Sicklebill Safaris

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

4th – 8th January 2021



Palm Cockatoo (Probosciger aterrimus) © guide Phil Gregory

CLIENTS: OG, MP, KW **GUIDE:** Phil Gregory

This was the first of our 2021 *Sicklebill Safaris/Cassowary Tours* green season Cape York trips, targeting the Far North Queensland and Cape York endemics plus other northern specials. The covid situation made planning highly uncertain, and a nearby cyclone caused some anxiety about flights, but happily it all came together very nicely. The weather was kind, being hot and humid but 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 a cyclone, and thousands of trees were blown down, but much remains and regrowth is well under way, making viewing a tad more challenging than last year. The main Portland Road was also in good 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 Mango Farm Dam and the sewage ponds.

Some memorable sightings of a fun trip were the male **Magnificent Riflebird** perched for half an hour and watched drinking, preening and regurgitating figs, the **Palm Cockatoos** drinking from the puddle were great, and both the pittas showed very well, with a determined effort finally getting fantastic views of **Noisy Pitta** in a very dense spiny thicket on the last morning. **Black-eared Catbird** actually showed several times too, and **Marbled Frogmouth** was also very obliging, whilst we had a couple of good encounters with **Papuan**. Two unexpected visitors were a **Little Curlew** and **Eastern Yellow Wagtail** at the Lockhart River Airstrip, and other exciting Iron Range birds were **White-browed Robin, Peregrine** and **Spotted Whistling Ducks**. No thanks whatsoever to Lovely Fairywren, which proved amazingly elusive, but did get us a couple of additional species whilst on that guest. I hope Oakley and Karen got it at Machan's next day?

Surprising absentees were **Eastern Koel, Willie-wagtail, Magpie-lark** and **Brown Honeyeater,** which really do seem to be absent here, and there were no **Rainbow Bee-eaters** and very few herons. 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 everyone for their good spotting, good humour and enthusiasm, and to Sue and Rowan for setting it all up. Hannah at *Iron Range Cabins* was a helpful host, and thanks to the folks at the *Green Hoos* for opening their café for us so we could have a morning coffee on the last day.

Itinerary

Day 1 Monday January 4th

Skytrans to Lockhart River, depart Cairns 1130, arriving 1300.

Mango Farm dam and Lockhart River settlement, then a recce of the Portland Road forest area

Day 2 Tuesday Jan 5th

Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp ground and Cook's Hut area; Chilli Beach 1615-1715, before heading to Portland Roads via Packer Creek and the waste dump area. We had a very good dinner courtesy of Sheree at the *Out of the Blue* café then spotlighting near Rainforest Campground before returning to *Iron Range Cabins* by 2230.

Dav 3 Wednesdav Jan 6th

Portland Road rainforest areas and Gordon Creek; pm 2000-2100 then Tozer's Gap and Claudie River rainforest

Dav 4 Thursdav Jan 7th

Lockhart River beach, Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp and then Cook's Hut; pm sewage ponds, beach then mango farm dam area.

Day 5 Friday Jan 8th

0630-0800 Lockhart River sewage ponds and beach, roadside at Old Mission then Portland Road triangle area, catbird site and Cook's Hut. Depart Skytrans to Cairns via Aurukun at 1600.



Huge termite Mound © MP

Noisy Pitta © MP

Whistling Kite immature © PG

SPECIES LIST

Australian endemics in bold, Bold red denotes a Cape York endemic * Red denotes New Guinea special.

* denotes a near-endemic

Anatidae

* Spotted Whistling Duck Dendrocygna guttata

5 at the sewage ponds on our last morning gave very good flight views, we had heard and glimpsed what was presumably them the day before but they vanished!

Radjah Shelduck Tadorna radjah

2 at the sewage ponds

Green Pygmy-Goose Nettapus pulchellus

2 at the Mango Farm dam.

Megapodiidae

Megapodes

Ducks

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 birds.

Orange-footed Scrubfowl Megapodius freycinet

A few were seen in the rainforest areas.

Columbidae

Pigeons and Doves

Brown Cuckoo-Dove Macropygia phasianella

Just two sightings in the forest areas.

Pacific Emerald Dove Chalcophaps (indica) longirostris

Heard daily, and luckily a fine pair in the road on Jan 7th, they seem to be remarkably unobtrusive at this time of the year.

Peaceful Dove Geopelia placida

Seem most days but only one's and two's, seems oddly scarce up 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

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

Superb Fruit Dove Ptilinopus superbus

Calling each day and one or two seen or glimpsed most days.

* Rose-crowned Fruit Dove Ptilinopus regina

Just one seen in riparian at Packer Creek, and heard at Chilli Beach.

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon Ducula spilorrhoa

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

Podargidae

Frogmouths

* Marbled Frogmouth Podargus ocellatus marmoratus

We did well en route back from Portland Roads on Jan 4th, getting two calling distantly, then another two much closer. Oakley, Mark and I went in after one and got a great view of it perched quite low down, and I managed to persuade Karen to brave the thickets for a second great look. This race is endemic to Cape York.

Papuan Frogmouth Podargus papuensis

Great views of one by the road en route back from Portland Roads on Jan 4th, and a second bird in a paperbark at Mango Farm dam on Jan 7th.

Caprimulgidae

Nightjars

Large-tailed Nightjar Caprimulgus macrurus

A brief view of one by the airstrip at dusk on Jan 5th.

Apodidae

Swifts

Australian Swiftlet Collocalia terraereginae

Very few, seen on 3 days and only as singles.

Pacific Swift Apus pacificus

Oakley saw 5 in unsettled conditions Jan 4th.

White-throated Needletail Hirundapus caudacutus

Oakley saw one on Jan 7th.

Ardeidae

Herons, Bitterns and Egrets

Eastern Reef Egret Egretta sacra

One at Lockhart River beach, a dark phase bird.

Great Egret Egretta alba modesta

Just one at the Mango Farm dam.

Cuculidae

Cuckoos

Pheasant Coucal Centropus phasianinus

Heard and seen most days.

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

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

Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo Cacomantis castaneiventris

2 or 3 heard daily in the rainforest, and seen in flight twice at Rainforest Camp, though the two calling at the Ranger Station on Jan 8th were more obliging and one showed nicely. Recording posted to xeno-canto.

Fregatidae

Frigatebirds

Lesser Frigatebird Fregata ariel

5 + over Chilli Beach and Portland Roads on Jan 4th.

Great Frigatebird Fregata minor

3+ over Chilli Beach and Portland Roads on Jan 4th

Frigatebird sp. Fregata sp.

28 at Chilli Beach and 15 at Portland Roads, still around after the cyclone to the south.

Burhinidae

Stone-curlews

Bush Stone-curlew Burhinus grallarius (H)

Karen heard one at night near Iron Range cabins; I suspect feral dogs have a bad impact on them.

Charadriidae

Plovers

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 17 the most.

Greater Sand-Plover Charadrius leschenaultii

5 at Chilli Beach.

Scolopacidae

Sandpipers and Snipes

Bar-tailed Godwit Limosa Iapponica

One at Chilli Beach on the islets offshore.

Grey-tailed Tattler Heteroscelus brevipes

A single at Chilli Beach.

Laridae Gulls and Terns

Silver Gull Larus novaehollandiae

One at Chilli Beach and 2 at Lockhart R beach.

Brown Noddy Anous stolidus

About 100 over a fish shoal way offshore from Chilli Beach.

Bridled Tern Onychoprion anaethetus

5 at Chilli Beach on the rocks with Crested Terns, quite good views via the scope.

Crested Tern Thalasseus bergii

8 at Chilli Beach, I strongly suspect there was a Lesser Crested amongst them, but it was just too far to discern bill colour properly.

Black-naped Tern Sternula sumatrana

Two way offshore with the noddies at Chilli Beach, and a distant heat-haze one at Lockhart beach Jan 7th.

Little Tern Sternula albipennis

6 at Chilli Beach and 8 at Lockhart R beach.

Common Tern Sterna hirundo

One at Lockhart R beach on Jan 7th was in winter dress.

Accipitridae

Kites, Eagles and Hawks

Grey Goshawk Accipiter novaehollandiae

Seen by the group at Rainforest Camp.

Brown Goshawk (Northern) Accipiter fasciatus didimus

Mark found us a fantastic huge perched immature female at the Portland Roads tip, and she sat for ages for the best views I've had in years! Also one seen near the Ranger Station on several days.

Black Kite Milvus migrans

A couple around the sewage ponds.

Whistling Kite Haliastur sphenurus

Just a single immature at the beach at Lockhart River.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster

Karen got an immature perched up in the forest whilst were were grappling with the Noisy Pitta on Jan 8th.

Cacatuidae

Cockatoos

* Palm Cockatoo Probosciger aterrimus macgillivrayi

Singles seen briefly in flight along Portland road forest, then great views of at least 8 perched up in Lockhart River beach Jan 7th, even coming down to a puddle to drink, which is I think the first time I've seen them on the ground. Then a distant one seen from the cabins by Oakley.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo Cacatua galerita

Seen most days in small numbers, even in the rainforest where 30+ were on the roads feeding on fallen fruit.

Psittacidae Parrots

* 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 5th

* 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.

Alcedinidae Kingfishers

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 near Lockhart River.

Forest Kingfisher Todiramphus macleayii

Several regularly perched on wires near Iron Range Cabins.

Sacred Kingfisher Todiramphus sacra (H)

The group heard one at Old Mission Road but it had stopped calling by the time I got back.

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

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

* Yellow-billed Kingfisher Syma torotoro

Two were seen nicely along Portland Road, and small numbers heard every day.

Pittidae Pittas

Noisv Pitta Pitta versicolor

Heard daily in small numbers, and one was eventually seen really well in a prickly thicket along at Portland Road, after an epic duel trying to lure it into a visible spot.

* Papuan Pitta Erythropitta papuana

We had heard them each day at several sites, but mostly pretty inaccessible due to the trees felled by the cyclone. Happily I got one calling fairly near the road near Rainforest Camp on Jan 5th, and by going in a short way we managed to lure it into a visible spot for some very nice looks. This was formerly known as Red-bellied Pitta but is now split into 12 or 15 species depending on whose taxonomy you adopt. It is a presumed migrant from New Guinea, only here over the wet season and a big lure for birders coming up the Cape.

Ptilonorhynchidae Bowerbirds

* Black-eared Catbird Ailuroedus melanotis ioanae

I reckon this to be the hardest of all the Iron Range specials, a 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. We heard them along Portland Road at two spots, and I was able to call one into flying across on Jan 6th. Next day we did even better, seeing a single bird, then two at the next spot, before finally getting another 2 calling and showing moderately well at Cook's Hut, I actually saw 5 birds today! In 2020 Lloyd Nielsen had only seen it once in all his many visits here, so this was a very pleasing find.

* Fawn-breasted Bowerbird Chlamydera cerviniventris

One seen several times at Iron Range Cabins and nearby, it is odd how this bird is so elusive here as so much suitable habitat exists.

Maluridae Fairywrens

Red-backed Fairywren Malurus melanocephalus

Seen near Iron Range Cabins and Mango Farm dam.

* Graceful Honeveater Microptilotis gracilis gracilis

One of the commonest honeyeaters, vocal and frequent in the rainforest and also at Mango Farm dam. This is now monotypic, occurring here and in S. PNG, but birds from Cooktown south, which were formerly Graceful Honeyeater race imitatrix, 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, this race is endemic to the Cape.

White-streaked Honeyeater Trichodere cockerelli

Calling out at Tozer's Gap on Jan 6th, and we eventually got good views of a couple in the swampy heath formation. Then Oakley found us 5 birds coming in to drink at a creek near Mango Farm dam on Jan 7th, and we had one in the scrub there next day. This is a Cape York endemic and in a monotypic genus.

Green-backed Honeyeater Glycichaera fallax

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 alboqularis

A few at Mango Farm dam.

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!

Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis*

Heard at the waste dump, and singles at the sewage ponds on both visits.

* Brown-backed Honeyeater Ramsayornis modestus

2 along the road to Claudie River, and a few at Mango Farm dam.

Dusky Honeyeater Myzomela obscura

Quite common in the forest.

Acanthizidae

Thornbills and Gerygones

* 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*

Heard at Portland Roads mangroves.

Fairy Gerygone Gerygone palpebrosa personata

Seen daily and with pair at a nest on Jan 8th, this is the black-throated *personata* race. I posted the recording of the anxiety calls by the nest to xeno-canto.

Machaerirhynchidae

Boatbills

Yellow-breasted Boatbill Machaerirhynchus flaviventer

Common by voice and seen several times.

Cracticidae

Butcherbirds

Black Butcherbird Cracticus quoyi jardini

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

Artamidae Woodswallows

White-breasted Woodswallow Artamus leucorhynchus

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

Seen well at Portland Road forest on several days, and very vocal this trip.

Rufous Shrike-thrush Colluricincla megarhyncha goodsoni

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 in Australia.

Grey Shrike-thrush C. harmonica (H)

Seen en route to Mango Farm dam and heard out at Tozer's Gap.

Oriolidae and Figbirds

Australasian Figbird Sphecotheres viridis

The yellow race was present in small numbers.

Green (Yellow) Oriole Oriolus flavocinctus

Very common and noisy in the rainforest areas, and Green oriole is a far more appropriate name then the old one

Dicruridae Drongos

Spangled Drongo Dicrurus bracteatus

Small numbers in the various woodlands.

Monarchidae Monarchs

Black-winged Monarch Monarcha frater canescens

This Cape York wet season special showed well just twice, with singles on Jan 5th and on Jan 8th. 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 Lynx *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, this may be 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. We heard them daily but sightings were few and far between.

White-eared Monarch Carterornis leucotis

A pleasing find on Jan 8th 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. I posted an improved cut of it to xenocanto from this tour.

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 on Jan 4th, and a male at Mango Farm dam on Jan 7th, with a female in the forest on Jan 8th.

Paradisaeidae Birds of Paradise

* Trumpet Manucode Phonygammus keraudreni gouldii

This one is always a challenge, and was not calling very much, but we found one sat up drying out on the very first afternoon and got fine scope views of it calling. Otherwise, one was seen briefly at Claudie River, and it was heard on Jan 8th. 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 a wonderful male at Claudie River late one afternoon, perched for some 30 minutes and watched preening, drinking from a knothole (a seldom reported behaviour for birds of Paradise) and regurgitating small red figs.,, as well as raising the wings in brief display bursts if other birds came nearby. We also saw sundry female-plumaged birds, seen on most days but usually briefly. They were very vocal, far more so than Victoria's Riflebird, and surprisingly common even though no longer displaying. This is 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.

Petroicidae Australasian Robins

Lemon-bellied Flyrobin Microeca flavigaster flavissima

Heard near Iron Range Cabins, and a fine bird seen on Jan 7th at Old Mission Road en route to the dam.

White-browed Robin Poecilodryas superciliosa

Detective work from Oakley on eBird gave us a site for this species at Packer Creek near Portland Roads, and sure enough we found it there almost at once and eventually got quite good views. Then we heard it at the waste dump nearby, before finally finding them in scrub along the road to Mango Farm Dam, where two were calling and one showed nicely. It was nice to add this scarce species to the Iron Range menu.

Yellow-legged Flyrobin Microeca griseoceps

One of the hardest Cape York specials, Oakley got us onto one along Portland Road on Jan 5th. It is easily missed, as it is so unobtrusive in the mid-levels, and this was the only one we saw

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.

Cisticolidae Cisticolas

Golden-headed Cisticola Cisticola exilis

One in display at the grassy bombsite area near the triangle was unexpected.

Zosteropidae White-eyes

Silvereye Zosterops lateralis

Just a few along Portland Road in the forest.

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 gave good views several times in the forest areas.

Nectariniidae Sunbirds

Olive-backed Sunbird Nectarinia jugularis frenatus

A few sightings away from the forest areas

Estrildidae Finches and Mannikins

Red-browed Finch Neochmia temporalis

A maximum of about 30 along Portland Road in grass on the forest edges.

Mammals

Agile Wallaby Macropus agilis.

A couple near Iron Range Cabins.

Northern Brown Bandicoot Isoodon macrourus

One dead in the road near Lockhart River

Spectacled Flying-fox Pteropus conspicillatus

Small numbers seen in the rainforest

Black Flying-fox Pteropus alecto

Great views of one hanging in roadside tree as we came back from Portland Roads, and others seen nearby

Bat. sp.

Bats were few and far between but we did see a small/medium one at Iron Range Cabins

Reptiles

Green tree python Morelia viridis

Thanks to Matt and his group from Faunagraphic, who showed us one they had found near Rainforest Camp, as we were working on Marbled Frogmouth. It only occurs on Cape York in Australia, but is widespread in New Guinea.

Canopy Monitor Varanus keithhomei

We saw one well at Rainforest Camp, also known as Canopy Goanna, Keith Home's Monitor, Blue-nosed Tree Monitor or Nesbit River Monitor. It is endemic to the Iron and McIlwraith Ranges of the Cape York Peninsula.

<u>Amphibians</u>

Cane toads were very common, and there was a Green tree-frog at Iron Range cabins

These were quite prominent tis trip and Oakley and I grappled with the identification issues, usually without much successwe failed utterly with the blues and the planes proved problematic! The following were identified, often with photos, and Karen may have few to add:

New Guinea Birdwing, Ulysses Swallowtail, Fuscous Swallowtail, Green-spotted Triangle, White-tipped Swift, Red Lacewing, Lurcher sp. (apparently there is an endemic Iron Range species as well as the common one!), Eichorn's Crow, Blackbanded Plane, Hamadryad, Cedar Bush-brown, Blue-banded Eggfly, Broad-margined Grass-yellow.

Plants

Cape York Pitcher-plant Nepenthes rowaniae

I was very pleased to stumble across a small colony of this Cape York endemic on wet white sand in the heath at Tozer's Gap, as we came back out from the White-streaked Honeyeaters. It doesn't seem to have a common name as it was often lumped in with the widespread Asian species Nepenthes mirabilis, but it seems somewhat distinct and I have christened it here!

Phil Gregory Jan 2021 info@s2travel.com.au

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