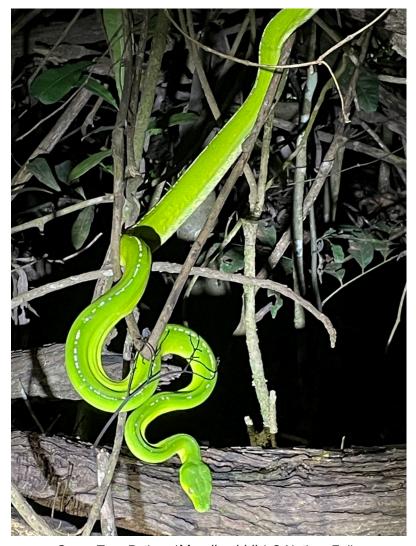
Sicklebill Safaris& Bellbird Tours

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TRIP REPORT IRON RANGE FIFO 2 (Fly In – Fly Out)

14th – 20th January 2021



Green Tree Python (Morelia viridis) © Nathan Falla

CLIENTS: NF, AG and DS

GUIDE: Phil Gregory

This was the second of our 2021 *Sicklebill Safaris / Cassowary Tours* green season Cape York trips this time run in conjunction with Bellbird Tours, targeting the Far North Queensland and Cape York endemics plus other northern specials. The covid situation made planning highly uncertain, and a cyclone to the

south caused a 2-day delay in getting out, but happily this was quite serendipitous in a way and we got some great extra sightings because of it. The weather was again relatively kind here, being hot and humid but with just one heavy (61mm) lunchtime downpour that flooded the drainage ditch alongside the cabins. *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, with visits to the Mango Farm Dam and the sewage ponds on occasion,

Some memorable sightings of a fun trip were the male **Magnificent Riflebird**, the male **Palm Cockatoo** that flew into a large *Melaleuca* and then began calling and drumming with a stick was just incredible, and the Papuan Pitta showed very well, especially on the second effort. **Black-eared Catbird** actually showed too, and **Marbled Frogmouth** was also very obliging, whilst we also had a good encounter with **Papuan Frogmouth**. **Spotted Whistling Ducks** had increased to 45; a very high count and we saw them on a couple of visits.

Surprising absentees were **Eastern Koel**, **Willie-wagtail** and **Magpie-lark**, which really do seem to be absent here, and there were no **Dollarbirds** and very few herons. Overall it was a fun trip with some great sightings and even better we saw all the endemics, though being denied alcohol was a shock for some as this is a strict dry area! Thanks to everyone for their excellent spotting, good humour and enthusiasm, and to Sue and Rowan for setting it all up. Hannah at *Iron Range Cabins* was a helpful host.







Palm Cockatoo © Sicklebill



Black-winged Monarch © Sicklebill

<u>Itinerary</u>

Day 1 Thursday January 14th

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

Mango Farm dam and Lockhart River settlement, then airstrip area.

Day 2 Friday Jan 15th

Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp, Cook's Hut area and Gordon Creek; pm Claudie River and Tozer's Gap, Iron Range Cabins at dusk.

Day 3 Saturday Jan 16th

Portland Road rainforest areas and Gordon Creek; Very heavy rain 61 mm at lunchtime, and from 0930-1700 the area got 213 mm. PM Mango Farm Dam and Claudie River road.

Day 4 Sunday Jan 17th

Lockhart River beach, Portland Road forest, Rainforest Camp and then Cook's Hut; Chilli Beach 1615-1715, before heading to Portland Roads via Packer Creek. 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 2100.

Day 5 Monday Jan 18th

Quintell Beach/ Lockhart sewage ponds/ Ranger Station, over cast and very humid, Portland Road forest until 1945

Day 6 Tuesday Jan 19th

Mango Farm Dam 0645-0745, Rainforest camp / Gordon Creek; pm Mango Farm dam 1615-1700 then Quintell Beach and airstrip

Day 7 Wednesday Jan 20th

0630-0800 Lockhart River sewage ponds and beach, and Cook's Hut. Depart Skytrans to Cairns via Aurukun at 1045.

SPECIES LIST

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

* denotes a near-endemic

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 birds.

Orange-footed Scrubfowl Megapodius freycinet

A few were seen in the rainforest areas.

Anatidae

Ducks

* Spotted Whistling Duck Dendrocygna guttata

45 at the sewage ponds on our first and last mornings were a very good count, giving very good flight views, and I posted a sound cut of them in flight to xeno-canto.

Radjah Shelduck Tadorna radjah

2 at the sewage ponds

Green Pygmy-Goose Nettapus pulchellus

2 at the Mango Farm dam.

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 seen on the road occasionally, 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 they were 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 nicely in riparian at Packer Creek, and heard at Portland Roads.

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 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 well along Portland Road.

Podargidae Frogmouths

* Marbled Frogmouth Podargus ocellatus marmoratus

We did well en route back from Portland Roads on Jan 17th, getting two calling distantly, then another two much closer. We went in after one and got a great view of it perched quite low down, in the same area as the previous trip. 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 17th, with Nath seeing another earlier.

Caprimulgidae Nightjars

Large-tailed Nightjar Caprimulgus macrurus

One by the airstrip at dusk on Jan 14th and Phil saw one as we came out of Portland Roads

Apodidae Swifts

Australian Swiftlet Collocalia terraereginae

Very few, 4 on Jan 15th, then seen by some on 3 more days.

Pacific Swift Apus pacificus

25 in unsettled conditions Jan 16th, 30 on Jan 18th and 20 on Jan 20th including one almost tailless moulting bird that can easily be mistaken for House Swift.....

White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*

One on Jan 16th, and one seen by Nath on Jan 18th.

Burhinidae Stone-curlews

Bush Stone-curlew Burhinus *grallarius* (H)

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

Haematopodidae

Oystercatchers

Pied Oystercatcher Haematopus *longirostris* One at Quintell Beach on Jan 18th

Charadriidae Plovers

Masked Lapwing Vanellus novaehollandiae miles

A few around Iron Range cabins. Lockhart River town and up at Portland Roads.

Pacific Golden Plover Pluvialis fulva

Seen daily at the airstrip and by the cabins, with 17 the most.

Greater Sand-Plover Charadrius leschenaultii

2 at Quintell Beach and 7 at Chilli Beach.

Scolopacidae

Sandpipers and Snipes

Common Sandpiper

3 at the Sewage ponds each visit and 1 at Quintell Beach at Lockhart River.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

One seen at Portland Roads.

Laridae Gulls and Terns

Lesser Crested Tern Thalasseus bengalensis

3 scoped on the islet offshore at Chilli Beach, the orange bill just about discernable.

Crested Tern Thalasseus bergii

2 scoped on the islet offshore at Chilli Beach.

Black-naped Tern Sternula sumatrana

4 offshore on the rocky islet at Chilli Beach.

Little Tern Sternula albipennis

2 at Chilli Beach, and 2 at Lockhart R Quintell beach on each visit.

Fregatidae

Frigatebirds

Great Frigatebird Fregata minor

6 over Chilli Beach on Jan 17th, still around after the cyclone to the south.

Frigatebird sp. *Fregata* sp.

One over Lockhart Beach on Jan 18th,

Ardeidae

Herons, Bitterns and Egrets

Great-billed Heron Ardea sumatrana

One flying N near the sewage ponds on Jan 18th was an unexpected sight, my first record here.

Eastern Reef Egret Egretta sacra

One a dark phase bird seen at Quintell beach, Lockhart River on Jan 18th.

Intermediate (Plumed) Egret Egretta intermedia

One seen at the airstrip on Jan 16th and 17th.

Great Egret Egretta alba modesta

One flying over the airstrip on Jan 16th.

Accipitridae

Kites, Eagles and Hawks

Pacific Baza Aviceda subcristata

One at Rainforest Camp Jan 16th

Grey Goshawk Accipiter novaehollandiae

One seen briefly at Rainforest Camp Jan 17th.

Brown Goshawk (Northern) Accipiter fasciatus didimus

One seen on several days near the Ranger Station, near a nest in a tall tree there.

Whistling Kite Haliastur sphenurus

Just a single immature at the beach at Lockhart River.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster

One seen flying-by mobbed by a drongo as we ate dinner at Portland Roads.

Cockatoos

Cacatuidae

* Palm Cockatoo Probosciger aterrimus macgillivrayi

Seen almost every day, with 2 or 3 birds, the most memorable being the one at Mango Farm Dam on Jan 19th which flew into a tall paperbark and began calling to a more distant bird, then plucked a stick, trimmed it to size and began drumming with it for about 25 seconds. I was able to get recording, which I have posted, to xeno-canto; it was a fantastic sighting and something I actually never expected to see as I don't hang about near their nests.

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

A good trip for them this time, with 20 around at Old Coen Road Jan 15th and up to 10 each day after.

* Eclectus Parrot Eclectus roratus

Quite vocal but strangely wary, we saw them in flight daily, and had good looks at a female at a nest hole with attendant males nearby

* Double-eyed Fig-Parrot Cyclopsitta diopthalma marshalli

A couple of birds seen most days with 7 the maximum, then a male and female at a fruiting fig by Gordon Creek that showed very well, a great find by Adrian; 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 where they called loudly at dawn each day.

Forest Kingfisher Todiramphus macleayii

Several regularly perched on wires near Iron Range Cabins.

Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sacra* (H)

One heard distantly at Mango Farm Dam.

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

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

Azure Kingfisher Ceyx azurea

Seen at Mango Farm dam

Little Kingfisher Ceyx pusillus

A nice view early one morning at Mango Farm Dam Jan 19th, thanks to another birdo for the info.

Pittidae Pittas

Noisy Pitta Pitta versicolor

Heard daily in small numbers, but we did not really try for them this trip.

* Papuan Pitta Erythropitta papuana

We had heard them on two days 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 15th, and by going in a short way we managed to lure it into a visible spot for some nice look. We then got it superbly on Jan 19th at the same spot, a bonus from the delay in the flights. 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 joanae

We heard them along Portland Road at two spots on two dates, and I was able to call one into flying across on Jan 15th, I reckon this to be the hardest of all the Iron Range specials, a Black Diamond bird to borrow a ski 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. In 2020 well known local birder 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 calling at the sewage ponds Jan 14th, and Adrian and Nath saw 5 sheltering in a shady tree by the airstrip in the heat of the day on Jan 15th. 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.

Lovely Fairywren Malurus amabilis

A fine male out near Rainforest Camp, found initially by David then seen later some way down the road, they seem scarce here and this was the only sighting.

Meliphagidae Honeyeaters

Dusky Honeyeater Myzomela obscura

Quite common in the forest in small numbers.

Green-backed Honeyeater Glycichaera fallax

Two birds seen well on Jan 16th and Jan 18th, 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.

Banded Honeyeater Cissomela pectoralis

Chatting to some visiting birders we learned they had seen an immature at Mango Farm Dam, and sure enough next day Jan 20th we eventually got a good view of it, a very unexpected species here and my first local record.

Brown Honeyeater Lichmera indistincta

One seen out in the heath en route to Chilli Beach.

White-streaked Honeyeater Trichodere cockerelli

Calling out at Tozer's Gap on Jan 15th, and we got good views of a couple in the swampy heath formation. This is a Cape York endemic and in a monotypic genus.

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.

Little Friarbird Philemon citreogularis

A single at the sewage ponds.

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!

White-throated Honeyeater *Melithreptus albogularis*

A few at Mango Farm dam.

* Brown-backed Honeyeater *Ramsayornis modestus*Quite frequent at Mango Farm dam.

Yellow Honeyeater Stomiopera flavus

One calling well at Iron Range cabins on two dates, sound cut posted to xeno-canto.

* Graceful Honeyeater Microptilotis 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.

Acanthizidae

Thornbills and Gerygones

* Tropical Scrubwren Sericornis beccarii

This proved elusive again, but was seen well on Jan 15th near the Papuan Pitta site and again next day, it does seem quite localised and unexpectedly unresponsive.

Large-billed Gerygone *Gerygone magnirostris*Seen at Portland Roads mangroves.

Fairy Gerygone Gerygone palpebrosa personata

Seen daily, this is the black-throated personata race.

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 daily, the species now being split into 8 species, with 2 in Australia (Arafura in the NT and this one on the E coast).

Grey Shrike-thrush C. harmonica (H)

Heard at Mango Farm dam.

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 of Yellow Oriole, which is preoccupied by a South American species.

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 15th and on Jan 18th. 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 of this elusive canopy bird on several days, 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 xeno-canto from the previous tour.

Frill-necked Monarch Arses lorealis

Seen daily in the rainforest, creeping along trunks and branches like Pied Monarch does but also fluttering more in the foliage. A fine basket tendril fibre nest was in a hanging vine at Gordon Creek on Jan 19th. It is endemic to Cape York Peninsula.

Leaden Flycatcher Myiagra rubecula

A couple seen near Iron Range cabins

Shining Flycatcher Myiagra alecto

Seen at Mango Farm Dam, along Portland Road, and at a nest by the supermarket in Lockhart River

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 calling briefly on Jan 17th Otherwise, one was seen briefly at Claudie River. 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

We saw sundry female-plumaged birds, seen on several days but usually briefly, with a close flyby of a male at Cook's Hut on Jan 19th. They were not very vocal as they are 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*

Seen singing really well at Mango Farm Dam, cut now posted to xeno-canto.

White-browed Robin Poecilodryas superciliosa

The birds at Packer Creek near Portland Roads gave good views, as did one in scrub along the road to Mango Farm Dam, where two were calling. Nice that this scarce species is now on the Iron Range bird list.

Yellow-legged Flyrobin Microeca griseoceps

One of the hardest Cape York specials, we got onto one along Portland Road on Jan 15th. 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 fair views of 2 birds on two dates, they seem to have got harder each trip. Now split from Papuan Scrub-Robin as quite distinct in voice and behaviour.

Cisticolidae

Cisticolas

Golden-headed Cisticola Cisticola exilis

Adrian and Nath saw this near the airstrip in the heat one day.

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.

Spectacled Flying-fox Pteropus conspicillatus

Small numbers seen in the rainforest

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 the reptile wizard/guru from Australian Wildlife Experience who told us how to go about finding them, and sure enough ti worked, with a luminous green one beautifully lit up by Adrian's torch near Rainforest Camp. It only occurs on Cape York in Australia, but is widespread in New Guinea.

<u>Amphibians</u>

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

Butterflies

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

New Guinea Birdwing, Ulysses Swallowtail, Fuscous Swallowtail, Blue Triangle, 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, Black-banded Plane, Yellow-eyed Plane, Hamadryad, Cedar Bush-brown, Blue-banded Eggfly, Bordered Rustic, Broad-margined Grass-yellow, Lemon Migrant.

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