

Australia 2019

(a trip by RVs, buses, airplanes, and ships)

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Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia

It has been a long time since I have written a travel blog and I had considered stopping this habit. Comments from friends in the past few days have urged me to continue now that we have arrived in Darwin, Australia. Shari and I began writing in 1996, over two decades ago. Then it was written using an obsolete word processing program called Word Perfect. We printed the daily text on paper and used the U.S. Postal Service to mail them to a few family members. Our only other form of communication was a bulky AT&T bag phone with a high monthly expense and a prohibitive per minute charge, reserved for emergency use only.

We wrote every year thereafter, but in the early years it was text only and although we then sent our travel journals through Internet, using a 150-baud modem connected to a land line, we did not include photos as the technology of connecting my non-digital photos to e-mail was too primitive. Eventually, I started adding digital photos to my website, attaching them to the blog after reaching home. It is only in recent years when it became easy to include photos in our daily e-mails.

Now communication methods have changed again and writing a full page of text per day is obsolete. Messages have been reduced to short Facebook sentences or even shorter 140- or later 280-character Twitter bursts. Messages such as "Thanks, I received your message" reduced to "Okay, thanks", then shrunk to "Okay" and now to just "K". Photos shoot to friends almost at the time they were taken.

So with this long preamble, I am going back to text and photos through e-mail, likely not sent daily and likely only produced when I like photos I took that day.

The morning after our McAllen-Dallas-Sydney-Darwin marathon of connecting flights, we are up early and drive to my favorite Darwin birding sites. A mob of macropods surprise us at East Point. We quickly pull to the side of the road for photos, me with my usual long lens, using an old-technology single-lens reflex camera and Shari with her fancy new lens attachments to her iPhone. These include a telephoto lens that protrudes several inches from her iPhone. She has already sent her resulting photos on Facebook, while a few of mine are included here now.

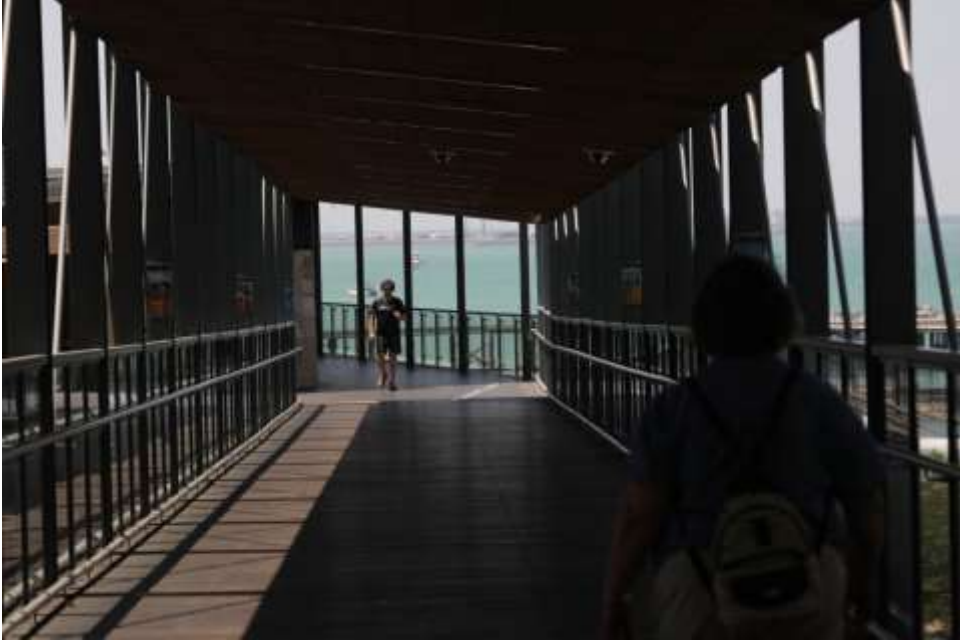


I am quite surprised to see kangaroos this far north, as we have never seen them here before. I thought these are Red Kangaroos, an Outback species, but I am told, in spite of their very large size, that these are Agile Wallabies.

We continue surveying East Point, then Lee Point, ending at Buffalo Creek. Birding is sparse, curtailed by high winds and the warming day. One of the few birds I find is a Varied Triller, identified by its ventral horizontal bars. Topside, it shows a contrasting black back with white wing bars.



We head to the Darwin coast to a beachfront area we have not visited before. Wearing string bikinis, young teenage girls promenade on the sand and swim in a wave pool. Children play on enormous floats anchored in the bay. We watch from an outside restaurant where I order a buffalo burger. In the U.S. it would be bison; here it is Water Buffalo. They have a similar taste like lean hamburger.





Darwin 2

Today we get an early start to Buffalo Creek to avoid midday heat. With little wind, I am hoping birding will be better. The tide is closer today and shorebirds line up in a ribbon at the edge of the tranquil sea. I photograph the ribbon of birds and later examine it closely on my computer. The flock is 800-900 birds, dominated by Great Knots, stacked four to five deep and the length of a football field. Scanning closely, I find two Red Knots, a single Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, plus Red-capped Plovers and Lesser Sand Plovers. These are all recently arrived migrants from China and eastern Asia. Although I'm still quite far from the flock, it suddenly takes flight to join others a quarter mile away.



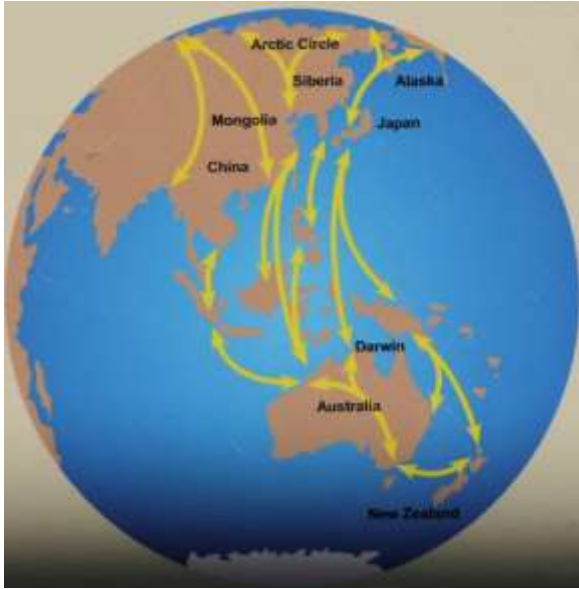
800-900 shorebirds lined up along edge of sea



Far Eastern Curlew sticks out above Great Knots



Red Knot amongst Great Knots



Shorebird migration path





Great Knots in flight

Walking the path through the forest bordering the ocean, I am able to get somewhat closer to the birds, although often photographing birds in the canopy. One attractive species is sometimes called Green Oriole and sometimes Yellow Oriole. Looking at my photo, you can see why the confusion. Although an oriole, it is not closely related to our Baltimore Oriole, not even in the same family.



Green Oriole

I watch a Rufous-banded Honeyeater probing a red flower. Honeyeaters are the Australian equivalent to hummingbirds, both feeding on the nectar and cross-pollinating the flowers.



Rufous-banded Honeyeater

A number of the trees support green ant nests. The ants really are green and the nests are carefully woven from the leaves of the tree supporting them.





Green ant nest

Darwin 3

A few of our group have been arriving each day. Today June, Theresa, Lynne, and Dwight join us on the Big Bus hop-on hop-off tour of Darwin. Darwin feels like a much bigger city than its 100,000+ population, though it doesn't take long to circle the city. It is quite modern, perhaps because it was first leveled by Japanese pilots in WWII and hit several times by cyclones, most famously in 1974 when Cyclone Tracy killed 65 people and almost completely destroyed the city. Modern skyscrapers dominate the downtown area (our hotel room is on the 21st floor), attractive condos and apartments offer sea views, and yachts float listlessly in harbors. Shari and I stop at the Flying Doctors museum. We learn about how a single doctor first serviced The Outback with a car—sometimes arriving days after the patient died—and evolved into a fleet of hospital-equipped airplanes, dozens of pilots, doctors and nurses that now service the huge expanse of vast Australia. Wearing a pair of virtual reality glasses, we experience flying with the pilot across The Outback. Better yet is using another pair to experience the bombing of Darwin. I could turn my head in any direction and see the planes attacking, watch dock workers take enemy fire, and experience the action and noise of the bombs and exploding buildings and ships.

In the evening we walk from the hotel to the Darwin harbor and an outdoor theater that shows the newest movies, similar to Cannes and Sundance film festivals. After watching a red sunset, we lounge on reclining deck chairs and watch "Sorry we missed you" on a huge screen. Occasionally, shadowy flying foxes wing across the screen. Although the film was depressing in its progression and outcome, almost everyone rates it 5-star on a chalk board as we exit.



Rufous Whistler

Darwin 4

By now all of our fellow travelers have arrived. In mid-afternoon we meet for orientation. This year for the first time we have another staff couple accompanying us. Anticipating that this will be the last year we will lead tours to Australia and New Zealand, Bob and Marcia will take over thereafter and are learning the ropes this trip. As we circle through the caravan group with introductions we note the unusual fact that almost everyone comes from Florida. In fact, 16 of 22 are from that state, when normally our caravaners are spread throughout the U.S. and Canada.

After orientation particulars, I give a PowerPoint presentation on "Termites of the Top End". I first ask the group how many signed up for this tour so that they could see termites. No hands shoot up. Midway through my talk, I can see eyes intensely following my slides and ears perked to hear my words. There is a lot more interesting about termites than you would expect, but more on that another day when we go to see the Litchfield termite mounds.

We follow Shari's handling of the travel meeting for tomorrow's activities with a steak dinner and Pavlova for dessert. Surprising to us is that almost no one else has tasted Pavlova, a favorite Australian dessert for Shari and me. It is certainly the highlight of the meal.

Darwin to Howard Springs

The bus driver rushes to retrieve her cell phone to photograph the trailer she pulls behind the bus. It is the first time she has filled the trailer to the top with luggage. Almost all of us are traveling for two months in varying weather conditions, so nearly everyone has packed to the 50-lb. and 25 lb. limits of

checked and carry-on baggage. After a short ride to the RV rental dealership we handle the paperwork and review of our rental RVs. The procedure has vastly improved with simultaneous orientation of everyone, divided in three groups with three clerks and multiple iPads displaying a video introduction to the features of the vehicles, inside and out. Two years ago, pickup, drop-off, and the condition of the RVs were subpar. At the conclusion of the tours I wrote a five page letter listing issues I thought could improve. The new manager of the Darwin facility tells me that my letter and complaints from others resulted in many changes. I note another change when reading the long legal document of terms and conditions. Gone are the administrative charges that so annoyed a few of our previous guests. I guess it pays to provide evaluations to companies. Some listen.

Shari is a strong supporter of the app Maps.me. Back at home this winter, I used Google Earth to lay our planned route—including way points— and exported it to a KML file, and then e-mailed it to Shari. She imported the KML into Maps.me and we made modifications so the routes aligned. Shari touts Maps.me because the app is free and it can be used in the field without accessing cell phone data, perfect for traveling in other countries where you are not buying cell phone coverage. However, getting the route onto twenty-some other iPhones and Androids and teaching our fellow travelers on how to use it was part of yesterday's orientation meeting. Today is the test. Will they use Maps.me to follow our route? Fortunately, they have a printed road log to fall back on.

As it turns out, a third of the group end up buying their groceries at another Woolworth's instead of the one we picked for the road log. Seeing the sign was enough for them to deviate from the route. Whatever, everyone meets up again at the Howard Springs campground.



Bombax Trees in the campground

By mid-day, the Top End Australian heat has peaked just at the time we want to set up our beds, put on sheets, and unpack suitcases. The RV A/C can't cool us sufficiently for our activity. Fortunately, the campground has two delightful swimming pools and many take advantage of cooling off.

At 5 PM we gather, lawn chairs circled, to hear Dr. Denise Lawungkurr Goodfellow tell us about Aboriginal culture and a few of her highly unusual lifetime experiences as a buffalo hunter, python catcher, scientist, birding guide, Darwin city council member, author, lecturer, confident of Aboriginal people and adopted into their moiety. Few people know and understand the native Aboriginals as does Denise. She was initiated by catching a python in crocodile-infested shallow water with her bare hands, but that wasn't what got her into the clan. It happened when they came to her defense after she was arrested for catching a protected animal, the python, a right only allotted to native people. Denise entertained us with story after story, some captivating, some inspirational, some educational, most insightful.



Denise and our group



Denise and her husband Michael



Wine shared, a photo for my sister and brother-in-law of the same Scottish surname



Torresian Imperial Pigeon

Litchfield National Park and Mindil Beach Market

We are headed to Litchfield National Park with two stops before we reach the park. The small Batchelor Museum features early settlement of the area, the uranium mine era, and stories and film about the WWII bombing of Darwin. One old 1891 photo interests me because I have many old family photos and my grandfather was born at that time. In one of his photos, he also had horse and buggy, but the horses were dark and the buggy had a top. The native Aboriginal man would not have an equivalent as the American Indians had only overlapped timeframe with my great-great-grandparents in Wisconsin.



SLSA: B5055. A very erect aboriginal man stands alongside a buggy at Knuckeys Lagoon. The backdrop displays the long grass of late wet season. Photo of EC Stirling in the buggy, taken by Paul Foelsche March 14, 1891.

A continuously running film about WWII features many witnesses to the Darwin bombing and the repeated Japanese invasions. One lady relates how as a child she was told, whenever she heard the planes, to lie flat on the ground and open her mouth to protect her eardrums from the concussion of the bombs.



Next stop was the Batchelor Butterfly Farm. Becky displays the latest fashion: a Cairns Birdwing perched on her glasses. Lynn feeds a carrot to an anxious goat.





The highlight for me is the termite mounds. In my presentation two days ago I talked about the various species of termites of the Top End and how different species build different mounds. Given the size of termites and the enormous mounds, it is the equivalent of a million blind-folded people building a skyscraper covering 8 city blocks and towering over a mile into the sky.



Most fascinating is the magnetic termite mounds, aligned nearly north-south but with slight deviations to allow for wind directions and shade. The termites must be able to detect the magnetic compass, but make deviations so that the east side warms with the rising sun and captures afternoon breezes for

cooling, thus maintaining suitable temperatures. They are built in areas that have extreme flooding in the rainy season, so the termites wait out the flood in the upper chambers.



The competitive highlight for the day is the rock pools, deep cool water beneath plunging waterfalls. Some swim at several pools, but Shari and I hold off until the last pool. There I swim an eighth-mile to the waterfall. Although the rock pool water is comfortable, the waterfall feels icy.



In the evening we drive to Darwin to see the sunset over the ocean and to dine on exotic foods prepared by Mindil Thursday Market vendors from an amazing variety of native countries. My selection is from Sri Lanka; Shari's is Lebanese with a Greek dessert.

Kakadu National Park 1

Sorry, it is not a long eighty-mile swim, but "an eighth-mile" swim mentioned in the last blog. Two alert readers spotted my typo.

This morning we leave our campground in Howard Springs and drive to Fogg Dam, a water wonderland for water buffalo, agile wallabies, crocodiles, and thousands of birds. Denise meets us there and leads us first along the causeway and then along a trail through the paperbark forest. By far the most numerous birds are the Magpie Geese. Denise tells us they are related to the South American screamers—which I saw and photographed at the Berlin Zoo last year—and are not closely related to our Canada Geese.



Flocks of Magpie Geese fly over Fogg Dam



Magpie Goose

One of the few birds we also see in the U.S. is the Glossy Ibis and here I find several small flocks.



Glossy Ibis in profile

We gather at a small hide that projects into the swamp and flittering among the Lotus leaves is a tiny bird that rarely stops to pose. After a dozen tries I finally get the cisticola into focus.



Golden-headed Cisticola resting on the seed pod of a Lotus flower

The water buffalo was brought to northern Australia in the 19th century as a source of meat. It originates from India, Southeast Asia, and China. They are now feral in Australia and an environmental nuisance. In my photo a Cattle Egret accompanies one buffalo family.



Water Buffalo

I had my camera on burst mode to catch an Agile Wallaby in action. They look like kangaroos, but are less than half their size.



Agile Wallaby



Pied Heron

From Fogg Dam we travel to Window of the Wetlands, appreciating the air conditioning while we study the exhibits and watch a film about nature at the Top End.



View from Window of the Wetland

Most of the group heads to the campground at Jabiru where they can cool off in the large swimming pool adjacent to the outdoor restaurant and bar. A few of us want to explore Mamukala Wetlands. A flock of 50+ Little Corellas are feeding high in densely foliated trees and it takes patience to find them and even more time to get a clear photo shot. We spend more time in the hide that looks out on the wetlands where thousands of birds have gathered. We are near the end of the dry season—the Top End

has only two seasons, wet and dry—and only a few waterholes still contain water. Hence, wildlife gathers at these in huge numbers.

By the time we finish at Mamukala and drive to the campground, we have no time for a swim before our travel meeting. I give a presentation on Aboriginal rock art and the geology of the places we will visit tomorrow.



Little Corella

Kakadu National Park 2

Not well known, nor advertised, Bardedjilidjil is not the usual tourist stop. I learned where it is two years ago when Denise led us to its obscure Aboriginal rock art. We park the RVs and start on the loop trail, but when I see the Alligator River I notice we are walking in the opposite direction as I had intended. No worries, as the Australians would stay. The sandy wooded trail opens to sandstone outcroppings. A billion and a half years ago this area of northern Australia was covered by the sea which deposited sand. Compression turned the sand to sandstone. At the era of dinosaurs (140-65 Mya), some of the hardened rock resisted erosion and became small islands with their sides sculpted to show the sandstone layers that we look at now.



Sandstone layers

Filling the sand strewn gaps between the sandstone outcroppings are palm-like trees called pandanus, specifically *Pandanus spiralis*. Rather than just a symmetric fan, the leaves form a corkscrew arrangement, hence its Latin species name. Dead leaves hang like hula skirts and Aborigines used these to weave baskets and mats.





Pandanus spiralis

Although my fellow caravaners are not birders, I cannot resist pointing out a bird, perched in clear view, with a conspicuous black face, aptly named Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike.



Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike

As millions of years of rainfalls trickled down the sandstone cliffs, shallow caves were formed providing cool shelter for insects, bats, and Aboriginal hunters. Crevices in the rock have become termite tunnels connecting the base to huge gray termite mounds wedged high into the cliffs. The rock termites harvest spinifex at night during dry season, storing it for the wet season when spinifex is green and inedible.



Rock termite mounds



Spinifex, a spiny-leaved, tussock-forming grass

I find the shallow cave with the red hand art, the mortar-and-pestle hole in the rock, the smoky roof, and other evidence that Aboriginals used the cave in early years.



Life-size hand in red ochre

Now I know where I am, but not which way to head to the other Aboriginal art. Bobby finds a rocky uphill trail and claims it is useable for us old “over-the-hill” hikers. I don’t recall doing this last time, nor does Shari, so she doubles back to a fork in the path we passed earlier. Surprisingly, we meet at the other side of the rock conglomerate. But now, where is the rest of the rock art? I recognize a formation and just as I head in that direction, Shari yells out “Here it is!” Once I see what she has found, I know where the other rock art is painted.



Aboriginal rock art depicting foods: pepper-like fruit, wallaby, crablike seafood



Aboriginal rock art depicting boat and fishermen

From Bardedjilidjil we head to Ubirr, stopping to watch crocodiles at Cahill's Crossing and a surprise ice cream treat at the only store for miles around. At Ubirr we walk to see more Aboriginal rock art, but just before we reach the start of it, we find a rock wallaby. I've seen a lot of animals in Australia, but this is a new one for me and I have to check my mammal book to identify it. Although it is indeed a rock wallaby, it is called a Nabarlek or elegant rock-weasel. It is quite small, only weighing about three pounds and as you can see this one is nursing a rather large joey.



Nabarlek

Ubirr is the premier tourist stop at Kakadu with lots of visitors today. Since I've studied this rock art before and have written about it, I'll just repeat photos of my favorite rock art. To give perspective to how high up is the artwork, I will show a more distant view. The puzzling question is how did the artist reach the high position to do his work? This artwork is thousands of years old, most clearly defined by the fact that the animal depicted is a thylacine, more dramatically called a Tasmanian tiger that has been extinct on the mainland for 2000-3000 years. It survived longer on the island of Tasmania and the last captive survivor died in a zoo in 1934.

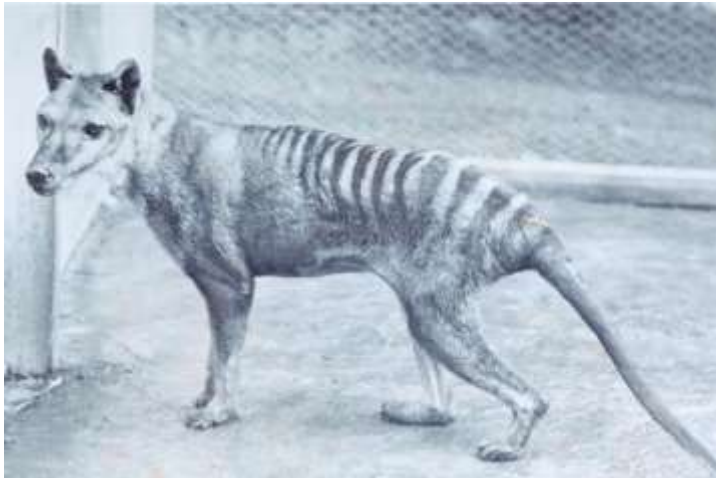
So how was it drawn so far up? The Aboriginal story is that Mimi spirits are so tall and thin that they can slip in and out of the cracks in the rock and that the Mimi brought the rock down to ground level and then painted the rock and put it back up. Another possibility is that the rocks were at ground level when the paintings were done thousands of years ago—perhaps as much as 40,000 years ago when Aboriginals first reached Ubirr—and that the rocks below eroded further since that time.



Can you find the rock art in this distant view?



Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger)



The last wild Thylacine in captivity

Kakadu National Park 3

Not long after sunrise, the bright sun still low over the horizon and casting a yellow veneer on landscape, our flat-bottomed boat slowly churns through Yellow Water. The billabong meanders beside vibrant green pandanus and mangroves clinging to the edge of vast wetlands and more distant paperbark forests. Pink-flowered Lotus plants add contrasting color to shades of green.





Visitors less in tune to the intricacies of nature are fascinating with the big stuff. The boat leans to one side whenever a crocodile is sighted and people shuffle to the edge for closer view. A close-up view of a water buffalo (introduced) gets much attention, as does a distant wild pig (introduced). Birds draw much less interest unless they are big, like the White-bellied Sea-eagles.





Freshwater Crocodile





White-bellied Sea-Eagle

For my part, I'm interested in the little things, the tiny birds that evade close view especially without good binoculars. A bird on pogo-stick legs and long spreading feet walks on lily pads. At first I do not recognize it because it is in juvenile plumage, but its shape marks it as Comb-crested Jacana. It escapes the captain's attention (and microphone) and I'm probably the only one on board that sees it.



Comb-crested Jacana (juvenile)

I'll give the captain credit for being the first to spot the Little Kingfisher; he immediately gets my attention. I readily agree with the captain that this bird is rarely seen, perhaps because it is less than 5 inches and prefers resting quietly in dense mangrove cover. I am photographing the much larger Shining Flycatcher when I see the tiny kingfisher on the right. I quickly shoot eight photos in eleven seconds, trying to get the tiny object in focus as the boat drifts by. In an instant it is gone and almost everyone misses seeing it, much less photographing it. I've seen Little Kingfisher only once before (in Cairns) and only poorly photographed it that time.



Shining Flycatcher (female) and Little Kingfisher



Little Kingfisher

The captain calls out one other elusive bird, the Great-billed Heron. Marsha, a Floridian, asks me if this is the same bird she sees in Florida. While it is similar to the common Great Blue Heron, it is indeed rare and rarely seen. My Australian bird app states, "... retreats into cover of mangrove or paperback swamp while any observer is still distant." Strangely, though, it is the fifth time I've seen one in Australia.



Great-billed Heron

Nitmiluk National Park

The Katherine River passes through Katherine Gorge, carved through millennia from the underlying 1.6 billion year old sandstone. Today, nearing the end of the Dry Season, the water level is low. In the Wet Season, water levels can rise as much as 10 meters. We are on another boat cruise, though very different from yesterday; this one is about scenery and geology and less about wildlife.



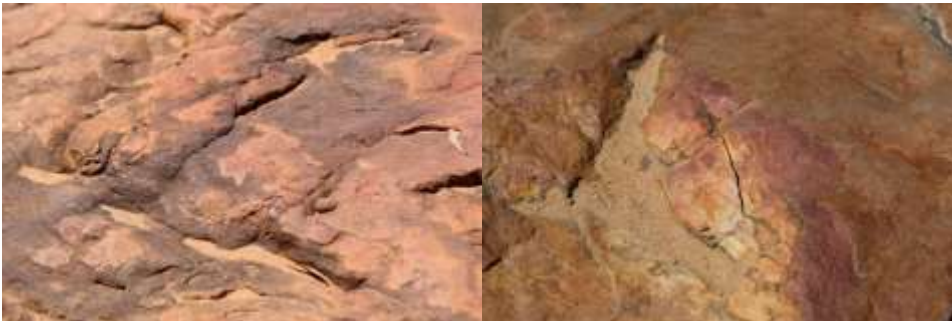
Katherine River



Low water barricade between two of the gorges



A few days ago in Kakadu I picked up a piece of sandstone. I rubbed my thumb across the sandpaper surface and easily scraped off grains of sand. When I study the sandstone of Katherine Gorge, I would have considered it granite or some other hard stone. Our Aboriginal boat driver provides the explanation. Although the same rock of Kakadu, here the rock fractured and pressure has compressed the sandstone and forced the quartz to crystallize, thereby providing the hardest form of sandstone. In its natural state it is white, the color of white sand. However, on the surface layer the iron has oxidized, creating the rusty red color. In other sections it is black from a coating of algae. Rubbing my finger across this smooth rock evokes no sand grains. Viewing the sandstone at our feet we can see spots of recently exposed bare sandstone, reddened iron-oxidized faces, and patches of dark algae.



A flock of Varied Lorikeets fly downstream and about the same time our driver spots a Peregrine Falcon at what appears to be a nest site high up on the cliff side. The falcon is eating red meat in its talons; perhaps it is one of the lorikeets. After multiple photographs, the falcon swoops down over our heads, shoots downstream, does a sharp turn and comes back toward us to rest on a water level rock ledge where it seems to drink from a puddle.



Peregrine Falcon





Peregrine Falcon

Along the base of the rock sides at the river are small patches of sand. Many have signs posted, warning boaters to keep away from the area as it is a crocodile nesting area. Saltwater crocodiles sometimes come into the river at high levels during the wet season, but they do not stay. Freshwater crocodiles lay their eggs in sand, so this is a suitable nesting area for them.





The Outback 2

By definition, The Outback is where few people live. When we leave Katherine, heading south on the Stuart Highway, we truly are in The Outback. Stuart Highway is a straight line, 2,834 km from Darwin to Port Augusta, with hardly a stop sign en route. We will take it as far as Alice Springs in three days of travel.



Stuart Highway

A flock of Apostlebirds feeds below the eucalyptus trees at Larrimah. I never see a single Apostlebird, only flocks, though just as likely to be 9 or 14 as 12 apostles.



Apostlebirds

Crested Pigeons are very common in The Outback, easily recognized by their crests. Their multicolor wing panels flash in sunlight.



Crested Pigeon

Water is scarce in The Outback, so this flock of Rainbow Lorikeets takes advantage of a leaking faucet.



Rainbow Lorikeets



Black-chinned Honeyeater



Black-chinned Honeyeater

In Tennant Springs we visit a former gold mine, now a museum and listen to a retired miner tell us about the days when this was the richest mine in the world for the small size of its area. In those days as an employee, he could make more money in 3 months than he could in 2 years as a carpenter in Queensland. Now the mines are owned by the Chinese and they recently discovered lithium.

I was intrigued by his comments on climate change. Although a skeptic at first, he has now witnessed how little rain they are getting in central Australia, how the snakes and kangaroos have trouble finding

water, and how the drought is adjusting bird migration. They have begun fracking in his area and now they are suffering earthquakes which never occurred in the past.



Gold miner



Sunset in The Outback at Tennant Springs

The Outback 3

I anticipated only about half the group would be willing to leave camp by 6 AM, but to my surprise everyone was ready for the hour drive to see Devils Marbles at sunrise. The "marbles" are really huge

boulders rounded through weathering into unrealistic spheres, oblongs, balanced rocks, cracked eggs, and split half-balls. At sunrise, the blue part of the spectrum is filtered out, accentuating the red, and when sunlight hits the marbles the iron oxides surfaces glow brightly.











A thin 4-ft. slice has peeled off one of the boulders and lies flat on the ground revealing the white color of the sandstone, not yet oxidized by the iron. The slice on the ground has not oxidized as much as the portion to which it was attached.



Bobby picks up a small stone laying on top of one boulder and out runs a rather attractive cockroach, if such an insect can be called such. At the Desert Museum I read about this insect. It is called a Striped Desert Cockroach, almost an inch long, and its stark, contrasting colors are a warning to potential predators because it produces a very strong odor if disturbed. I do not poke it to test this theory.



The Outback 4

Up until now The Outback has been essentially flat and the farther south we travel, the fewer and shorter the trees. Shortly after crossing the Tropic of Capricorn and approaching Alice Springs we see the high hills or low mountains of the McDonnell Range. Today we drive up to the cliffs of a portion of the range. Simpson's Gap is a sharp break in the range where a river passes in the wet season, but now is only a small shallow pond. Breaking chunks of the cliffs have left the nearly vertical mountain ragged. Rock debris has accumulated at the bottom and that is where Black-footed Rock Wallabies hide.



Simpson's Gap



Simpson's Gap



Cliffs of MacDonnell Range, rising sun illuminating the top



Looking up at the sharply defined breaks from which rock fell



Debris of falling rocks. Can you find the wallaby in this photo?

During the daytime, rock-wallabies feed on grasses and shrubs. We are here early in the morning when the wallabies sun in the open just like we are seeing two of them. Later in the day they hide in the shelter of the rocks. They are only about 20 inches high and are good jumpers between rocks.



Black-footed Rock-wallaby

We drive to another section of the national park, finding a giant gum tree and colorful Australian Ringnecks. The highlight is a pink bird sporting a crest of red and white. I recognize it immediately. My fellow non-birders are excited too because this bird comes with a story I told a few days ago. The Lewis-and-Clark of Australia could be Major Mitchel, a Scotsman who in 1828 became the Surveyor General for Australia. Based in the Sydney area he conducted four expeditions along the Darling River and drew accurate maps of the area. He used Aboriginal guides including a woman which reminded me that Lewis and Clark used Sakakawea. He was knighted for his accurate maps and their importance in understanding the new Australia continent. Many places are named after Major Mitchel and most importantly for me is the cockatoo named after him, Major Mitchel's Cockatoo. I've only photographed it in the wild once before, but today's photo shows it in all its glory, wings widespread, crest erect, sporting its startling red-orange colors.



Major Mitchell's Cockatoo

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park 1

From Alice Springs we travel by chartered bus, a big bus with lots of room to spread out, driven by an entertaining driver named Gavin who provides commentary. Our first stop is the Erldunda Roadhouse where dozens of buses, RVs, and cars have gathered, and several hundred tourists. Between roadhouses, of which there are very few, is nothing except vast ranches called cattle stations. These stations are many thousands of acres: in 200 km we passed only six property owners. Actually, they don't own the property but instead have 99-year leases. The cattle wander freely but the land only supports one cow per 300 acres versus a more typical rate in good pastureland of two per acre. When it's time for roundup, the cattlemen use helicopters to pursue and move the widely spread cattle. One innovative rancher uses water instead. Computer-controlled equipment adjusts water tanks, causing cattle to move to the water, passing through sensors that record their tag numbers and body weight. At roundup time, they become entrapped when the gates are closed electronically.



One of the very few roadhouses between Alice Springs and Ayer's Rock



Mt. Conner, a flat-top conglomerate rock, passed en route to Ayer's Rock

I know I've pointed this out before in my travel journal of prior years, but I am always intrigued by the Desert Oaks. They really are not oaks, but that's what they call them. They have long needle-like leaves, ideal for the desert environment. The trees only grow when there is rain, and since sometimes it doesn't rain for several years, the trees we see many be hundreds of years old. In my photo, the rounded shape tells us it is very old, as young trees have sticklike trunks without spreading branches. This way, they conserve growth until their roots reach the water table, which many take many years.



Desert Oak

We reach Ayer's Rock with time to spare and Gavin suggests we go to the camel riding station. A few in our group take a short ride.



Camel riding

We've dropped off our luggage at the hotel and Gavin drives us to a special parking lot for buses to watch the Uluru sunset. From my photos, you can tell everyone wants photos and soon it becomes a big party complete with snacks and sparkling wine.



Uluru at sunset



Getting sunset photos



Shari is having a good time



Everyone is having a good time



Smile for the camera

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park 2

We are on an early bus to see Uluru, already glowing on the horizon. Uluru, the Aboriginal name for what an early European discoverer called Ayer's Rock, is unique in that it is one single rock. I take dozens of photos and it is hard to decide which ones to depict here. Every curve in the circumference road highlights a different view, every angle of sunlight and shadow produces another. Chemical erosion and rock falls produce still other perspectives. Many views show slanting lines demonstrating how the rock was uplifted and some streaks are nearly vertical. Uluru is like an iceberg in that we are only seeing a small portion of the rock, the rest buried below ground. In shallow caves are Aboriginal rock art. Birds are sparse, though I watch an overwhelming number of White-plumed Honeyeaters that stay distant and fly fast, making photographing difficult.











White-plumed Honeyeater

We reach the place where climbers ascend to the top of Uluru. After many years of controversy, by mid-October the practice will finally end forever. Besides being dangerous, it has long been condemned by Aboriginals that hold the rock sacred. On my close-up photos, notice how some climbers are coming down backwards or sitting and sliding to avoid falling.





This evening we enjoy the premier event at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park: Sounds of Silence. Buses carry us to a remote location in the desert where, from a sandy knoll we have a clear view of both Uluru and Kata Tjuta. With glasses raised, we toast the sunset.



Sounds of Silence



Uluru



Kata Tjuta



Desert Oaks ablaze in sunset



Candlelight gourmet dinner under the stars

After dinner, the candles are extinguished and the only illumination is starlight. An astronomer with a strong sense of humor entertains us as he uses a laser pointer to point out astrological star configurations. We are most curious about seeing the Southern Cross. Earlier, I had tried to find it myself and I was quite sure I found the two stars that are the key. Unlike the North Star and the Big Dipper, finding the Southern Cross is more difficult and involves extending a line from Alpha Centauri to beta Centauri and beyond. However, tonight that line points below the horizon, so we won't see the Southern Cross.



The two bright stars, nearly vertical in my photo, are alpha and beta Centauri

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park 3

In near total darkness, busses, RVs, and cars pile up at the entrance to the park. Our driver waves to the attendant as the park workers know we have already paid the entrance fees. Cars and RVs wait at another line to pay. The bus takes us 50+ miles to the Kata Tjuta Dune viewing area where we wait for sunrise. The sun comes up from behind Uluru and casts morning light on Kata Tjuta.



5:43 AM passing the entrance gate to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park





Sunrise viewing



Morning light on Kata Tjuta



After sunrise, we have just enough time to walk back to the bus before it continues to Kata Tjuta. Unlike Uluru, a single rock, Kata Tjuta is a conglomerate of enormous rock mountains melded together. Everyone except me hikes a trail to the Walpa Gorge. Having already seen the gorge in prior trips, I hold back and look for birds in the area surrounding the parking lot. Overhead and high in the sky, tiny woodswallows are fast fliers, too high and too fast to identify. So I take my chances at photographing them. With several dozen shots, I manage to get a few in focus. They are Little Woodswallows, only the second time I've seen this species.



Little Woodswallow

The hikers return from the mountain and the bus returns to pick us up. On the way out, the driver stops when she sees two camels grazing on the trees. Although there are over a million camels wandering the Australia Outback, this is the first time I've seen them in the wild.



Wild Camel in desert near Kata Tjuta

Michaelmas Caye

Two days ago we flew out of Ayer's Rock, though our plane was delayed for so many hours that we arrived in Sydney so late we could not make the connecting flight. Virgin Australia put us up in an excellent hotel blocks from the airport and we flew to Cairns yesterday morning. The diversion and hotel with meals was so delightful, our group welcomed the unplanned interruption. Last night we arrived in time for a celebratory welcome dinner and a good night's rest at the Cairns hotel.

This morning we head to the Great Barrier Reef. Our day is filled with activities, including riding in a semi-submersible to see the coral reef through glassed side panels, watching fish being fed at the surface, snorkeling off Michaelmas Caye, listening to a biologist presentation, and birding on the caye. Oh, yes, also a breakfast snack and a big lunch.



Rainbow over Sydney Airport



Cairns from catamaran heading to Great Barrier Reef



Michaelmas Caye, a seabird sanctuary



Semisubmersible



Inside the semisubmersible



1000+ Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns



Donned in stinger suits and about to go snorkeling on the reef



Sooty Tern



Crested Terns with banded Ruddy Turnstone



Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies



Mating ritual: male Brown Booby (right) offering seaweed to female



Female Brown Booby on nest



Brown Booby and full-grown chick

Cairns 2

Intermittent rain, from a few drops to a downpour, cycles through the early morning. Unfortunately, it coincides with our nature walk to the Cairns Botanic Gardens via the Cairns Cemetery. Surprisingly, in spite of the weather, I have half a dozen followers. The birds too are active. Six Laughing Kookaburras chase across the cemetery to a copse of trees and carry on a boisterous argument, loud enough to wake the dead. Long-legged, long-necked, bigheaded, big-eyed birds that two years ago were called Bush Stone-curlews patrol the graveyard standing silent guard beside tombstones. Now my eBird app names them Bush Thick-knee, which seems appropriate considering their close similarity to the Thick-knees we have seen in the farmlands near Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. By the time we reach the end of the cemetery, I count 27 Thick-knees.



Bush Thick-knee, also called Bush Stone-curlew

My camera is wrapped in a protective bag, so I only reluctantly take it out when we see a bird I am slow to identify. The lanky dark bird hides in dense foliage but I find a window for a clear photo shot. The red eye and pale bill are the clue to calling it a Pacific Koel. Like white pearls, raindrops bead on its black back.



Pacific Koel

It is still raining as we cross through the Centenary Lakes and the boardwalk through the dense swamp. We reach the outdoor restaurant where we will have brunch and a short time later the rest of our group shows up too. I would have stayed longer to visit the botanic gardens, but the long walk in the rain, struggling with an umbrella, raincoat, camera, binoculars, etc. has dampened my enthusiasm and I readily accept a ride back to camp.

In late afternoon I return to the cemetery with a group mostly of those who avoided the wet morning walk. The highlight is the many Rainbow Bee-eaters that buzz past us in aerobic circles. I photograph only one other bird today, a Black Butcherbird perched at the edge of the campground.



Rainbow Bee-eater



Black Butcherbird

Cairns 3

With a day filled with activities, I'll skip the historic train ride and the shopping in Kuranda, focusing instead on the Skyrail over the rainforest. We ride from sea level to Kuranda, a gain of about a thousand feet. Below us and to the north is the Daintree Rainforest. At 130 million years, it is the oldest rainforest in the world. It was designated a World Heritage Site in 1988 and therefore is a protected area. The stillness of the Skyrail riding above the rainforest reminds me of hot air ballooning. A few times I spot Sulphur-crested Cockatoos but instead of looking up into the sky for them I look down and into the tree tops. We ride beside the Barron River, see the tall Barron Falls, and its hydroelectric plant looking small like a train-set-miniature. At one of the stops, in the exhibits, I read that songbirds evolved in this ancient rainforest before spreading around the world.



Coastal lowlands north of Cairns



Skyrail



Sulphur-crested Cockatoo in tree tops



Rainforest diversity



Barron Falls



Pool above Barron Falls



Kuranda train station



Bridal Falls



Spotted Doves

Tjapukai

Just before leaving our Cairns campground we are entertained by an inquisitive Laughing Kookaburra who seems to be begging for food, although he gets none from us.



Laughing Kookaburra



White-breasted Woodswallow

We drive the short distance to Tjapukai, a cultural center where we learn about local Aboriginal people before the arrival of Europeans. The local tribe is the Tjapukai and young representatives are dressed in loin cloths and body paint as did their ancestors.

We learn of the various foods they ate, the weapons they used, the tools used for hunting, and their music and dancing. One of the foods was a blue berry which is also a favorite of the cassowary. Dances imitate life, including kangaroos and cassowaries browsing for food and a tribal hunt of a kangaroo.

Music is provided with a didgeridoo which is a wind instrument producing a bass sound and is made from a tree trunk originally hollowed out by termites and further cored by the instrument maker. The didgeridoo takes considerable skill and practice to play well and it is capable of providing a wide variety of rhythmic sounds.



Davidson Plum, favored by Aboriginals and Southern Cassowary



Performing the cassowary imitation dance



Playing the didgeridoo

We also see how to make fire by twirling a wooden stick between open palms, with one end scraping on a partially bored hole of another stick. After several minutes of intense work, friction causes the stick to heat enough to smoke and then to ignite dried grass to flame.



Making fire the hard way

All of us get an opportunity to throw a spear at a target. A second stick, an atlatl, which acts as a lever that dramatically increases the power of the thrown spear, aids spear throwing. Interestingly, this ancient technique was also used in Europe by early man and by Native Americans in the U.S. We also

throw boomerangs and much to everyone's surprise, many of the boomerangs return to us, some so close we must duck to avoid getting hit.



Throwing spear with lever or atlatl



Throwing a boomerang

Atherton Tablelands 1

We visit several nature sites today on the tablelands from Mt. Carbine to Mareeba. Highlights include finding eight Australian Bustards, the heaviest Australian bird still capable of flight. Males can weigh up to 28 lb. and have a wing span up to 7.5 ft.



Australian Bustard

I never thought about “friarbird”, the name applied to four Australian bird species until Heather said, “It’s because they have bare heads.” Each species has bare skin on its head, though in different amounts and color.



Noisy Friarbird drinking from leaky faucet

For many, the best stop was at the golf course where kangaroos hang out. We hardly ever see kangaroos, except singly and usually in twilight hours. It makes one wonder where they are in the daytime and in larger numbers. Now we know they lounge in the shade of trees on the golf course. Shari arranged golf cart rentals so we zoom around the course at will, from one mob to another. I keep a rough count and stop when I reach 200 kangaroos.



Grey Kangaroo



How many legs do you see?



Joey in the pouch



Joey and Jill feeding together



A few of over 200 Grey Kangaroos at the golf course



Rainbow Lorikeet



Gray-crowned Babbler

At another location we watch Mareeba Rock Wallabies. Rock Wallabies always live in rocks, but since rocky sites are often separated by great distances, the wallabies have evolved into separate species. We visit the only publically accessible site where the Mareeba species can be viewed.



Mareeba Rock Wallaby



Noisy Friarbird



Squatter Pigeon

Atherton Tablelands 2

Another good day for nature and wildlife, we try for the hardest species first, getting to the river not long after sunrise. The platypus is mostly nocturnal, but still active in early morning. The platypus is shy and easily prone to diving and disappearing, so we walk along the creek in silence. To my surprise, we find one at the first widening of the creek. I signal its position across the pond and obligingly it swims toward us, not away. Even better, it swims right in front of our feet at the edge of the creek. Many get photos, some get excellent videos. We can clearly see its duck-like bill from which it emits electric

impulses to sense its prey. Its tiny eyes look useless and probably are. We can see its feet paddling, though not the spur which injects poison strong enough to kill a person. Its beavertail propels it silently through the water.



Platypus



Brown Honeyeater

At Curtain Fig Sanctuary my photo of *Ficus virens* only shows the curtain of strangler fig roots dangling over 50 ft. from the canopy. Others with iPhones and smartphones have learned how to use the pano feature which will take a vertical panoramic photo of someone at the base of the tree and extending to the sky.



Curtain Fig

The dense rainforest canopy allows scant light to reach eye level. I see a tiny black and white bird flitting around a tree trunk and quickly start snapping dozens of photos, hoping something will catch the bird. I recognize it as a Pied Monarch and fortunately a few of my photos catch the remarkable blue eye ring.



Pied Monarch

We move on to another location where we saw Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroos two years ago. After a 10 min. search we find one again and, then, a bit later a female with a juvenile. They are 25 ft. high up in the trees, feeding on leaves. Their faces resemble brown bears, through their long tails more than double their body length.



Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo





Lewin's Honeyeater

Atherton Tablelands 3

Bob and I met a young visiting Japanese birder last night and this morning he is leading us to another campsite where a semi-permanent resident has set up multiple bird feeders. Rainbow Lorikeets and King Parrots are in abundance but hardly a match for hundreds of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins. My photos show dozens crowding the feeder, seeds flying willy-nilly, and a few birds caught in flight.



Chestnut-breasted Mannikin



Chestnut-breasted Mannikin



King Parrot

At a nearby tree our Japanese friend has found Scaly-breasted Lorikeets which hide deep in the green leaves. After many attempts I eventually photograph one in the open. It's not as brightly colored as its rainbow relatives, but still striking.



Scaly-breasted Lorikeet

I have less photographic success when our group visits Lake Eacham, most birds being distant or in bad lighting. The Great Cormorants catch my attention as one of the few birds I've also seen in North America.



Great Cormorant



Lake Eacham, above and below

Bob, Heather, and I find a bird I'm not sure I can identify. Bob and I both take photos but can't quite match up the colors to the bird app I have on my iPhone. It looks a lot like a Bower's Shrike-thrush, but not quite. Later we decide it is a Grey Shrike-thrush.



Grey Shrike-thrush

In the evening we meet up again with our Japanese friend. He tells us about the owlet he saw last night and wants to show us the spot. After dusk at about 7 PM, Bob and I follow him to a low glassy area near the campground. In the surrounding dark woods I hear a call that could be the owlet so I use my iPhone to play the calls of the Australian Owlet-nightjar. It's a match. One of the sounds comes closer. Our sharp-eyed youthful friend says the bird landed in the same low tree branch he saw it yesterday. We move closer and we see the dark 9-in. bird on the dark branch faintly backlit by ambient starlight. With flashlights the owlet is slightly brighter. I try for a photo, but the camera doesn't receive enough light to focus. I've seen the owlet one time before, in daylight, with its head poking out of a small hole in a rotting tree high in the canopy. This is the first time I have hear them call and see one at night.

Atherton Tablelands 4 and ETTY Bay

About half of the group arrives at Lake Barrine early in the morning. Most will hike three miles around the lake, while the rest of us will get only part way, birding slowly. We reach the famous twin trees that many locals talk about. These are bull kauris (*Agathis microstachya*) that rise nearly 150 ft. above us and are over 20 ft. in girth. The giant conifers exist in a very narrow range of high rainfall in the Atherton Tablelands.



Bull Kauris

The forest is alive with the cacophony of bird songs, but seeing them in the dense woods is very difficult, especially when most are high in the canopy. Dark, dim lighting makes photography nearly impossible as well. I open the shutter and increase the ISO to the extreme. The next few shots of the Pale Yellow Robin are taken at 10,000-12,500 ISO, which makes them fuzzy, yet recognizable. Remember when with film cameras, 400 ISO was extreme? In the last shot I catch the robin just as it takes flight.



Pale Yellow Robin





Lake Barrine

After a sumptuous breakfast at the restaurant overlooking Lake Barrine, we head to the coast at Etty Bay. A Laughing Kookaburra lands on a short post and poses for photos. It is so still it behaves like a child's stuffed bear. Ed takes a close-up photo with his smartphone while I stand back 12 ft. and use my long lens.



Laughing Kookaburra

We have been waiting for the arrival of one in the family of Southern Cassowaries that is known to have adopted this beach as their territory. Close to dusk, the male arrives. I am surprised how fast it walks as photographers try catching up with it for a quick shot. Although cassowaries are dangerous (attacking with their feet), perhaps the most fearsome among birds, this bird is so familiar to campers and beachgoers that it is accustomed to them. Yet we avoid close contact, preferring for it to approach on its own terms, and do not provoke it. However, it is awesome when it approaches within a few feet and you look at it eye-to-eye. The cassowary has many remarkable features such as the “rubber bumper” casque, colorful neck and waddle, and its fur-like feathers, I am most intrigued by its enormous powerful three-forward none-back toes and sharp claws.



Southern Cassowary





Queensland Coast 1

At 5:45 AM, I peek out the RV window to see the sun just about to rise above the Coral Sea horizon. I quickly dress, grab my camera, and head a dozen yards to the sandy beach. In predawn light, dozens of pairs of butterflies perform courtship dances high above me. I zoom in toward them to catch their dark profiles. The sun bursts through the horizon in brilliant orange and collides with a dark cloud. The glow of the rising sun highlights yellow tree leaves and caps a green tree with orange blossoms.



Courtship butterflies



Sunrise over the Coral Sea



Sunrise lite trees

After breakfast, I am outside again and see a juvenile cassowary on the beach. It crosses the park entrance road and heads to dense woods on the other side. Before he disappears, I get a good photo of the cassowary, showing its brush-like brown feathers and barely developed facial markings.



Juvenile Southern Cassowary

Reading my journals, one might get the impression that the only activities we do are nature related. Not so; it is just the ones I usually write about. This morning we visit Paronella Park, the castle-like ruins of a century old vacation spot destroyed by multiple typhoons, floods, and fires. The aged concrete structures hauntingly nestle in overgrown tropical jungle. The natural centerpiece is a waterfall fronting a picnic area, compete with broken concrete tables and benches. On the center left of my photo you can see two people in a balcony window. One of the floods rose to the level above them.



Paronella Park



Waterfalls at Paronella Park



Paronella Park

Next, we drive to the Tully sugarmill for a tour of how sugarcane is processed to make raw sugar (brown sugar). Sugarcane grows within a mile of where we live in South Texas and is abundantly grown in the places we have led tours in Mexico and Belize, so I am already familiar with some of the process. However, the way the cane is transported to the mill is very different. Stretched across the countryside, bordering the cane fields, is 125 miles of 2-ft. gauge track. Chopped cane is loaded into awaiting sidetracked railcars. When filled, a locomotive pulls the train to the mill. One by one, the railcars roll into the tipper which rotates the railcar upside down and tips the cane onto a conveyor belt.



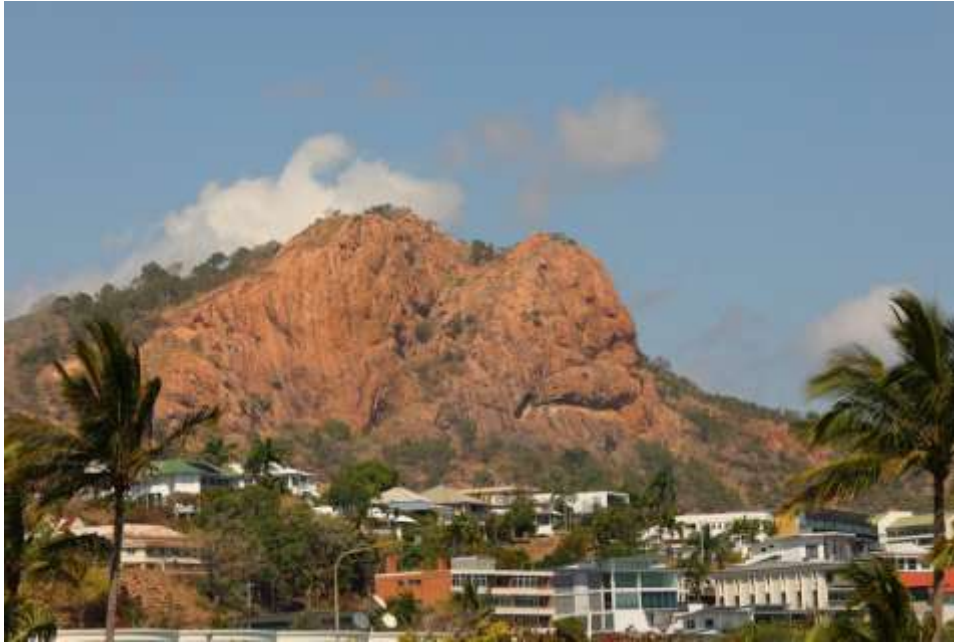
Locomotives and cane-filled railcars



Railcars entering the tipper

Queensland Coast 2

We move south to Townsville, park our RVs, and walk aboard a ferry to Magnetic Island. With Bob and Heather, we share a tiny rental car that we climb into over the sides, as it has no roof or doors. It is perfect for scooting around the small island, though it drives like a go-cart with five forward gears.



Townsville landmark



Ferry to Magnetic Island

We have three targets: finding koalas, finding rock wallabies, and eating lunch at a seaside restaurant. We tried to find koalas two years ago, and some in our group did find them, but not us. We even looked in the known streets without luck. This time we stop to talk to two bicyclists who live on the island and can give us specific directions. We find the small grove of blue gum trees and spot our first two koalas even before we can reconnoiter how to get out of the tiny car. Heather finds another pair at the back of the grove and when we return to the street we find two more, including one at eye level. If we had film cameras, the cost would be enormous because we just cannot get enough of photographing these delightful marsupials.



Koala, a doe and a joey





Koala claws

Satisfied with our success, we drive to the far side of the island where many people are swimming in the gentle bay or sunbathing on the sand beach. While eating lunch I notice a flimsy nest suspended from the black cord of an outdoor ceiling fan. It looks like a sunbird nest and, sure enough, about 15 min. later a Olive-backed Sunbird appears with a feather in its bill. It springs into the side opening and feathers its nest.



Heading back across the island we run into Ed who tells us where he and Carrie found a rock wallaby. We drive to the area and also find the Allied Rock-wallaby, a new mammal species for me.



Allied Rock-wallaby

Queensland Coast 3

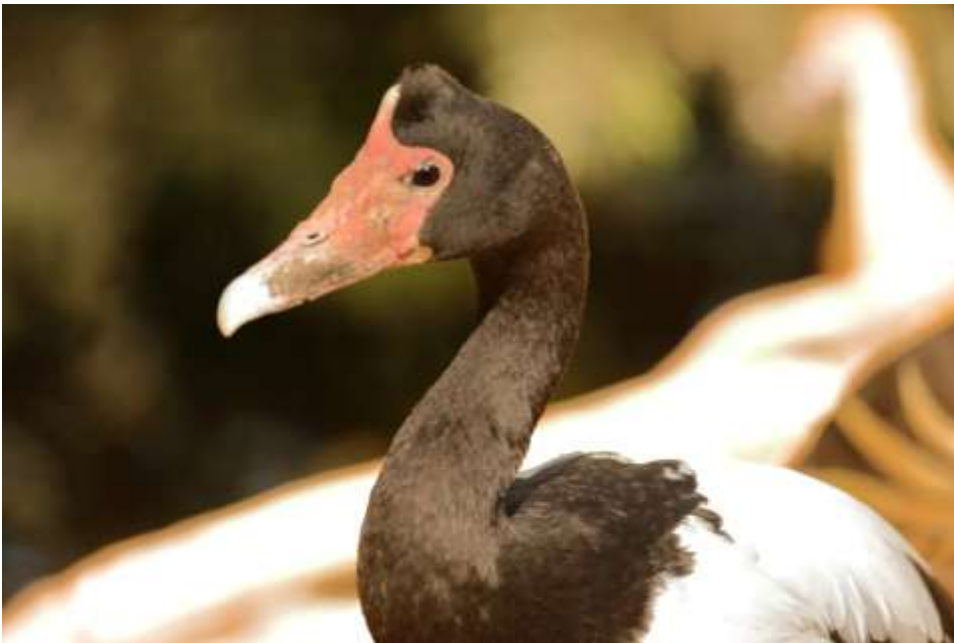
Our visit to the Billabong Sanctuary includes animals captive, wild, and fake: you are the judge for these photos.



Wandering Whistling-Ducks



Estuarine crocodile



Magpie Goose



Dusky Moorhen



Wombat



Python



Estuarine crocodile

Queensland Coast 4

Bob, Heather, and I bird Townsville Commons Conservation Park. I hope to find a jabiru and, in fact, Heather spots a distant one, too far to photograph. This is their first trip to Australia and Heather tells me they have seen over 120 life birds so far. Not too many photos to post today, as most birds are distant. One of these is almost a football field's length away, a Red-backed Fairywren, a bird less than 5 in. in length, yet recognizable in my photo. Flocks of Royal Spoonbills fly over the marsh with bulbous bills that help in identification.



Red-backed Fairywren



Royal Spoonbill

Closer than most, an Australian White Ibis flies overhead. Remarkable in my photo is the red line. This is bare pink skin along the wing bones, normally orange, but the line turns scarlet in breeding season.



Australian White Ibis

We leave Townsville and drive to Cairns where we will return the RVs. One stop is at a coastal park in Cardwell.



Coastal park in Cardwell



Lamington National Park 1

Overnight in Cairns, then an early flight to Brisbane where a shuttle bus meets us, we are driven high in the mountains to the crest at Lamington National Park. En route, we stop at a winery and then the winding road uphill, sometimes single lane, always narrow. At the winery, I photograph a Little Friarbird feeding on the nectar of the violet blossoms of jacaranda. I found the juxtaposition of bird and flower so interesting I did not know which one to post here, so you are getting multiple shots.



Little Friarbird on acaranda









While I was photographing the friarbird, a Wedge-tailed Eagle flies overhead. Although it is flying very high, I get a nice black-and-white silhouette showing the wedge tail.



Wedge-tailed Eagle

We see numerous Pretty-faced Wallaby on the roadside as we wind uphill.



Pretty Face Wallaby with a bulging pouch

Upon arriving at the resort, we check into our villas, three couples per villa with individual bedrooms and bathrooms, sharing a kitchen, living room, and balcony. Within minutes after stepping onto the balcony, rosellas, honeybirds, bowerbirds, and parrots fly to the railing and tables. A bit of food entices them to rest on our hands and, as Elaine finds out, even snatch food from our fingertips while remaining in flight. Surprised and delighted, one Crimson Rosellas lands on Shari's head.



Shari holding a Crimson Rosella



Regent Bowerbird feeding from Elaine's fingers



Crimson Rosella surprises Shari

Lamington National Park 2

Lots of activities today: a Billy-Tea-and-Damper excursion to the cliffs of Luke's Farm in the morning, ziplining in the afternoon, and a trip to see glowworms in a deep dark woods at night. On the way to breakfast, a few of us walk and bird slowly uphill to the lodge shortly after dawn. Most bird photos are in early morning fog, so I only have a few to show. Quite common are White-browed Scrubwrens that feed on the ground like sparrows. Bowerbirds are exceedingly common and I will write more about them tomorrow. The female has a dark brown bill, so my photo confused me until I recognized it was an immature male, not a female. It looks so different from the adult. The Pied Currawong is more easily heard than seen, using distinctive gurgling sounds that vaguely sound like its name.



White-browed Scrubwren



Immature male Regent Bowerbird



Adult male Regent Bowerbird



Pied Currawong

The most specular of birds is the Australian King Parrot. It certainly steals the show, especially when it lands on a shoulder or my hat, which frequently happens.



Australian King Parrot

The sun sets at 5:55 PM over the distant mountains and we line up for photos. Eight minutes after sunset and in dim lighting, we are drinking wine on the balcony of the second story bar when I see an Eastern Spinebill in the shrubbery below. Even though the lighting is poor, I try for a photo. Remarkably, at an ISO of 12,800 the image is bright with a pitch-black background and surprisingly sharp given the conditions. As the photo clearly shows, the spinebill is another in the honeyeater family.



Photographing the sunset



Eastern Spinebill after sunset

At 8 PM, a 4-wheel-drive bus picks us up and drives to the bottom of the zipline hill. From there, using flashlights (called torches in Australia), we hike a third mile deep into dense tropical forest. Along the way we see a brushtail possum clinging to a tree branch. The Australian possums are marsupials related to our American opossums and are strictly nocturnal. At the terminus of our walk, we sit on plank benches while viewing thousands of glow worms that look like stars in the night sky. Our guide gives an excellent presentation on the biology of glow worms, pointing out how rare it is to see them outside of a dark cave. Their requirements are absolute darkness, wet habitat, and no wind. We hear the wind blowing high above us in the canopy, but where we sit, it is dead calm.



Mountain Brushtail Possum

Lamington National Park 3

Bowerbirds are fascinating to watch and I spent an hour today doing just that. Each bowerbird species has a favorite color. For Satin Bowerbirds, it is shades of blue. The male picks up scraps of bottlecaps, plastic spoons, broken pieces of plastic: anything as long as it is blue. It places them as decoration around its bower. Using stiff grass stalks, it maneuvers them one-by-one into an upright arrangement with two sides and a passageway through the center. In idle times, the bowerbird rests in his bower: a bachelor pad or man's cave. A brushturkey walks by while the bowerbird ignores the intrusion. The male bowerbird picks up another stick and turns it into position on his bower. Just then, about a dozen feet deeper into the forest, a female Satin Bowerbird lands on a horizontal branch about a foot above the forest, conveniently in a spot of sunlight penetrating the tall trees and underbrush. The male takes notice and picks up a blue object and a yellow flower, calls loudly, and parades around his bower as the female watches the display. After about ten minutes, the female loses interest and flies away.



Bower of vertical sticks surrounded by blue objects



Satin Bowerbird in his bower



Brushturkey invades the Satin Bowerbird's territory



Bowerbird adding a stick to his bower



Female Satin Bowerbird on branch about a dozen feet from the bower



Male Satin Bowerbird attracting the female

Sydney

From Brisbane, we fly to Sydney and do the tourist thing: four days of Hop-on Hop-off bus tour, Sydney Harbour Bridge, Botanic Gardens, Sydney Opera House tour, Bondi Beach, Harbor boat ride, Paddy's Market, museums, restaurants, etc. The highlight is attending opera highlights sung by four excellent opera singers and narrated by the comical piano accompanist. Our last night culminates with a fireworks display over Darling Harbour, viewed from our hotel balcony.









