

TRIP REPORT
Wet Tropics & The Cape York
 6th – 10th June 2021



Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*) © guide Phil Gregory

PARTICIPANTS: George G, Matt G

GUIDE: Phil Gregory

Wet Tropics Section – 6th & 7th June 2021 Itinerary

Sunday June 6th

Pick-up in Cairns at 0700 then Centenary Park, followed by Black Mountain Road at Kuranda, Mareeba, Granite Gorge then Lake Barrine before dropping off at Chambers at Lake Eacham. Spotlighting after dinner.

Monday June 7th

Chambers Lodge 0700-0745, then Yungaburra, Curtain Fig and Nerada Tea Estate, followed by Danggaja Nature Refuge at the Gregory home along Old Boonjie Road; next came Hastie's Swamp then a foray to the higher altitude forest at Mt. Hypipamee, finishing at Bromfield Swamp and then a site near Atherton for platypus viewing.

This was a short-notice private trip for George and Matt, aiming to see many of the wildlife highlights of the Wet Tropics area, and we were lucky with the weather throughout.

Starting in Cairns, the **Rufous Owl** was a no-show, but Centenary Park gave a fine pair of **Papuan Frogmouth** at roost along the boardwalk, We then headed up into the rainforest of the Kuranda Range and Phil's former home at *Cassowary House*, with

slight chances of **Cassowary** these days, where it was pretty quiet but a Darter soaring overhead was unexpected, we did pick-up the newly split **Cryptic** and **Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters**, **Eastern Whipbird** eventually showed well and **Forest Kingfisher** posed nicely.

Three **Red-winged parrots** shot over near Mareeba, where we went to see a bower of **Great Bowerbird**, which is an unusual one because two structures are constructed side-by-side and in good condition. They build what is known as an avenue bower of small twigs and sticks, decorated by whitish objects like stones, snail-shells and bones plus some few brighter objects in green, red or blue items. The bird was in attendance too, which was great, and an **Olive-backed Oriole** was singing very well nearby.

Granite Gorge near Mareeba came next, with lovely close encounters with **Mareeba Rock Wallabies**, tame **Squatter Pigeons**, **Pale-headed Rosella**, **Yellow Honeyeater** and a showy male **Scarlet Honeyeater**, **Blue-faced Honeyeater** and **Noisy Friarbird**.

We did lunch in Yungaburra, and then went out to Lake Barrine where a young woman was watching **Chowchillas** along the Rainforest Trail and we managed quite good looks at a skulking pair, as well as a bonus **Musky Rat-Kangaroo**. **Large-billed Scrubwren** and **Golden Whistler** showed well and the lake held a few **Great-crested Grebe**.

That night my son Rowan joined us and we went spotlighting at Lake Eacham, on a dark still and very inactive night, where his keen eyes and ears located a most unexpected **Echidna** in the forest as the highlight. Back at Chambers the **Sugar Gliders** showed beautifully and Matt & George got to see the spectacular **Striped Possum** both nights. They also had an unfortunate encounter with a very persistent **Bush Rat** chewing cables in the roof of their room, and George saw the cat-sized **White-tailed rat** in the grounds!



Shorted-beaked Echidna © RG

Sugar Glider © RG

June 7th Birding around Chambers Lodge, where the forest held **Brown Cuckoo-Dove**, **Spotted Catbird** and both male and female-plumaged **Victoria's Riflebird**. A stop at Yungaburra gave us a false alarm on platypus, with some large initially distant Krefft's River turtles being misleading, thankfully put right later this day! Curtain Fig was spectacular and yielded a fine **Yellow-breasted Boatbill**, and we made a lucky find of a flock of about 36 **Brolgas** and **Sarus Cranes** in a field nearby, the first of the winter and a great chance to see the differences between them (pink legs for **Sarus**, grey for **Brolga**, and more red on the head of **Sarus** and no black dewlap). There was a fine **Lumholtz's Tree-Kangaroo** spotted by Matt near the entrance gate to Nerada Tea Estate, before we went for morning tea at Phil, Sue and Rowan's place at *Danggaja Nature Refuge* on Old Boonjie Road at Topaz. Here the feeders proved very exciting, and we had great looks at **Spotted Catbird**, **Satin Bowerbird** and **Victoria's Riflebird** plus **Macleay's Honeyeater**, **Lewin's Honeyeater** and an unusually confiding male **Eastern Spinebill** which actually sat still for a photo for once! The **Satin Bowerbird** has built a neat avenue bower in the flowerbed right by the veranda, a very odd time of year at start of winter, and complete with blue plastic decorations, some purloined from my grandson's toys as well as our clothesline. 5 **White-headed Pigeons** came in and sat nearby too, the first here for some

months. It was a very pleasing visit here, capped off by seeing the **Red-backed Fairywrens** newly arrived back in the paddocks by the house.

A foray over to Hastie's Swamp and the lovely hide there produced a very high count of about 400 noisy **Plumed Whistling-Ducks**, plus **Hardhead** and a lone **Grey Teal**, also **Coot** and **Australasian Swamphen**. A flowering bush along the main road gave the spectacular showy and uncommon black and white, **White-cheeked Honeyeater**, plus a bonus of **Tawny Grassbird** and **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin** in a grassy paddock nearby.

Our visit to the higher altitude rainforest at Mt Hypipamee gave us the chance to look at the unique double maypole stick bower of **Golden Bowerbird**, not attended at this time of year. A **Bower's Shrike-thrush** gave good views too, another FNQ endemic. We got very lucky however as a fruiting tree nearby along the approach road lured in 5 **Tooth-billed Bowerbirds** and a very fine male **Golden Bowerbird** as well, a tour highlight for sure as both are difficult to find at this time of year. We saw tame **Grey-headed Robins** by the car park and we had looks at the regional restricted range endemic **Atherton Scrubwren**, foraging quite high in the mid-levels before coming back down to the more typical near-ground level. Another local Far North Queensland endemic here was a sweet-singing **Mountain Thornbill**. Bromfield Swamp held no cranes, so we then renewed the mammal theme and had great looks at **Duck-billed Platypus** swimming about in broad daylight near Atherton, still a good place to see this iconic and bizarre creature. This made a nice finale to our short tablelands intro, and ready for a very early morning departure next day for Iron Range.

My thanks to you both for the chance to do the tour, it was fun and we had some terrific sightings in this beautiful region. Thanks also to Sue Gregory of Sicklebill Safaris/Cassowary Tours for setting it up, and to Rowan Gregory for that and his spotlighting expertise. Good birding and have a safe rest of 2021, proving to be another bizarre year after the disasters of 2020. I hope you enjoyed the intro to the wonderful world of wildlife tourism, come again sometime.



Mareeba Rock Wallaby © PG

Scarlett Honeyeater © PG

Squatter Pigeon © PG

Cape York Iron Range Section – 8th, 9th & 10th June 2021 Itinerary

Tuesday June 8th

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

Lockhart River settlement, then a recce of the Portland Road forest area before spotlighting in the forest areas after dinner from 2030-2200.

Wednesday June 9th

Portland Road forest, Rainforest Campground and Gordon Creek area. Pm- Claudie River Road and Tozer's Gap. Spotlighting near Rainforest Campground before returning to the *Green Hoose* by 2200.

Wednesday June 10th

Portland Road rainforest areas around Rainforest Camp and Cook's Hut, then a look at Chilli Beach area. Depart Skytrans to Cairns via Aurukun at 1600.

This was a private *Sicklebill Safaris* winter season Cape York trip, targeting the Far North Queensland and Cape York endemics plus other northern specials as well as wildlife in general. The covid situation still made planning highly uncertain, and mask wearing is mandatory on the flights and at the airports, but happily it all came together very nicely. The weather was kind, being pleasantly cool and sunny with some overcast with little rain, and that mostly at night. *The Green Hoose* duplex was a very nice place to stay albeit with a tortuous bumpy approach track, 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. The main Portland Road was also in fair condition with some potholes, though many forest trails were still impassable. We primarily birded from the road or large side tracks.

Some memorable sightings of a fun trip were the male **Magnificent Riflebird** perched for half an hour and watched calling, preening and even giving a short display, the **Yellow-billed Kingfisher**, **Palm Cockatoos** and **Eclectus parrots**, and the very responsive **Trumpet Manucode**, whilst **Marbled Frogmouth** was also very obliging. Two unexpected visitors were **White-necked Heron** and **Caspian Tern** plus heard only **Shining Bronze Cuckoo** and **Torresian Crow** at the Green Hoose. **Lovely Fairywren** also showed nicely and finding **Papuan Scrub-robin**, **Green-backed Honeyeater** and **Yellow-legged Flyrobin** were very pleasing as these can be very tricky.

Surprising absentees were **Little Bronze-Cuckoo**, **Figbird** and **Spangled Drongo** whilst **Willie-wagtail** really does seem to be absent here, and there were very few hawks and herons and no shorebirds at this time of year. Overall it was a fun trip with some great sightings and even better we did see all the endemics. Thanks to Matt for good spotting, he has the makings of a fine birder, and thanks to George for the astronomical viewings, I got a tick in the shape of the globular cluster Omega Centauri, and it was nice to see the Big Dipper/Plough albeit upside-down! I am relieved George did not expire from his lung douche with fizzy passion fruit cola, not a good idea to drink on the duplex approach track! Our night forays got us the first **pythons** that George and Matt had ever seen, and the various **frogs** plus the delightful **Spotted Cuscus** were great, now if only I can find that darn **bandicoot**! It was an enjoyable good-humoured short trip with great interest shown in general wildlife and the respective habitats and niches. Thanks to Sue and Rowan for setting it all up, whilst Jayne, Lynn and Stu at *Green Hoose* were good hosts and Paul Piva was helpful as ever.



Frill-necked Monarch © PG



Marbled Frogmouth © PG



Flying into Aurukun © PG

SPECIES LIST

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

* denotes a near-endemic

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 couple were seen in the rainforest areas and the cackling call was often heard, even at night.

Brown Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia phasianella*

Just two sightings in the forest areas.

Pacific Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps (indica) longirostris*

Several fine birds in the road, they are as ever remarkably unobtrusive.

Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida*

See once at Iron Range Cabins, it 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*

Hardly calling at all this trip and we saw none.

* Rose-crowned Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus regina*

Just one in riparian at Packer Creek, calling briefly and a fly-by only.

* Marbled Frogmouth *Podargus ocellatus marmoratus*

A fine calling bird was tracked down in the forest, they are very tolerant of the inevitably non-stealthy approach and I was able to find it and bring in the guys to see it. We heard a couple more off in the distance. This race is endemic to Cape York.

Australian Swiftlet *Collocalia terraereginae*

10 at the triangle grassland one day.

Great Egret *Egretta alba modesta*

Just one at the sewage ponds.

Pied Heron *Egretta picata*

One juvenile at the sewage ponds

White-necked Heron *Ardea pacifica*

Matt saw a large dark heron at the triangle which I suspected would be Great-billed, but it flew over later and perched up, proving to be the first White-necked Heron I have seen here.

Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus*

Seen twice near Lockhart River and Iron Range cabins.

Shining Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx lucidus (H)*

One heard at the sewage ponds was unexpected here and I think my first record.

* **Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo** *Cacomantis castaneiventris*

2 or 3 heard daily in the rainforest and one seen nicely by the duplex at the Green Hoose. This is a far north Q special.

Masked Lapwing *Vanellus novaehollandiae miles*

Just two near Iron Range cabins.

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*

2 at Lockhart R beach.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne tschegrava*

One at Lockhart R beach on Jun 8th was my first sighting here.

Straw-necked Ibis *Threskiornis spinicollis*

9 over at the Ranger Station were unexpected and a winter visitor here.

Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus australis*

One in flight near the road triangle scare up here.

Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*

One or two seen daily.

* **Palm Cockatoo** *Probosciger aterrimus macgillivrayi*

One perched up for scope views near the dump, then at least 5 flying over at Lockhart River beach Jun 9th, with one near Iron Range Cabins next day.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*

Seen most days in small numbers, even in the rainforest.

Galah *Eolophus roseicapilla*

Two at Aurukun, and I saw a flock of about 40 from the plane as we took off; I have not seen this at Iron Range. where it seems to be too wet for this dry country species

Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus*

Noisy up at Chillli Beach in flowering gums there.

* **Red-cheeked Parrot** *Geoffroyus geoffroyus*

Scarce, we saw just 3 individuals; one male perched by the Ranger Station, one over Old Coen Road and one near Packer Creek.

* **Eclectus Parrot** *Eclectus roratus*

Quite vocal but wary, we saw them in flight daily, but the best was a perched pair at the Ranger Station on Jun 9th

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

Only heard this trip, 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.

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

Vocal and seen near Iron Range Cabins.

Forest Kingfisher *Todiramphus macleayi*

Several regularly perched on wires near Iron Range Cabins.

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

One called in and seen nicely at the Ranger Station, and small numbers heard every day.

Lovely Fairywren *Malurus*

At least 2 males and 2 females seen at Rainforest Camp, moving quite quickly through and covering a large area. This is a hard bird to find here.

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

One of the commonest honeyeaters, very vocal with its “plik” call albeit hard to see well. This is now monotypic, occurring here and in S. PNG, but birds from Cooktown south, which were formerly Graceful Honeyeater race *imitatrix*, are recently 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 also hard to see well. This race sounds a bit different to the subspecies *mixta* around Cairns/Kuranda too.

* **Brown Honeyeater** *Lichmera indistincta* (H)

I think the very vocal honeyeater singing at dawn by the duplex is this species giving a dawn song, I have uploaded a recording to the xeno-canto website and hope someone can confirm it.

Tawny-breasted Honeyeater *Xanthotis flaviventer filiger*

Fairly common and vocal in the forests, we saw it well a couple of times, this race is endemic to the Cape.

White-streaked Honeyeater *Trichodere cockerelli*

Calling out at Tozer's Gap on Jun 9th, and we eventually got good views of one in the sandy heath formation. This is a Cape York endemic and in a monotypic genus.

Green-backed Honeyeater *Glycichaera fallax*

A good view of one on the first morning, found by the voice, and seen again along the Old Coen Road one afternoon. It is an elusive low-density species that only occurs here on Cape York in Australia, and is by no means easy to find in New Guinea either.

White-throated Honeyeater *Melithreptus albogularis*

Commonly heard out in the savanna and seen flying a couple of times.

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!

Dusky Honeyeater *Myzomela obscura*

Quite common in the forest.

* **Tropical Scrubwren** *Sericornis beccarii*

This again proved elusive, with just a single at Gordon Creek, a Cape York special too.

Fairy Gerygone *Gerygone palpebrosa personata*

Seen daily and one of the most frequent voices, this is the black-throated *personata* race.

Yellow-breasted Boatbill *Machaerirhynchus flaviventer*

Common by voice and seen nicely several times.

Black Butcherbird *Cracticus quoyi jardini*

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

White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus*

3 at Quintell beach were the only ones, and I think only I saw them.

White-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina papuensis*

One seen near the beach almonds at Quintell Beach.

Black-faced-Cuckooshrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*

A couple seen near Iron Range cabins.

Varied Triller *Lalage leucomela*

One or two seen daily.

Grey Whistler *Pachycephala simplex peninsulae*

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

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 in Australia.

Grey Shrike-thrush *C. harmonica* (H)

Heard by the sewage ponds.

Green (Yellow) Oriole *Oriolus flavocinctus*

A nice view of one in the rainforest, but not very vocal at this time. Green Oriole is a far more appropriate name than the old one of Yellow Oriole as it is primarily greenish.

Spectacled Monarch *Symposiachrus trivirgatus albiventris*

Just one at Rainforest camp, 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 on Jan 9th 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 twice in the rainforest, creeping along trunks and branches like Pied Monarch does, this species is endemic to Cape York Peninsula.

Leaden Flycatcher *Myiagra rubecula*

A couple of females seen in the forest.

Shining Flycatcher *Myiagra alecto* (H)

Heard in the riparian forest at Rainforest camp.

Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca*

Two at iron Range cabins- there were none here back in January.

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

This one is always a challenge, and was not calling very much, but we heard two along Claudie River Road and got a very responsive bird to come in repeatedly to a recording, the most reactive I've ever had with this elusive species. 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 heard a male calling and tracked it down deep in the forest at Cook's Hut late on the last morning. Matt spotted it and found an angle that gave terrific front views of a wonderful male. It was perched on a thick horizontal branch in the mid-levels and watched for some 30 minutes, calling every couple of minutes with single or sometimes double reverse wolf-whistle calls, preening and even once raising the wings in a brief display burst by bobbing up and down and spreading the wings up like a

butterfly. Overall they only called sporadically, as they are not displaying at this time, but they are quite frequent throughout the rainforest. A fine Cape York special, and a highlight of the trip.

White-browed Robin *Poecilodryas superciliosa*

Three calling near Portland Roads, with one giving brief views.

Yellow-legged Flyrobin *Microeca griseocephala*

One of the hardest Cape York specials, we saw one calling very well at Rainforest Camp. 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 superciliosus*

Another elusive and very local Cape York endemic special, it was calling and we got great views of a bird on Jun 10th. Now split from Papuan Scrub-Robin as quite distinct in voice and behaviour.

Torresian Crow *Corvus orru* (H)

Heard calling near the Green Hoose, I think this was my first record from Iron Range.

Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*

Just a few along Portland Road in the forest, and at the duplex at the Green Hoose.

* Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* (H)

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

Red-browed Finch *Neochmia temporalis*

About 5 along Portland Road in grass on the forest edges.

Mammals

Agile Wallaby *Macropus agilis*.

One remarkably tame animal near Iron Range Cabins.

Spotted Cuscus *Spilocuscus*

One at Rainforest camp on our second night, the usual greyish form with the white belly and cute pink face.

Bat. sp.

Bats were few and far between but we did see a small/medium one at the Green Hoose and by the duplex, and a smallish fruit bat that may have been a bare-backed flying-fox was seen briefly by the Green Hoose. I am hoping we may be able to identify the dinnertime bat as George amazingly got a photo as it came repeatedly around hawking for insects by the lights.

Reptiles

Green tree python *Morelia viridis*

Matt spotted one curled along a sapling back in the forest, they glow a luminous green in the torchlight and we got some wonderful views of this remarkably beautiful snake, it seems to glisten in the light. It only occurs on Cape York in Australia, but is widespread in New Guinea.

Scrub python *Morelia amethystina*

We saw one on both our night forays, one near the Green Hoose and one stretched out almost across the entire road in the forest, gently persuaded to move elsewhere by Matt and George as I did not want to run it over!

Amphibians

Cane toads were quite common, and there was 4 or 5 white-lipped green tree frogs at the Green Hoose, where the TV seems to be a favourite spot, and Matt removed an interloper from the kitchen. Two large frogs with barred legs seen whilst spotlighting look to be northern barred frogs.

Butterflies

Not such a good time of year for them, we saw New Guinea Birdwing, Ulysses Swallowtail, Fuscous Swallowtail, Black-banded Plane, Cedar Bush-brown, Blue-banded Eggfly, Varied Eggfly and various as yet unidentified grass yellows and ringlets

Plants

Cape York Pitcher-plant *Nepenthes rowaniana*

I was very please to find again 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 duly christened it here!

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