning, goodwill and Brian's willingness to sacrifice dignity and comfort in pursuit of a long list! This was my third trip to Australia and my second to Cairns but I had never been further north before to Daintree and the area around Mount Molloy and Mount Lewis. I had particular target birds in mind to extend my world list but, as always, never went in pursuit of one rare or difficult to find species at the expense of more common lifers, or, indeed variety. So many birds are special to Australia that seeing many species again was welcome.

### **Background**

Through Fatbirder I had corresponded with Lloyd Neilson and had heard of Fine Feather Tours and Kingfisher Lodge but not actually met any of the characters involved with them. However, I had heard many good things it was obvious that time spent with any of them would pay great dividends. Lloyd had offered to spend a day with me and we arranged to make contact as soon as I was in Cairns. I planned this leg of my trip with his excellent guide to hand.

I knew that our visit would probably be just too late for some of the special birds of the North but, for some hard to fathom reason, I had not realised that Cairns would not be the wader paradise it had been on my previous visit, forgetting that waders migrate too. It was a bit of a shock to arrive and find so few waders about – doh

We had arranged to hire a vehicle for the week from [Ability Access](#) [run by Tony & Della Mahon 07 4033 6293 Mob 04177 64028] who have one of the few wheelchair accessible vehicles in the area. In addition to this dearth of accessible vehicles it was disappointing to note that the concept of a hand-controlled vehicle for a disabled person to drive seemed to be an alien concept.

Disabled persons driving? Whatever next! The vehicle supplied was a large van with a rear facing, narrow, bench seat and a single seat in the rear along with many anchoring points where a wheelchair can be firmly locked in. At the back was an easy to operate tail-lift. The ability to get the wheelchair in and out of the vehicle was a great

improvement on previous methods, and once the anchoring system was managed efficiently it was a reasonably quick operation to get in and out of the vehicle. Unfortunately, sitting in the vehicle, in the wheelchair, meant that bird watching from the anchored wheelchair proved to be a neck twisting, torso bending trial because the wheelchair is very much higher than the seating of the vehicle. This restricted, very much, the area that could be seen from the vehicle as opposed to the full views enjoyed by the front seat passengers.

There was, of course, the option of the wheelchair passenger transferring to the rear-facing bench seat. Apart from this seat facing the opposite way to the rest of the passengers it was too narrow to sit comfortably on for any distance. Possibly things could be improved with better seating and an improved seating configuration.

## **Day by Day**

### **Day 1**

A phone call from the airport brought the vehicle to us and we drove to our hotel for breakfast. [Our flight from Darwin was at 6.00am]. We booked in at the [Acacia Court Hotel](#). We stayed here again as Maggie and I had previously stayed there and remembered the “eat all you can seafood buffet” as being second to none. They also assured us that they had accessible rooms at the rear of the hotel. As is so often the case with such facilities, the “disabled rooms” were truly horrible and situated close to a noisy parking area. Brian & Joanna took one look and decided to manage in a standard room with a sea view. Their rooms and balconies are accessible to wheelchairs although the bathroom is a bit of a squeeze and showers were not possible for a wheelchair user.

Once we had settled in and rested a little I decided to take the vehicle out to get used to driving it and Brian accompanied me – inevitably we had a look around the town for birds and spent a while sitting on the [esplanade](#). There were a few waders in small numbers, [Eastern Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Marsh Sandpiper, Greenshank, Terek Sandpiper, Asian Dowitcher, Turnstones, Great & Red Knot, Red-necked Stint, Ruff and Pied Oystercatcher] some Herons [Great & Intermediate Egret, Striated Heron and one Black Bittern] and a few terns [Gull-billed, Caspian, Crested and Black-naped with one Whiskered Tern]. There were also several Forest Kingfishers fishing from tiny mangrove saplings. Around the parks and gardens we also saw Masked Plover, Diamond and Peaceful Doves, Willie Wagtails, Magpie larks and other common species.

Before our evening meal at Charlie’s we spent time [on two evenings] watching birds coming to roost in the trees that line the Esplanade which can be seen from many of the hotels. These included large flocks of Metallic Starlings, Figbirds, White-breasted and masked Woodswallows, Varied Honeyeaters and several unidentified flycatchers. All the while White-rumped Swiftlets and Fork-tailed Swifts were streaming by with an occasional White-throated Needletail too. As dusk came on small bats appeared and then large fruit bats [Flying Foxes].

### **Day 2**

On day two we explored a bit further afield venturing out towards the Tablelands and forest near Lake Eacham and towards the Crater National Park and then circle south back to Cairns. The day started bright but unfortunately the weather deteriorated and

it became a dismal day with torrential rain interspersed with showers and the occasional bright spell.

En route we went off the road when we saw what we thought were accessible toilets – it was a mistake but a whim took us off on a small road towards Frazier turning off the Kennedy Highway opposite Rocky Creek Memorial Park near Tolga on the Atherton Tableland. Where the road turns right and a track goes off to the left we stopped as we heard so many bird calls. It took us ages before we actually saw any and realised that the majority of noise was coming from Rainbow Lorikeets and Red-winged Parrots but there was also noise from finch flocks. When they did pop up high enough in the grass it turned out to be a flock of Chestnut-breasted Manikins – our first god look at these common but beautiful birds. We were also very lucky to see several Scarlet Honeyeaters; the sun was shining on us literally and figuratively!

We drove on but, by the time we reached our goal, The Crater near Mount Hypipamee National Park the rain was torrential. We sat in the car for some minutes before deciding to press on preferring to travel in the wet hoping to bird as soon as it was dry enough. It was still raining when we stopped towards Malandra for a delicious lunch at the “Tree Kangaroo” small eateries with excellent home cooked meals. We headed for Yungaburra having been told by Lloyd Neilson the area was good for White-headed Pigeon. This turned out to be a good call and we had great views of several in a tree as we turned the vehicle round having taken a wrong turning. The tree also held a number of Rainbow Lorikeets which we had to go to the book for as they were of a different race to those we had previously seen. We also stooped to watch some Pied Currawongs.

As we were wandering the area we saw a signpost for Lake Eacham National Park and thought we could do worse than give it a look. Approaching the park we saw a sign for a Lake Road and took a wrong turning into some agricultural land with small stands of trees. This proved the most productive mistake of the day with good views of Emerald Dove, Brown Cuckoo Dove, Lots of White-eyes and Red-browed finches and a host of common honeyeaters. We then managed to find the right road around the Lake and enjoyed hearing the whipbirds calling and had good views of displaying Rufous Fantails and a great number of Brush Turkeys and some Orange-footed Scrubfowl. The rain returned and we decided to head back to our Hotel.

### **Day 3**

The next day we set off for Daintree with an appointment en route with Lloyd to discuss our targets for the day he had set aside for us. At 10 o'clock we met up with him at Kingfisher Park near Julatten. Ron Stannard, the owner of [Kingfisher Park Birdwatcher's Lodge](#), kindly supplied coffee and cakes and extra advice whilst we had our discussions with Lloyd. The feeders next to us attracted no less than three lifers in the first few minutes, Little Shrike Thrush, Spectacled Monarch and Graceful Honeyeater as well as photo opportunities for Red-browed Finches, Emerald Dove and Macleay's Honeyeaters. We later added Silver-crowned Friarbird and had terrific views of every stage of maturity of Blue-faced honeyeaters.

Lloyd [author and webmaster of [Birding Australia](#)] told us that our day out would also have the added advantage of being accompanied by Del Richards, owner operator of [Fine Feather Tours](#). Ron told us to look for Bush Hens on our departure and that

the last of the Buff-breasted Kingfishers was still hanging around and he advised us to look for it as he assumed it would have migrated by the next day. We eagerly took his advice and spent sometime circling around before Maggie spotted this magnificent bird only a few feet from us low to the ground among the trees. It took nearly an hour to manage views for all the party but it was time well spent as we managed to add another lifer – Pale Yellow Robin, too.

We then went on to Daintree to suss out our accommodation. Brian & Joanna stayed at [Red Mill House](#) where owner operator Andrew Forsyth had converted one of the downstairs rooms especially for the visit. [Brian advised him of the tweaks to be made to turn it from excellent disabled accessible accommodation into perfection.] Maggie & I drove the 8 kilometres down an un-metalled road to [Daintree Valley Haven](#) where we were staying [really excellent self-catering cottages set in beautiful grounds carved out of the forest]. We had time to see our first Yellow-breasted Sunbirds and Varied Trillers of the trip before driving back to Daintree Village where Brian had clocked up Mistletoebird in the grounds of Red Mill House.

We drove back to our cottage to show Brian and Joanna what it was like before going back into the village for an evening meal at Jacanas Restaurant. As Maggie and I travelled back to Daintree Haven we put up a small band of Bush Thickknee and one night bird which we had too little time of to ID. We also nearly ran over a very large snake which was identified from our description as a Brown Tree snake.

#### **Day 4**

The next day Brian, Joanna and I met Lloyd and Del the next morning at 7.30am at the turn off the Captain Cook Highway to Newell Beach. They took us to the first stop of the day a group of trees a few hundred yards from the coast where we were delighted to see our first Papuan Frogmouths – a new family for all of us. After this we went into Port Douglas where an acquaintance of our guides allowed us to sit in the vehicle in his driveway whilst a succession of honeyeaters came to his feeders. We had great views of Yellow, Graceful, Lewin's, Yellow-spotted, Macleay's, Brown and Bridled Honeyeaters and our first House Sparrows of the trip. Despite the light drizzle this was a great chance to see the size differences between some difficult to separate species.

En Route for Mount Molloy we stopped for Golden-headed Cisticola and tried a spot for Wompoo Fruit Dove without success. Our next stop was at the place where, according to our guides, the wet lands and dry lands had their border. a small picnic site near Julatten Tavern. Whilst eating excellent lamingtons supplied by Del we had terrific views of Channel-billed Cuckoo, Black-faced Monarch and Grey Whistler with rather less good views of Fairy Gerygone and Brown Gerygone. I had a nice close up look at a very large spider that had taken up residence in the toilet bowl at the picnic site!

Next stop was Mount Lewis Road with a quick look for Blue-faced Finches near Nissen Creek, which were not in evidence and then on to a fish farm at Perseverance Road looking for rails. We had very good looks at Buff-banded Rail but the site for Superb Fairy Wren further down the road was quiet although it was hard to see much in the rain.

We headed for Mount Molloy to look for Squatter Pigeon without success but did get a good look at a Great Bowerbird's bower here. From here we headed along the highway into the dry lands around Mt Carbine in search of dry land specialities. Our lunch stop was at Mt Carbine Caravan Park where another bowerbird's bower had been cleverly formed using the tunnel of a small culvert which the bird had adorned with white shells and red plastic. Our main target here were Tawny Frogmouths which roosted in easy view once Del and Lloyd managed to locate the right tree. The owner was shown the birds too and was delighted with her residents. This site was also excellent for Pale-headed Rosella and our only views of another lifer – Apostlebirds which, true to their name, went around in a group of a dozen or so.

Off the highway on the road to the old Mt Carbine airstrip we spent some time looking for Squatter Pigeon. These proved elusive but we did have great views of Common Bronze-wing. Del and Lloyd managed to hear some Weebills close to the vehicle and Brian was very gratified to "pull back" this species. We also lucked upon a close Squatter Pigeon that gave great views.

Further on we took West Mary Road at Maryfarms to look for Bustard. which Lloyd saw and I glimpsed but Brian missed. As we drove back we picked up our only lark of the trip; unexpected amongst the Richard's Pipits.

At this point we needed to head "home" and had the choice of trying again for the bustards or going to another site in search of pardalotes. As bustard was only needed by Brian we decided upon the pardalotes and as we headed for the site a very obliging bustard gave great views beside the highway. The site for the pardalotes [a municipal dump] was quiet and I dipped – the third time of this trip and my third trip in a row where I have heard but never seen any of these birds!

The return trip back was uneventful although we did see a few raptors one circling over the road where there was a road kill carpet python.

## **Day 5**

The next day we decided to retrace some of our steps in search of new species and to give Maggie views of the Papuan Frogmouths. which were obligingly even lower down their roost branch. We took another look at the picnic site but it was very quiet apart from one very unexpected bird. As we were getting back into the vehicle we spotted a bright yellow bird in a tee towards the rainforest. At first we assumed it was an oriole but as soon as we managed to view it through binoculars we found it to be an absolutely immaculate Golden Bowerbird! By the time we got the scope organised it had flown off back to the woods!

We tried the Mount Lewis Road and Maggie spotted a raptor in a tree top. We fully quizzed the bird not believing it could be a Grey Falcon out of its normal range [later we learnt that it was seen regularly]. Further down the road we stopped to view a feeding flock of birds which turned out to be Metallic Starlings. Other birds flitted around in the bushes and trees including a Red-backed Fairy Wren and Brown and White-gaped Honeyeaters.



Further retracing our steps of the previous day we tried Perseverance Road. As we breasted the hill Maggie spotted a Black-shouldered Kite – our only one of the trip. We had no luck at the Fairywren site and there were no rails in evidence at the Barramundi fish farm.

We went back to the Tavern at Julatten for a late lunch. As we left the tavern the trees around the car park were full of birds and Brian pulled back Pied Monarch and we had good views of Noisy Friarbird and I had views of a Gould's Shining Cuckoo. There was a supporting cast of common honeyeaters too.

We headed back for an early evening meal and then all drove down the road towards Daintree Haven in search of night birds. Typically all we saw were toads and bats so we drove Brian & Joanna back to Red Mill House; typically as we drove ourselves home, just a few hundred yards down the road Maggie Spotted an owl on a fence. It stayed perfectly still for us in the headlights so we could get a really good look at what proved to be a sought-after and scarce speciality – Lesser Sooty Owl

## **Day 6**

Our next day was something of a washout. We decided to take the ferry over the Daintree River and drive up to the Jindalba Boardwalk as we had been told that Cassowary had been seen there the previous day. It rained most of the morning and our walk along the boardwalk was unrewarded by ANY birds. In fact we saw very few birds all day as we took whatever side roads we could to explore the Daintree forest area. The only notable birds seen were Brown Cuckoo Dove and a Bridled Honeyeater at the Ice Cream Factory where we stopped to enjoy some unusual flavours of ice cream. Back at Daintree Valley Haven Maggie and I were lucky to spot two Platypus in the dam and to see Brown Swamp Wallaby and Brown Bandicoot there too at dusk. In view of the weather we decided to head back for Cairns the following day.

Our plan was to visit a site for Kangaroo and then drop into [Cassowary House](#) in the hope of seeing Cassowary. The journey down to Cairns was uneventful with no new birds added to the list until we took a break and a lunch in the rain at Abattoir Swamp along the Rex Highway. Here we saw a variety of honeyeaters as the picnic area had clearly been deliberately planted with many flowering native trees – these included Yellow, Yellow-faced, White-cheeked, Dusky and Scarlet Honeyeaters. No one was in at Cassowary House and we did not connect.

## **Day 7**

The following day started gloomily once more, particularly over the Kuranda Rainforest so we abandoned our initial plan of going back to Cassowary House in favour of a visit to Cairns' Flecker Botanic Gardens, the Centenary Lakes and then on to the Crocodile Farm a few miles south of town.

The botanic gardens proved to be a very pleasant [if rather humid] walk amidst tropical palm forest – where we saw not one bird. However, the adjoining lakes did prove more successful turning up a life – White-browed Crake as well as few commoner birds.

By the time we got to the crocodile farm it was extremely hot and we walked around trying not to notice the terrible smell of stagnant water and fetid crocodile breath. One could not forget the crocodiles as a good few managed to make us jump out of our skins by lunging for the fences making primeval noises. A leaflet is available at reception giving locations of some of the birds and this proved useless for locations but useful for knowing what to look out for. The entrance fee for birders is less than for crocodile watchers. Nevertheless, it proved a good source of new birds with several lifers including Lewin's Rail and Brown-backed Honeyeater as well as a few more trip ticks such as Common Koel, Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt, Little Kingfisher and Black-fronted Dotterel. We also saw more White-browed Crake there and may have heard and seen Cicadabirds but were not sure enough to "tick" them. We were temporarily greatly excited by the Common Koel which was an immature bird with a cream coloured head which looked like an entirely different species to the adult males I have seen before.

Our last evening was spent on the hotel balcony looking out across the mudflats to sea and just enjoying the esplanade.