

IRON RANGE Fly-in Fly-out January 6-10 2020 Led by Phil Gregory



This was a *Sicklebill Safaris* green season Cape York trip, targeting the Far North Queensland endemics and other northern specials. The weather was kind to us, being hot and humid but with relatively little rain, and that mostly at night, though the weekend proved to be very wet after we had gone. 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 last season by a cyclone, and thousands of trees were blown down, but much remains and the damage was not as bad as I had feared and opened it up in various spots making viewing potentially easier. The main Portland Road was also in excellent condition, though many forest trails were still impassable. We primarily birded from the road or large side tracks, though I was surprised at how little there was to see at both Chilli Beach and the sewage ponds. Surprising absentees were Peaceful Dove, Willie-wagtail, Magpie-lark, Rainbow Lorikeet and Brown Honeyeater, which really do seem to be absent here. Overall it was a fun trip with some great sightings and even better we did see all the endemics, though being denied alcohol was a shock for some as this is a strict dry area! Thanks to John for some good spotting and historical background, and to everyone for their good, humour and enthusiasm.

Participants: 4



Itinerary

Day 1 Monday January 6th

Skytrans to Lockhart River, depart 1130, arriving 1300.

Mango Farm dam and Lockhart River settlement, then a recce of the Portland Road forest area before heading to Portland Roads itself, where we had dinner at the *Out of the Blue* café before returning to Iron Range Cabins by 2100.

Day 2 Tuesday Jan 7th

Rainforest Camp ground and Cook's Hut area, then Mango Farm Dam; Lockhart River beach then Tozer's Gap and rainforest nearby

Day 3 Wednesday Jan 8th

Portland Road rainforest areas and Gordon Creek; pm Chilli Beach 1615-1715, then spotlighting along Portland Road in bright moonlight 2000-2100

Day 4 Thursday Jan 9th

Portland Road Rainforest Camp and then Gordon Creek, some rain later. Lockhart River Sewage ponds 1100-1130 and Mango Farm dam; pm Rainforest camp 1600-1645 then roadside. Spotlighting same area 2000-2130.

Day 5 Friday Jan 10th

Portland Road triangle area 0700-0800, rain later. Depart Skytrans to Cairns at 1130.

SPECIES LIST

Endemics in bold, red denotes a Cape York special in Australia

* denotes a near-endemic

* Southern Cassowary *Casuarius casuarius*

A large pile of droppings was by the Ranger Station, and an old one in the forest, it is very seldom seen here though obviously present.

* Radjah Shelduck *Tadorna radjah*

2 at Mango Farm dam and one at the sewage ponds

* Green Pygmy-Goose *Nettapus pulchellus*

2 at the Mango Farm dam on Jan 9.

Pacific Black Duck *Anas rubripes*

A few seen at Mango Farm dam and at the sewage ponds.

Australian Brush-turkey *Alectura lathami purpureicollis*

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

* Orange-footed Scrubfowl *Megapodius freycinet*

A few were seen in the rainforest areas.

Australian Little Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*

Two at the Mango Farm dam.

Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca*

2 at the Mango farm dam on Jan 9.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

About 30 at Mango Farm Dam.

Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia*

11 at the Mango Farm dam, some very stained and grubby looking.

Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*

One immature flying over Lockhart River township, then seen in flight at the Mango Farm dam later.

Australasian Darter *Anhinga novaehollandiae*

One at the Mango Farm dam on Jan 9.

Brown Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia phasianella*

A few sightings in the forest areas.

Pacific Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps (indica) longirostris*

Heard occasionally but only John saw one, they seem to be remarkably unobtrusive at this time of the year.

* Bar-shouldered Dove *G. humeralis*

Widespread in the eucalypt and open country areas, one of the commonest birds. Oddly, once again no sign of Peaceful Dove here.

* Wompoo Fruit-Dove *Megaloprepia magnificus*

A few sightings from the rainforest areas, but hardly calling at all.

* Superb Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus superbus*

Barely calling, though Phil saw a female at Gordon Creek.

* Rose-crowned Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus regina (H)*

Heard in the mangroves at Portland Roads.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa*

Small flocks flying over in the coastal areas, but not in the rainforest.

Nankeen Night Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus*

One seen in a roadside puddle on Jan 9 when we were heading out spotlighting.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

2 at the Mango Farm dam and a couple nearby, nice to see them in the orange-headed breeding plumage.

Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*

Seen at Chilli Beach and Lockhart R beach, both dark phase birds.

Great Egret *Egretta alba modesta*

2 at the Mango Farm dam on Jan 9.

Intermediate (Plumed) Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia plumifera*

Just one seen on Jan 9, split by BirdLife as Plumed Egret.

Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus*

One seen perched up as we waited at the airport, and heard once previously.

Little (Gould's) Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx minutillus russatus*

A nice view of 3 of the race *russatus* Gould's Bronze-Cuckoo at Cook's Hut camp

Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo *Cacomantis castaneiventris*

2 or 3 heard daily in the rainforest, and I called one in nicely on Jan 9 at Cook's Hut.

* **Marbled Frogmouth** *Podargus ocellatus marmoratus*

None on Jan 7, but going slightly further on Jan 8 John and I got fine views of one bird, and heard another 5, including a pair duetting, which I taped and have posted on xenocanto. This race is endemic to Cape York.

Papuan Frogmouth *Podargus papuensis*

Great views of one by the road near the Green Hoos on Jan 8, looking just huge in flight.

Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus*

One in the road as we came back from Portland Roads, and one by the airstrip as we turned into the cabins, also heard calling at Portland Roads proper.

Australian Swiftlet *Collocalia terraereginae*

Small numbers daily, sometimes with Pacific Swifts.

Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*

About 200 over Iron Range Cabins in unsettled conditions on Jan 7, with small numbers on other days

Grey Goshawk *Accipiter novaehollandiae*

John and Malcolm saw one go over at Rainforest Camp.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Malcolm and John saw a single, the only record.

Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*

Daily in small numbers

White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

Two adults and an immature at Mango Farm dam on Jan 9.

* **Bush Stone-curlew** *Burhinus grallarius*

One at night near Iron Range cabins, I suspect feral dogs have a bad impact on them.

Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*
Two at Lockhart River Beach.

Masked Lapwing *Vanellus novaehollandiae miles*
A few around Iron Range cabins.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*
Seen daily at the airstrip and by the cabins, with 9 on the day we left Jan 10 and half a dozen previously.

Greater Sand-Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*
2 at Lockhart R beach and one at Chilli Beach.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Heteroscelus brevipes*
A single at Chilli Beach

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*
5 at Chilli Beach.

Australian (Gull-billed) Tern *Gelochelidon (nilotica) macrotarsa*
One at Lockhart River and one at Chilli Beach, this is now split from the widespread Gull-billed Tern.

Little Tern *Sternula albipennis*
One at Chilli Beach and one at Lockhart R beach.

* **Palm Cockatoo** *Probosciger aterrimus macgillivrayi*
Great views of one perched up in Lockhart River township Jan 7, 3 at Chilli Beach and odd singles seen in flight, with a distant one seen from the airport as we were waiting to depart.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*
Seen most days in small numbers, even in the rainforest.

* **Red-cheeked Parrot** *Geoffroyus geoffroyus*
Amazingly scarce, we saw just two individuals, one in flight by the Ranger Station, and one over Old Coen Road.

* **Eclectus Parrot** *Eclectus roratus*
Quite vocal but strangely wary, we saw them in flight daily, but the best was a perched female on Jan 9, in beautiful morning light.

* **Double-eyed Fig-Parrot** *Cyclopsitta diopthalma marshalli*

One heard on Jan 8, then a male and 2 females at the start of the Old Coen Road Jan 9; 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.

Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher *Tanysiptera sylvia*

Heard daily in the rainforest and one or 2 seen each day flying across the road.

* **Blue-winged Kookaburra** *Dacelo leachii*

Vocal and seen near Iron Range Cabins, also one was being mobbed by White-throated honeyeaters near Lockhart River.

* **Forest Kingfisher** *Todiramphus macleayi*

Several perched on wires near Iron Range Cabins.

Torresian (Collared) Kingfisher *T. (chloris) sordidus (H)*

One heard at Portland Roads mangroves was the only one of the trip.

* **Yellow-billed Kingfisher** *Syma torotoro*

One seen at Rainforest Camp, and small numbers heard every day.

Noisy Pitta *Pitta versicolor*

Heard daily in small numbers, and one seen in scrub at Portland Roads.

* **Papuan Pitta** *Erythropitta papuana*

Our final foray on departure day was a special effort to try and see one, as we had heard them each day at several sites but largely inaccessible due to the trees felled by the cyclone. Happily I got one calling fairly near the road about a km along, and by going in a short way John and I saw it very well, with brief looks later for others. Formerly known as Red-bellied Pitta but now split, and a presumed migrant to New Guinea, only here over the wet season.

* **Black-eared Catbird** *Ailuroedus melanotis joanae*

I reckon this to be the hardest of all the Iron Range specials, 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. Lloyd Nielsen left us a note about a place where they had seen one, and we heard it there, but it took until next day and much nearer the start of the forest before we heard two more and managed to see one. Lloyd had only seen it once in all his visits here, and I had only heard it, so a very pleasing find.

* **Fawn-breasted Bowerbird** *Chlamydera cerviniventris*

One seen briefly at Iron Range cabins, it is odd how this bird is so elusive here as so much suitable habitat exists.

Red-backed Fairywren *Malurus melanocephalus*

John saw this near Iron Range Cabins.

Varied Honeyeater *Gavicalis versicolor*

One at the Portland Roads mangroves

* **Graceful Honeyeater** *Microptilotis gracilis gracilis*

One of the commonest honeyeaters, vocal and frequent in the rainforest and also at Mango Farm dam. This is the northern nominate subspecies as in PNG, but birds from Cooktown south which were formerly Graceful Honeyeater are now split as Cryptic Honeyeater, so the Cairns, Cassowary House and coastal birds belong to this new species.

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.

Tawny-breasted Honeyeater *Xanthotis flaviventer filiger*

Surprisingly common and vocal in the forests, we saw it well each day.

White-streaked Honeyeater *Trichodere cockerelli*

Calling out at Tozer's Gap, and we eventually got good views of a couple in the swampy heath formation. This is a Cape York endemic and in a monotypic genus.

Green-backed Honeyeater *Glycichaera fallax*

John saw one briefly along the start of Old Coen Road, so we made a special effort that afternoon Jan 9 and found a responsive bird, tape cut now on xenocanto. 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.

* **White-throated Honeyeater** *Melithreptus albogularis*

Heard at Mango Farm dam and seen mobbing a Blue-winged Kookaburra nearby.

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!

* Brown-backed Honeyeater *Ramsayornis modestus*
2 at the Mango Farm dam.

Dusky Honeyeater *Myzomela obscura*
Quite common in the forest.

* **Tropical Scrubwren** *Sericornis beccarii*

This proved elusive, we heard it along the main Portland Roads track and John got a brief view Jan 7, then seen briefly at Gordon Creek next day; finally seen well on Jan 10 near the Papuan Pitta site, but it does seem quite localised and unexpectedly unresponsive. Note that the CD of Oz bird calls has Mangrove Gerygone labelled as this species, and their Large-billed Scrubwren cut is actually this species

Large-billed Gerygone *Gerygone magnirostris*
Nice views of 2 at Portland Roads mangroves.

* Fairy Gerygone *Gerygone palpebrosa personata*
Seen daily, this is the black-throated *personata* race.

* Yellow-breasted Boatbill *Machaerirhynchus flaviventer*
Common by voice but very unresponsive.

* Black Butcherbird *Cracticus quoyi jardini*
Heard daily and seen a couple of times in the rainforest.

White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*
Frequent around the airport and cabins, also at Lockhart River in small numbers

White-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina papuensis*
One near Iron Range Cabins was the only record

Varied Triller *Lalage leucomela*
Widespread in small numbers.

* Grey-headed (Grey) Whistler *Pachycephala simplex peninsulae*
Seen well at Portland Road forest on several days

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 with 2 in Australia.

- * Grey Shrike-thrush *C. harmonica* (H)
John saw one near Iron Range Cabins.

Australasian Figbird *Sphecothebes viridis*
The yellow race was present in small numbers.

- * Green (Yellow) Oriole *Oriolus flavocinctus*
Very common and noisy in the rainforest areas, John likened the clonking call to a stone skipping on ice, a striking but somehow singularly inappropriate comparison here!

Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus*
Small numbers in the various woodlands.

Black-winged Monarch *Monarcha frater canescens*

This Cape York wet season special showed well, with singles on Jan 7 and 8 and 2 on Jan 10. 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 and there seem to be plumage intergrades near Cooktown. During the writing of my New Guinea Field Guide, I realised there seem to be no records of this form *canescens* from that island despite all the 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, maybe a Cape York race of Black-faced or just possibly an endemic in its own right.

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 and a potential split once the New Guinea taxa are sorted out.

White-eared Monarch *Carterornis leucotis*

A pleasing find was this elusive canopy bird that John saw the first afternoon and which proved to be the source of a call series I could not recognise, quite unlike the birds at Cassowary House. I posted a cut to xenocanto. Happily we saw it again on Jan 9 and heard it daily, it is uncommon and difficult to locate at the tops of the trees.

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*
A couple seen near Iron Range cabins

* Shining Flycatcher *Myiagra alecto*

Heard in the forest and Julianne got a nice photo of a male

* **Trumpet Manucode** *Phonygammus keraudreni gouldii*

This one is always a challenge, and was not calling very much, but we found two fine birds at Gordon Creek, and had 3 more in the same general area, with video of one calling posted to eBird. 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*

Terrific views of both sexes and immatures, with two males seen nicely, a blotchy subadult at Rainforest camp, and sundry female-plumaged birds. They were very vocal, far more so than Victoria's Riflebird, and surprisingly common even though no longer displaying. Another potential split too as the voice is different to the New Guinea birds, and more resembles the western Magnificent Riflebird than the geographically much closer Growling Riflebird.

Lemon-bellied Flyrobin *Microeca flavigaster*

John and Malcolm saw one near Iron Range Cabins, and I heard it nearby.

Yellow-legged Flyrobin *Microeca griseocephala*

One of the hardest Cape York specials, John got us onto one along Portland Road on Jan 7. It is easily missed, as it is so unobtrusive in the mid-levels

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 due to be split into several species.

Northern Scrub-Robin *Drymodes superciliaris*

Another elusive and very local Cape York endemic special, it was calling well and we got great views of 2 birds on Jan 7, with more views on Jan 9. Now split from Papuan Scrub-Robin as quite distinct in voice and behaviour.

Tree Martin *Petrochelidon nigricans*

One flying around at the airport as we were leaving, the final addition to the trip.

Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*
Widespread in the woodlands.

Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica*
Common in the rainforest with large colonial nest colony seen

* Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*
Our only flowerpecker gave good views several times in the forest areas.

Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis frenatus*
Common and vocal around the cabins

Red-browed Finch *Neochmia temporalis*
About 30 along the road to Tozer's Gap and a couple in the forest.

Mammals

Agile Wallaby *Macropus agilis*.
A few around the Chilli Beach turning and near Iron Range Cabins.

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