Sicklebill Safaris

TRIP REPORT IRON RANGE FIFO (Fly In – Fly Out)

4th - 7th January 2022



Trumpet Manucode (Phonygammus keraudrenii)

CLIENTS: Judith, Elizabeth, Nigel & Jim

GUIDE: Phil Gregory

This was the first Sicklebill Safaris and Bellbird Cape York trip this year, targeting the Far North Queensland and Cape York endemics plus other northern specials. The covid situation with the state borders still made planning highly uncertain, but happily it all came together very nicely. The weather was kind, being hot and not too windy, quite dry and humid with relatively little rain, and that mostly at night. Iron Range Cabins has good air-conditioning and also wifi, and was very convenient for the rainforest habitat and the airport. The forest was damaged in 2019 by cyclone Trevor, and thousands of trees were blown down, but regrowth is well under way. The main Portland Road was in very good condition, (unlike back in January 2021 when many areas were damaged or washed out) though many forest trails remain impassable. We primarily birded in the Portland Road forest from the road or large sidetracks, exploring

the Claudie River road as well as the Portland Roads area, with the cooler early morning from 0600 to about 1000 the key time.

Palm Cockatoo was still unobtrusive this trip, but we got some great close birds at Quintel Beach. Eclectus and Red-cheeked Parrot were quite vocal with good views of both perched, and Double-eyed (Marshall's) Fig-Parrot was seen very well at a fruiting fig. Marbled Frogmouth called well with some 5 birds responding, and happily we found two both guite close to the road and easy to see with a short forest foray. Yellow-billed Kingfisher was still quite vocal and gave good looks, and Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo showed really well on the first afternoon, but barely called the rest of the trip. Papuan Pitta was calling sporadically but mostly quite distant, though we eventually got a fine bird close to Iron Range cabins, with Nigel and Jim hearing it during the break time, and a foray in eventually revealing the beast. It was amazingly ventriloquial and seemed to be calling from low down initially, but after some while it proved to be high up in a large tree and Jim eventually picked it up much to everyone's relief. Blackeared Catbird was the big target for everyone this trip despite previous Cape tours, and we got two very well on the first morning, I regard this as the hardest of the Cape York specials. Fawn-breasted Bowerbird is always elusive, but Nigel and Jim found one near the cabins and it proved to be a reliable place to see it, and we also saw a fine large bower later. White-streaked Honeyeater called at Tozer's Gap where there was at last some red blossom showing, and we got quite good views of several flighty birds, and found a great site for pitcher-plants. Northern Scrub-robin was furtive and largely not calling by now, but we got it to show well, this is always a very shy skulking species, as well as being a Cape York endemic. Yellow-legged Flyrobin gave brief views twice, then Phil Maher kindly put us onto a good spot near the cabins, this is always a hard bird. We did well with Green-backed Honeyeater on our very first outing with one calling nicely, and saw several later. We got lucky with Black-winged Monarch too, despite breeding being well under way and calling very limited, getting good views. A female plumage Magnificent Riflebird was perched in quite good view as we were after the catbirds, whilst a Trumpet Manucode landed bang in front of us and posed for what should be terrific pictures, a very neat trifecta.

Butterflies were a good side interest too and we managed a few local specials with **New Guinea Birdwing**, **Silky Jewel**, **Pale Cerulean** and **Pied Ringlet**. Reptiles were sparse and we had just a **Yellow-spotted Monitor** and a **Frilled Lizard**, with no snakes whatsoever.

Overall it was as ever a fun trip and we had some outstanding sightings of all the endemics. Thanks to Elisabeth, Judy, Nigel and Jim for coming on the trip, Peter at *Bellbird* and to Sue and Rowan at *Sicklebill Safaris* for setting it all up. Hannah at *Iron Range Cabins* was a helpful host and we enjoyed our last night dinner at the *Out of the Blue Café* at Portland Roads. Last but not least, an acknowledgement to the Kuuku-Ya'u people who are the custodians of Kutini-Payamu Iron Range NP.

Itinerary

Day 1 - Tuesday Jan 4th

Skytrans to Lockhart River via Aurukun, depart Cairns 0700, arriving 0930.

Checked in at Iron Range Cabins, then Quintel Beach, the sewage ponds and Lockhart River settlement for shopping, Pm 1500 to Ranger Station and Portland Roads forest as an introduction.

Day 2 - Wednesday Jan 5th

Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp ground, Cook's Hut area and Gordon Creek; pm Forest by cabins and Old Mission Road.

Dav 3 - Thursdav Jan 6th

Lockhart River beach, Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp and then Tozer's Gap; pm visited Chilli Beach 1515-1545, before heading to Portland Roads via Packers Creek. We had a very good farewell

dinner courtesy of Sheree and Greg at the *Out of the Blue Café* Spotlighting before returning to *Iron Range Cabins* by 2100.

Day 4 - Friday Jan 7th

0700-0830 Mango Farm Dam. Departed 1600 Skytrans to Cairns via Aurukun, Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama arriving 1845 and skirting storms en route.



Palm Cockatoo

Spotted Whistling Ducks



White-faced Robin

Ant Plants

SPECIES LIST

Australian or Queensland endemics in bold, red denotes a Cape York endemic

* denotes a near-endemic

Anseranatidae Magpie Goose

Magpie Goose Anseranas semipalmata

Just one at Mango Farm Dam.

Anatidae Ducks

Wandering Whistling Duck Dendrocygna arcuata

15 at Mango Farm Dam.

22 at the sewage ponds on our second visit showed very well and were a lifer for Jim.

Radjah Shelduck *Tadorna radjah*

3 at the sewage ponds and a couple at Mango Farm Dam

Green Pygmy-Goose Nettapus pulchellus

18 at Mango Farm Dam was a good count.

Pacific Black Duck Anas superciliosa

13 at Mango Farm Dam.

Megapodiidae Megapodes

Australian Brush-turkey Alectura lathami purpureicollis

Up to 10 in day in the rainforest areas, this taxon has a purplish collar, not yellow like the southern nominate birds.

Orange-footed Scrubfowl Megapodius freycinet

A few were seen in the rainforest areas.

Podicipedidae Grebes

Australasian Grebe Tachybaptus novaehollandiae

2 at the sewage ponds and 2 at Mango Farm Dam.

Columbidae Pigeons and Doves

Brown Cuckoo-Dove Macropygia phasianella

Strangely only one was seen by a couple in the forest area.

Pacific Emerald Dove Chalcophaps (indica) longirostris (H)

Heard daily, but none seen along the road.

Peaceful Dove Geopelia striata

3 by the cabins, always sparse here.

Bar-shouldered Dove Geopelia humeralis

Widespread in the eucalypt and open country areas as well as along the forest roads, this is one of the commonest birds.

Wompoo Fruit-Dove Megaloprepia magnificus

Several sightings from the rainforest areas, with some calling too.

Superb Fruit Dove Ptilinopus superbus (H)

Oddly not really calling much this trip, and none were seen.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa*

Small flocks flying over in the coastal areas, but not in the rainforest, we were seeing 40+ every day.

Cuculidae Cuckoos

Pheasant Coucal Centropus phasianinus

Heard most days and seen near Lockhart River.

Little Bronze-Cuckoo Chrysococcyx minutillus

A nice view of a male of Little Bronze-Cuckoo (presumably race *russatus*, Gould's Bronze) in forest along Portland Road, and heard most days.

Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo Cacomantis castaneiventris

A great view of a silent bird at Cook's Hut on Jan 5th, but otherwise curiously silent and only heard briefly later this day and again next day.

Brush Cuckoo Cacomantis variolosus

Quite vocal, with good views of a couple of birds.

Podargidae Frogmouths

* Marbled Frogmouth *Podargus ocellatus marmoratus*

We heard 5 calling on the clear moonlit night of Jan 6th, and got onto a fine male quite close to the road, with a female nearby later and also thankfully not far away. This race is endemic to Cape York, and the complex of 5 subspecies is clearly several species.

Papuan Frogmouth *Podargus papuensis*

A fine bird spotlit as we came back from Portland Roads, and one on a fence post at the cabins the same night.

Caprimulgidae Nightjars

Large-tailed Nightjar Caprimulgus macrurus

None calling at Portland Roads and just a single male that flashed across the road on the drive back, seen only by Phil.

Apodidae Swifts

Australian Swiftlet Collocalia terraereginae

Seen just once by some of the group.

Pacific Swift Apus pacificus

A good find by Judy were about 30 of this dispersive migrant circling by Mt Tozer.

Burhinidae Stone-curlews

Bush Stone Curlew *Burhinus grallarius* (H)

Heard around the cabin area on two nights, I suspect roaming dogs may be a problem for them here.

Haematopodidae Oystercatchers

Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris* 2 distantly at Quintel Beach.

Charadriidae Plovers

Masked Lapwing Vanellus novaehollandiae miles

A few seen around Iron Range cabins, and 2 at Chilli Beach.

Pacific Golden Plover Pluvialis fulva

Just 6 at Chilli Beach was the only sighting.

Black-fronted Dotterel Elseyornis melanops

One at Mango Farm Dam on Jan 4th.

Greater Sand Plover Charadrius leschenaultii

Ten at Chilli Beach.

Scolopacidae Sandpipers and Snipes

Grey-tailed Tattler Heteroscelus brevipes

One at Chilli Beach for Elisabeth, and heard at Quintel Beach.

Laridae Gulls and Terns

Bridled Tern Onychoprion anaethetus

2 at Chilli Beach, flying about above the island offshore.

Crested Tern Thalasseus bergii

4 at Chilli Beach.

Lesser Crested Tern Thalasseus benghalensis

One with Crested Terns at Chilli Beach, the smaller size and orange bill showing nicely.

Common Tern Sterna hirundo

5 at Chilli Beach in first winter plumage, I would like to see the photos as one looked somewhat thin billed.....

Little Tern Sternula albifrons

6 at Chilli Beach.

Fregatidae Frigatebirds

Great Frigatebird Fregata minor

We counted 53 soaring in a loose flock high over Portland Roads, and all looked to be this species with quite a few entirely dark males amongst them.

Phalacrocoracidae Cormorants

Little Pied Cormorant Microcarbo melanoleuca

One at Mango Farm Dam.

Little Black Cormorant Phalacrocorax sulcirostris

Two at Mango Farm Dam.

Anhingidae Darters

Australasian Darter *Anhinga novaehollandiae*One at Mango Farm Dam.

Threskiornithidae Ibis & spoonbills

Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia* 2 at Mango Farm Dam.

Ardeidae Herons, Bitterns and Egrets

Great Egret Egretta alba modesta

2 at Mango Farm Dam and 4 at the sewage ponds.

Intermediate (Plumed) Egret Egretta intermedia plumipes

One at Mango Farm Dam. This is a likely split as Plumed Egret, as already done by BirdLife.

Pied Heron Egretta picata

One at the sewage ponds and 2 at Mango Farm Dam.

Eastern Reef Egret Egretta sacra

One white morph at Chilli Beach.

Accipitridae Kites, Eagles and Hawks

Whistling Kite Haliastur sphenurus

Seen near Lockhart River and Mango Farm Dam.

Brahminy Kite Haliastur indus

One at the sewage ponds was the only sighting.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster

One imm. high over Portland Roads near the frigatebirds

Brown Goshawk Accipiter fasciatus didimus

One on Jan 5th. This small northern tropical race is a potential split.

Grey Goshawk Accipiter novaehollandiae

One seen at Gordon Creek Jan 5th

Alcedinidae Kingfishers

Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher Tanysiptera sylvia

Heard daily in the rainforest and one or 2 seen well most days.

Blue-winged Kookaburra Dacelo leachii

Vocal and seen near Iron Range Cabins this trip, reoccupying the burned woodlands.

Forest Kingfisher Todiramphus macleayii

Several regularly perched on wires near Iron Range Cabins.

Torresian Kingfisher Todiramphus sordidus

One heard in the mangroves at Portland Roads.

* Yellow-billed Kingfisher Syma torotoro

Seen nicely and photographed in the forest along Portland Road, plus a few heard every day.

Azure Kingfisher Ceyx azureus

One at Mango Farm Dam on the first visit.

Cacatuidae Cockatoos

* Palm Cockatoo Probosciger aterrimus macgillivrayi

Very unobtrusive this trip, but we saw 7 very well at Quintel Beach on the morning of Jan 6th; this spectacular species is always a highlight.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo Cacatua galerita

Seen most days in small numbers, even in the rainforest where they come to feed from fruiting trees.

Psittaculidae Old World Parrots

* Red-cheeked Parrot Geoffroyus geoffroyus

Vocal and quite widespread, and seen quite well in the forest.

* Eclectus Parrot Eclectus roratus

Quite vocal but wary, we saw 2 or 3 daily in flight with one female in a nest hole.

* Double-eyed Fig-Parrot Cyclopsitta diopthalma marshalli (H)

Lovely views of 2 feeding on cauliflorous figs at Gordon Creek on Jan 5th, this is the distinctive race *marshalli*. Surprisingly hard to find here and seems uncommon, I was surprised BirdLife did not split the species up like they did with other fig-parrots in New Guinea.

Pittidae Pittas

Noisy Pitta Pitta versicolor (H)

Heard daily in small numbers, and we almost saw one fly across the road, sorry Jim for whom this remained a bogey bird!

* Papuan Pitta Pitta macklotii

Heard each day though all quite far back, but luckily Jim and Nigel heard one in the forest near the cabins and we went in after it. It was calling very well and sounded low down, but try as we might we could not get onto the bird. Moving position we eventually realised it was actually quite high up in a large tree, and after much scanning Jim picked it up and we got good views. A major target of course and very nice to nail it as they were not calling particularly well.

Ptilonorhynchidae Bowerbirds

* Black-eared Catbird Ailuroedus melanotis joanae

Calling birds at Gordon Creek proved quite responsive and we got good views of this very elusive critter on the first afternoon, a major want for everyone. I rate this as the hardest of all the Iron Range specials, a Double Black Diamond bird to borrow a skiing term, being very shy and elusive and not calling much. It is a split from the Australian endemic Spotted Catbird, with this Iron Range taxon *joanae* now part of the New Guinea complex of Black-eared Catbird, which it resembles in its very shy behaviour.

* Fawn-breasted Bowerbird Chlamydera cerviniventris

We almost certainly had one at Mango Farm Dam on arrival day but it vanished quick smart. Then one by the turning to the cabins, initially found by Jim and Nigel and seen by all later. Also a very nice bower at Portland Roads, this one has a large platform and sparse decoration of bones and shells plus some dry green berries. It is odd how this bird is so elusive here as so much suitable habitat exists.

Meliphagidae Honeyeaters

Green-backed Honeyeater Glycichaera fallax

Seen well at the Ranger Station on arrival day, then several times along the forest road and at Rainforest Camp. It is an elusive low-density species that only occurs here in Australia, and is by no means easy to find in New Guinea either. Once you know the call however it becomes much easier.

* Brown-backed Honeyeater Ramsayornis modestus

5 at Mango Farm Dam.

Dusky Honeyeater Myzomela obscura

Just a handful this trip, unlike two weeks ago when they were very common.

Hornbill (Helmeted) Friarbird Philemon buceroides yorki

The common friarbird here, this taxon *yorki* is split by the IOC as Hornbill Friarbird, though the recent Australian Bird Guide treats it as Helmeted Friarbird, despite supposedly following IOC taxonomy!

Tawny-breasted Honeyeater Xanthotis flaviventer filiger

Quite vocal in the forests, we saw it well each day; this race is endemic to the Cape.

White-streaked Honeyeater Trichodere cockerelli

Heard in the distance at Tozer's Gap, and tracked down to where there were some unobtrusive red flowers on the trees. They were very flighty and wary but we saw them quite well, with further sightings later on the heath en route to Chilli Beach. They move around quite a bit locally after food sources when the heaths are lacking flowers.

White-throated Honeyeater Melithreptus albogularis

A few at Mango Farm Dam and nearby, and heard near the cabins.

Yellow-spotted Honeyeater Meliphaga notata notata

Vocal and quite frequent in the rainforest but hard to see well. This race sounds a bit different to the subspecies *mixta* around Cairns/Kuranda too.

* Graceful Honeyeater Microptilotis gracilis gracilis

One of the commonest honeyeaters, vocal and frequent in the rainforest and also at Mango Farm Dam. This is now classed as a monotypic species, occurring here and in S. PNG, but birds from Cooktown south, which were formerly Graceful Honeyeater race *imitatrix*, are now split as Cryptic Honeyeater. The Cairns, Kuranda and coastal birds belong to this new species.

Acanthizidae Scrubwrens and Gerygones

* Tropical Scrubwren Sericornis beccarii

This proved as elusive as ever; we saw 2 at Portland Road and 3 at Cook's Hut.

Large-billed Gerygone Gerygone magnirostris (H)

Heard at Portland Roads mangroves.

Fairy Gerygone Gerygone palpebrosa personata

Heard daily, and seen along Portland Road, this is the black-throated *personata* race.

Machaerirhynchidae

Boatbills

Yellow-breasted Boatbill Machaerirhynchus flaviventer

Common by voice, and after being initially troublesome it was seen most days

Cracticidae

Butcherbirds

Black Butcherbird Cracticus quoyi jardini

Heard daily and seen a couple of times in the rainforest.

Artamidae

Woodswallows

White-breasted Woodswallow Artamus leucorynchus

Frequent around the airport and cabins, also at Lockhart River in small numbers

Campephagidae

Cuckooshrikes

White-bellied Cuckooshrike Coracina papuensis

Just a couple of singles this trip, in the drier country.

Varied Triller Lalage leucomela

One or two seen most days.

Pachycephalidae

Whistlers and Shrike-thrushes

Grey Whistler Pachycephala simplex peninsulae

This unobtrusive species was seen well at Portland Road forest.

The quiet disyllabic call is a good pointer to its presence.

Rufous Shrike-thrush Colluricincla megarhyncha

The former (Not so) Little Shrike-thrush was seen well at Portland Road forest on several days, the species now being split into 8 species, with 2 (Arafura and Rufous) in Australia. It is one of the commonest species by voice.

Oriolidae

Oriolidae and Figbirds

Australian Figbird Sphecotheres vieilloti flaviventris

Seen on 3 days, with 5 birds the most, this is the northern race with the males bright yellow below.

Green (Yellow) Oriole Oriolus flavocinctus

Very common and noisy in the rainforest areas, Green Oriole is a far more appropriate name then the old one, which is preoccupied by some South American icterid anyway.

Dicruridae

Drongos

Spangled Drongo Dicrurus bracteatus

One or two daily in the various woodlands.

Monarchidae Monarch flycatchers

Spectacled Monarch Symposiachrus trivirgatus albiventris

The race here has a sharp cut-off between the orange throat and white underparts, rather different to the southerly taxa. We heard them daily and saw them by a nest at Rainforest Camp.

Black-winged Monarch Monarcha frater canescens

This Cape York wet season special was very elusive and hardly calling now, breeding seems to be more or less over. Fortunately we got one nicely in the forest. on Jan 6th It is much paler and more silvery than Black-faced Monarch, with black wings and tail, but the voice is very similar to that of Black-faced Monarch. During the writing of my Lynx *New Guinea Field Guide*, I realised there seem to be no records of this form *canescens* from that island despite many books saying it winters there. So, does it winter in remote parts of the Cape, or somewhere in New Guinea? I also don't think it belongs with Black-winged Monarch which is a hill forest species with very different voice, this may be a Cape York race of Black-faced or just possibly an endemic in its own right.

White-eared Monarch Carterornis leucotis

A pleasing find was this elusive canopy bird, it is uncommon and difficult to locate at the tops of the trees, and the call here is unlike the tablelands disyllabic version.

Frill-necked Monarch Arses lorealis

Seen daily in the rainforest, creeping along trunks and branches like Pied Monarch does. It is endemic to Cape York Peninsula.

Leaden Flycatcher Myiagra rubecula

Seen near Iron Range cabins, and a male at Mango Farm Dam.

Shining Flycatcher *Myiagra alecto*

Heard in the forest, seen at Mango farm Dam, and a male at Portland Roads.

Paradisaeidae Birds of Paradise

* Trumpet Manucode Phonygammus keraudreni gouldii

This one is always a challenge, and was not calling very much, but it was heard and called in very nicely on Jan 4th along with Black-eared Catbird and a riflebird, and we saw a couple on Jan 6th. This is another complex that surely consists of several species, and I would not be surprised to see this split as an endemic Cape York Manucode at some point. *Manucode* means bird of the gods in Malay, though quite why it is applied to this black plumaged species assemblage I have no idea!

* Magnificent (Cape York) Riflebird Ptiloris magnificus alberti

Good views of a female plumage bird at Cook's Hut. This is another potential split too as the voice is different to the New Guinea birds, and more resembles the western New Guinea Magnificent Riflebird rather than the geographically much closer Growling Riflebird.

Petroicidae Australasian Robins

Lemon-bellied Flyrobin *Microeca flavigaster*One singing near Mango Farm Dam.

Yellow-legged Flyrobin Kempiella griseoceps

One of the most difficult specials, we saw one briefly near Rainforest Camp with another next day as we were watching the Northern Scrub-robins. Then luckily Phil Maher told us of a spot where he had seen one and we had excellent views on Jan 6th

White-browed Robin Poecilodryas superciliosa

Frustrating, we heard it well and close along Old Mission Road, with Elisabeth getting a quick view, but it was very elusive. Also heard at Packers Creek near Portland Roads.

White-faced Robin Tregellasia leucops albigularis

Quite vocal in the rainforest, and seen nicely several times, this race is endemic to the Cape, (and the complex of races in New Guinea is overdue to be split into several species).

Northern Scrub-Robin Drymodes superciliaris

Another elusive and very local Cape York endemic special, and not calling much now, but we got good looks at two furtive birds on Jan 5th. Now split from Papuan Scrub-Robin as quite distinct in voice and behaviour.

Zosteropidae White-eyes

Silvereye Zosterops lateralis (H)

Just a few heard along Portland Road in the forest, this is about as far north as they go in Queensland.

Sturnidae Starlings and Mynas

Metallic Starling Aplonis metallica

Common in the rainforest with a large colonial nest colony seen

Dicaeidae Flowerpeckers

* Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*

Our only flowerpecker was seen and heard several times in the forest areas.

Nectariniidae Sunbirds

Olive-backed Sunbird Nectarinia jugularis frenatus

Seen at Portland Roads and in the forest near the start of the birding.

Estrildidae Finches and Mannikins

Red-browed Finch Neochmia temporalis (H)

Heard along Portland Road in grass on the forest edges.

Mammals

Macropodidae Kangaroos

Agile Wallaby Macropus agilis

A couple near the triangle on two days.

Reptiles

Yellow-spotted Monitor (Goanna) Varanus panoptes

One at Chilli Beach showed very nicely.

Frilled Lizard Chlamydosaurus kingii

One near Lockhart River dump, I seldom see them up here and they have become much scarcer in FNQ.

Otherwise just a few skinks, which remain unidentified.

Amphibians

Cane toads were very common, and there were some lovely White-lipped green tree frogs at Iron Range cabins.

Butterflies

New Guinea Birdwing, Ulysses Swallowtail, Fuscous Swallowtail, Clearwing Swallowtail, Green-spotted Triangle, Blue Tiger, Hamadryad, Bordered Rustic, Evening Brown, Common Crow, Black-eyed Plane, Orange Plane, Pied Ringlet, Orange Ringlet, Lemon Migrant, Varied Eggfly, Blue-banded Eggfly, Scalloped Grass-yellow, Shining Oak-blue, Silky Jewel at Tozer's Gap, Pale Cerulean at Rainforest Camp, these latter two lifers for Phil.

Phasmid sp. One slender 9 cm green one at Old Mission Road, no-one on i-Naturalist has been able to name it as yet.

Plants

Cape York Pitcher-plant Nepenthes mirabilis

Some fine flowering plant out on the white sand in the heath at Tozer's Gap. We also saw some fine very small sundews *Drosera* sp. by the lookout.

Phil Gregory Jan 2022 info@s2travel.com.au www.birder.travel