AUSTRALIA - Queensland & Northern Territory
September 20 - October 1, 2012
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QUEENSLAND

Sept 20 - Cairns

Twelve participants accompanied me on a delightful trip to Australia in September, the beginning of spring for this southern hemisphere continent. We toured Queensland and the Northern Territories, with an extension covering Western Australia and Tasmania, in search of avian species that inhabit this vast continent.

We explored a variety of habitats - coastal lowland and heathland, tropical rainforest, savannah woodlands, and widespread eucalyptus forest - finding an impressive diversity of birds. Our tour began in Cairns, “Gateway to the Great Barrier Reef,” on the eastern coast of Queensland. Some of our group had arrived in this small city a few days early to relax and recover from jetlag, after the long journey across the Pacific. I had already been ‘Down Under’ for about 2 weeks, and had spent the previous 3 days at O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat, south of Brisbane, with Peggy, Ginger, Pam and John.

In Cairns, I met up with our wonderful local guide, Barry Davies, and joined up with Marie, Lisa, Enid, Janis, Vicki, Joy and Anna Marie. Everyone’s flight schedules had us arriving at different times, so our whole group was not together until the end of the day! We explored the northern end of Trinity inlet, where the habitat was little more than mangroves lining a typical tropical suburban and coastal habitat, but provided plenty of avian activity to hold our attention. We saw Mangrove Robin, Long-billed Gerygone, Green Oriole, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Collared Kingfisher, and Olive-backed Sunbird. A diminutive Double-eyed Fig Parrot (right) was coaxed out of its nest hole. We found Yellow, Brown and Dusky Honeyeaters, the first of 43 honeyeater species that we would log on our trip. This large, diverse family of birds relies upon Eucalyptus trees - each species specializing in a different type of Eucalyptus, which are widespread throughout the continent.

Australian White Pelicans were seen in a small flock, feeding cooperatively. Gulls were unusually easy to identify, because we only had one choice, the ubiquitous Silver Gull. (Not until we reached Tasmania, did we have to worry about a second gull species!) We were able to separate a large group of shorebirds by size. The largest were Black-tailed Godwits, contrasting with the smallest Red-necked Stints, which fed more actively than the resting Great Knots, Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers. This was our only occurrence of Terek Sandpipers.
We took lunch at a small deli near our hotel, and met up with another member of our party, Nancy. After eating, we took off to visit a couple of spots around the city. The first stop was to see the spectacle of thousands of Spectacled Fruit Bats adorning the tops of trees. Driving through a cemetery, we oohed and aahed at some colorful Rainbow Bee-eaters and a large congregation of Bush Stone-Curlews resting in the shade of gravestones.

We spent most of the afternoon at the lovely Botanical Gardens and adjacent Centenary Lakes. In this tropical lowland forest habitat, we found noisy Spangled Drongos, Black Butcherbird, Metallic Starlings, and Australian Figbirds. Another honeyeater was added to our list, Hornbill Friarbird, a large drab-looking bird with bare, black facial skin.

Amongst the most fascinating of avian nesting activities is that of the megapods, a small family of large-footed birds that build mounds to house their eggs. We had our first encounter with Australian Brush Turkeys and Orange-footed Scrubfowl in the Botanical Gardens, and watched a pair of scrubfowl attending to their huge nest mound, six feet high and fifteen feet across. The birds regulate the internal temperature of the mound by opening and closing the mound, and adding or removing sand and leaf materials, as needed to maintain temperature for the eggs.

Our first raptors included Whistling, Black and a Brahminy Kite. We sighted another honeyeater, Brown-backed, along with an actively feeding female Leaden Flycatcher, and a Varied Triller foraging methodically through the foliage. In a small pond, pairs of Pacific Black Ducks and a few Australian White Ibis foraged along the banks, while a lone Magpie Goose stood in ankle deep water. We were all excited when Nancy spotted a motionless Blue-winged Kookaburra (left), one of the birds most associated with the country of Australia.

John, Pam, Ginger and Peggy arrived from Brisbane in time to join us for dinner at the RSL Club, where we first saw the gaming rooms that are located in every hotel/pub in the country. Gambling is among the most popular pastimes in Australia!

**Sept 21 - Great Barrier Reef**

On the second day of our Australian tour, we boarded the 110-passenger catamaran “Ocean Spirit,” for an all-day excursion to the edge of the Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef system in the world, and home to an incredible diversity of marine-based wildlife. This was our first, and longest, of four boat rides throughout our 3-week tour, as we sailed 25 miles offshore.

As our boat cruised out of the harbour, we spotted an Osprey standing on a marker, and our first terns of the day, Gull-billed, Crested and Caspian, before settling in for the two-hour sail to the reef on this gorgeous day.
We dropped anchor at Michaelmas Cay (above), a picturesque, low-lying, sand reef surrounded by magical coral gardens teeming with exotic marine life. This tiny, sparsely-vegetated cay is also a protected sanctuary for 20,000 migratory seabirds, making it one of the most important nesting sites in the Southern Hemisphere.

Ours was the last of three boats to arrive, and we used a dinghy to transport the group 200-yards to the shore. A small beach area was roped off as the designated spot for swimming and snorkeling. Most of our group opted to do so, even for just a short time. Lisa made the most of it, forgoing even the wonderful lunch spread! We maximized our hours here, patrolling the beach and looking for a Black Noddy amongst the thousands of nesting Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns. Barry remarked that it had been all Black Noddies a few months earlier. A couple of Great Frigatebirds floated over the cay, while pairs of Lesser Crested Terns chased each other in courtship display.

Looking beyond the masses of terns nesting on top of the cay, we stood on tiptoe for glimpses of birds on the other side. I could make out a Brown Booby or two, before losing the view into the sandy slope.

Following lunch, Barry had arranged for the crew to take us birders on a boat ride around to the other side of the cay. This gave us an excellent view of the nesting Brown Boobies, as well as a number of loafing Black-naped Tern and Little Terns.

Our last outing at the reef was to pile in two-by-two, sitting side-by-side into a glass-sided submarine that took us over and around magnificent corals, giant clams and schools of colorful fish, a brief glimpse of the great number of marine creatures that rely upon the resources of the Great Barrier Reef, one of the largest natural wonders of the world, and a globally important site for wildlife diversity.

**Sept 22 - Cairns to Daintree**

The third day of our Australian Tour began early, as several of us went out before breakfast, to explore the Cairns Esplanade. This wonderful recreational area features picturesque palm trees lining a paved walkway that runs the length of Trinity Inlet. Exercise was clearly the order of the day, with beach volleyball, jogging and various cardiovascular work-outs in full swing, even at this early hour! Per the custom of many busy pedestrian corridors, one has to stay to their side of the path, in this case, the left side. I heard a mother admonish her young sons who wandered into the right, “You weren’t born in America.”
For us it was a marvelous location for birding, even with the tide being far out. We enjoyed up-close views of Whimbrels, comparing them to Eastern Curlew foraging nearby. Three Royal Spoonbills (*right*) paced around a small pool, bills swaying in the water from side to side, stirring up what they could, much to the benefit of a Little Egret following them. A beautifully-patterned Buff-banded Rail stalked along a ridge of mud, hunting for its breakfast. Scaly-breasted Munia were feeding in short grass along the beach, as Peaceful Doves strutted about. Pairs of Australasian Figbirds, part of the oriole family, rose from their roost sites to perch on tree tops and catch the morning's warmth.

Janis had already sussed-out the local birding scene, when she arrived a day early. She gleefully pointed out the Esplanade’s “Tree of Knowledge” under which the local ‘birding elite’ would sit daily on the “Bullshit Bench,” to discuss the comings and goings of the avian world in front of them. No doubt they saw the Lesser Sand Plovers, Red-capped Plovers and pairs of Black-fronted Dotterel patrolling the open flats, as we did.

Following breakfast our whole group headed north of Cairns, and up the eastern slope of the Great Divide to Kuranda. From Kuranda we took the Sky Rail Rainforest Cableway over the pristine tropical rainforest of the Barron Gorge National Park to Tjapukai. The Cableway construction is marvelous, ensuring minimal impact to this world heritage rainforest.

We boarded gondolas in groups of 4, for the 7.5 km scenic ride, with stops at two mid-stations. At the first stop, Barren Falls, we followed a short boardwalk to three lookouts of the falls, while Red Peak, the second stop, had a 175-meter rainforest boardwalk. Avian activity was rather slow, and communication was a challenge between separate gondolas, but we managed to find Little Shrikethrush, Graceful Honeyeater and Spectacled Monarch. We also saw Tree Martins, Topknot Pigeons and fairly close views of a pair of perched Pacific Baza.

Our journey ended at the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park, where we had lunch at the cafe. We were treated to demonstrations by indigenous people of traditional storytelling, fire-making, boomerang throwing, dance and music along with the obligatory didgeridoo, much to Vicki’s delight, who has been taking didgeridoo lessons. John was even inspired to get up and join the dance!

Leaving the coastal, palm-fringed beaches, we drove through the lowland tropical rainforest on the escarpment and past sugar cane fields that had sadly replaced the forest, to Daintree, an area in Northern Queensland.
Since arriving in Australia, we were all eager to see the animals most associated with the country; as luck would have it, we saw a mob of Agile Kangaroos in a field while driving. Unfortunately, we were not in a position to pull the bus over for them, however, Barry was able to stop for a flock of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins. There was great excitement when Enid spotted a Laughing Kookaburra. We also saw Bar-shouldered Dove, Graceful Honeyeater and Sacred Kingfisher, a smaller member of the “kookaburra” family.

Hook-a-Barra, a play on kookaburra, was the name of a small commercial set-up for fishing barramundi. Peering through a fence, we could see Whiskered Terns quartering the ponds, Nankeen Night-Herons roosting in trees, as well as Rajah Shelduck and Black-winged Stilts on the banks.

Pheasant Coucal was the last new bird for the day, seen before arriving at the picturesque, laid back Daintree Village. Greeted by Trish and Andrew, hosts extraordinaire at the Red Mill, our group was too large for all of us to stay in their wonderful abode, so some of us settled into rooms at the adjacent Campground. It had been a wonderfully full day 'Down Under,' and everyone was eager to see what the next would bring!

Sept 23 - Daintree River and around Cape Kimberley

Our adventure in Australia continued on a foggy morning, with a pre-breakfast boat ride on the Daintree River. Our group of a dozen participants filled the boat to capacity, under the very capable and charismatic local guide, Murray. Barry and I went separately, with local guide “Sauce,” as in Worcester Sauce. In fact, his last name is Worcester… Australians have a great sense of humor!

The fog burned off quickly, revealing wonderful sightings on our two-hour excursion. Amid a background din of continuously-calling Green (or Yellow) Orioles, we saw Forest, Azure and Sacred Kingfishers, and a brief glimpse of Little Kingfisher. Fringed with tropical rainforest, and agricultural clearings, the river serves as a corridor for mangrove species. Several Nankeen Night-Herons were roosting half way up trees, while a Striated Heron skulked along the river bank. Our guides pointed out nests of Brown-backed Honeyeaters, untidy little structures that were hanging over the water. A Pacific Koel, a parasitic cuckoo, caught our attention as it flew across the width of the river. Australian Darter, and all the expected cormorants, Great, Little Black and Little Pied were diving for their meals. We were delighted to find a Green Tree Snake and a few basking Saltwater Crocodiles, the most feared of Australia's fauna!
Back at the Red Mill bed-and-breakfast, Trish and Andrew, our gracious hosts, served us a delicious breakfast on the balcony, fortifying us well before we headed off towards Cape Tribulation.

We took the short ferry ride across to Cape Kimberley and drove along the Cape Tribulation Road. Part of the Daintree National Park, the area encompasses lowland tropical rainforest with understory dominated by Licuala Palms and ferns. Leading into coastal mangroves, this region features the richest rainforest plant diversity in the country.

With patience, we were successful in tracking down a Noisy Pitta at Cape Kimberley. A skittish Emerald Dove (*right*) was a little easier to see. We had good views of both Northern Fantail and a pair of Pied Monarchs. Honeyeaters, a large, diverse family of bird species in Australia, play an important role in dispersing fruit and pollen, and we added yet another species to our growing list, a Yellow-spotted Honeyeater.

We visited a few of several short boardwalks within Daintree National Park. The Jindalba (“foot of the mountain”) boardwalk led us through a lush, shady rainforest on an elevated walkway. This is usually one of the better spots to find Southern Cassowary, Australia’s second largest bird after the Emu, but we came up empty-handed. A female Victoria Riflebird, one of four Birds-of-Paradise found in Australia, was seen briefly. Macleay’s Honeyeater, Rufous Fantail, Grey Whistler, Large-billed Scrubwren, Spectacled Monarch and Little Shrike-Thrush all showed well. We could hear Superb Fruit Doves calling but had difficulty locating. As we ate our boxed lunches at some picnic tables, a Shining Bronzed Cuckoo flew into the stately fig tree above us.

Driving to the next boardwalk, we laughed at the Australian sense of humor, as evident by some road signs. One sign depicted a cassowary, and another below it showed a speed bump. Someone had written “before” on the cassowary sign, and “after” on the lower sign, altering the speed bump to make it look like a dead cassowary! Despite the signs and prime habitat, we saw no Cassowarys, living or dead!

A short walk on the Marrja (“jungle” or “rainforest”) Botanical boardwalk took us through the mangroves just as the tide was coming in, where we saw Spotted Catbird, Shining Flycatcher, Mistletoebird and a vocal Black Butcherbird.

Butterflies were very good in this region of coastal Queensland, and our to date we recorded Cairns Birdwing, Hamadryad, Clearwing Swallowtail, Ulysses Swallowtail (think blue morpho), Varied Eggfly, Scarlet Jezebel, White-banded Line Blue and Orange Bush Brown. On the grounds of the Red Mill B&B, we saw a Northern Brown Bandicoot (*left*), a fat, rat-like marsupial, rounding out another beautiful day ‘Down Under.’
We got another early start on our 'Down Under' tour, starting the day with a pre-breakfast stroll along the Stewart Creek Road. It was relatively quiet as we walked the forest edge adjacent to the Daintree River, but we did find Forest Kingfisher, a female Leaden Flycatcher (left), Varied Triller, Bar-shouldered Dove and the common Dusky Honeyeater.

Back at the Red Mill B&B for breakfast, our attention was drawn to a large Golden Orb Spider and Giant White-lipped Treefrogs. It was not the only amphibian we saw, the other being that nemesis to Australia's native wildlife, the invasive Cane Toad. We said goodbye to our gracious hosts, Trish and Andrew, and headed out to explore local beaches.

At Wonga Beach, a lovely walk produced Brown Booby, Crested Tern and an Olive-backed Sunbird flitting about the trees that served as barrier between the beach and the rural road. Continuing on to Newell Beach, we watched a White-bellied Sea Eagle soaring over the shoreline, and a Pacific Baza flying up the rainforest slope.

We drove as far as we could along Newell Beach to Saltwater Creek and located our target bird, the Beach Thick-knee, on the far side of the creek. This was a birdy area, with excellent views of Sacred and Collared Kingfisher, Striated Heron, Grey-tailed Tattler and Common Sandpiper.

Leaving the coast, our journey took us into the Great Dividing Mountain Range, which rises sharply from coastal lowlands, and traverses the length of the country along the eastern coastline. We traveled northwest of Cairns to Kingfisher Park in the Julaten Tablelands, situated at the northern end of the Atherton Tablelands. The landscape changed from rainforest along the escarpment, to patches of eucalyptus forest and open agricultural lands.

The Kingfisher Park wildlife sanctuary encompasses a small, isolated patch of remnant rainforest surrounded by cane fields. Lindsay and Keith, our lodge hosts, greeted us upon arrival, and settled us into our rooms. Soon we migrated to the porch and feeders where several new species were present, providing an engaging distraction as we ate our lunch. A dozen Red-browed Finches took turns on the feeders, while the nicely-patterned Macleay’s Honeyeater (right) and the large Blue-faced Honeyeater made regular forays into the feeding area. Emerald Doves wandered in the shadows along with a shy Silvereye. Out in the gardens, we watched a pair of Metallic Starlings coming in to drink from a small pool of water, Rainbow Lorikeets whizzing around, and a Pale Yellow Robin hunting insects a few feet off the ground.

We spent most of the afternoon on Mt. Lewis, about 20 kms away along a winding dirt road that climbed to 3000 feet in northeastern Queensland. At the mouth of a forest trail, we enjoyed good looks of Grey Fantail, Eastern Spinebill, Bridled and Lewin’s Honeyeater and a couple of Mountain Thornbills. A White-headed Pigeon and small flocks of Topknot Pigeon flew overhead. The lovely Macleay’s Swallowtail flittering about the forest opening was a new butterfly for the trip.
The trail, wide enough to walk two abreast, wound through a mixed highland tropical rainforest, revealing a number of upland rainforest specialties. Low-perching Grey-headed Robin’s were encountered frequently along the path, and Joy found the first of several buff colored Bower’s Shrike-thrushes, endemic to these highlands, which were less conspicuous in the mid canopy. We got fleeting glimpses of Spotted Catbirds as they zipped across the trail.

The loud call of the Tooth-billed Bowerbird alerted us to its presence. Bowerbirds are named for their unique construction of bowers, and this species has a staging area that it has cleared of debris, and decorated with large green leaves, specifically placed upside-down. From a stalk within this stage, the male bowerbird sings and displays to attract a mate. For such a large bird, albeit a dull one, the Tooth-billed Bowerbird was surprisingly difficult to locate.

We found a family group of seven, ground-feeding Chowchillas, part of an endemic Australian family of birds. These thrush-sized birds with pale eye-rings, were remarkably quiet as they rummaged through leaf litter. Unlike other species that scratch backwards through the leaves, Chowchillas kick out to the side! The females are more colorful than the males, something I had noticed with a few other Australian species, in that they had an orange throat and breast with white belly, in contrast to the all-white underside of males.

Other species were encountered included Yellow-throated Scrubwren, an attractive, mostly terrestrial species, that seemed to follow the Chowchillas. Atherton Scrubwren, similar in size, though duller-plumaged, were seen by themselves, and some of our group saw a Fern Wren.

We returned to the Kingfisher grounds to visit the stream, in the hopes of seeing a Platypus, a rarely-encountered aquatic mammal. As we waited patiently along the upper bank, scanning the gently-flowing water below, we noticed a number of birds coming to the far water line for a drink. These included Rufous Fantail, Spotted Catbird, Grey-headed Robin, Long-billed and Atherton Scrubwren. Suddenly a Platypus appeared, looking very much like a log. It rose to the surface, dipped below, swam rapidly along the bank, then turned away and vanished. All this happened so fast, and we knew we would return at first light to try and see the elusive Platypus again.

Walking back to the lodge, Keith showed us a roosting Papuan Frogmouth, the largest of three frogmouth species found in Australia. The perfect host, Keith next showed us the resident Barn Owl. At dusk, right on cue, it left its roost high up in a eucalyptus tree, flew the length of the grove, then perched nicely for all of us to see.

After dinner we retired to our rooms, but were summoned a short time later by Barry urging us up for a pair of Barking Owls (left). Following their ‘woof-woof’ bark we found them in an open tree. While watching the owls, we could hear Bush Stone Curlews winding up and calling in the distance. The sounds of the night lulled us to sleep after another wonderful day in Australia.

**Sept 25 - Kingfisher Park to Rose Gums**

Yesterday, we had just the briefest glimpse of one of Australia’s most elusive animals, the Platypus. Today, at first light, Keith, the tall British owner of Kingfisher Park, led us back to the stream, where we were delighted to see the shy, amphibious creature swim silently past us. A fantastic start to another day on our ‘Down Under’ tour!
Keith continued guiding us on a walk through the grounds. We observed myriad nesting activity, which was no surprise, as our trip occurred at the beginning of Australia’s spring, and birds were focused on following the age-old instinct to reproduce. We watched a Pale Yellow Robin work on its nest, situated head height on a small fork in a tree. In a stark contrast of nesting behavior, a pair of Orange-footed Scrubfowl were engaged in their daily ritualistic maintenance and thermal control of their large-size nest mound, well established along a dirt road. Noisy, colony-nesting Metallic Starlings were busy adding final touches to their nests in several eucalyptus trees. Keith told us that the large colony had recently split up, and we were observing a new one.

A Blue-winged Kookaburra, one of several on the property, alighted and posed for us on a tree. Gorgeous Forest Kingfishers surveyed for their morning meal from elevated perches. Amongst the many colorful Rainbow Lorikeets feeding in the eucalyptus, we picked out plainer-looking Scaly-breasted Lorikeets by their green heads, both species being highly sociable. We got the desired views of Spotted Catbird, and some saw a Scarlet Honeyeater as it fed on a flowering bottlebrush.

Leaving Kingfisher Park, we traveled south to Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat in the Atherton Tablelands. The landscape within this fertile rolling plateau, about 2000 feet above sea level, was reminiscent of parts of northern Europe. Patches of relic rainforest and dry eucalyptus were interspersed between dairy farms and agricultural plots growing sugarcane, mangos, peanuts, bananas, and coffee.

We made the first of many stops at the Julateen State School. Australian Swiftlets flew overhead, while Yellow, Blue-faced and Yellow-faced Honeyeater moved about the flowering trees. We located a Great Bowerbird, the largest member of it's family, along with its impressive bower under a shrub. This bower, the largest construction of the bowerbirds, spans a 2-foot long corridor, with sides made of sticks. The entrance was covered in small grey materials, mostly small squares of matted fabric, with a few bits of broken glass adding decoration. In this fascinating structure, the Great Bowerbird displays to attract a mate.

We stopped at Sides Road to look for Blue-faced Parrot-finch amongst grasses adjacent to cane fields and a small copse. The Parrot-finch eluded us, but we did well to see the aptly-named Superb Fruit Dove, and a very confiding Pacific Baza sitting on a branch over the track. Assorted insect eaters included Yellow-breasted Boatbill, Spectacled and Pied Monarch (right), Grey Whistler, Little Shrike-thrush and Lovely Fairy-wren, its female showing prominent blue ear-coverts.

At Abattoir Swamp we walked out to the bird hide (bird blind), with nothing to view beyond. Around the hide, however, honeyeaters were quite conspicuous, including Brown, White-cheeked, White-throated, and a Yellow Honeyeater on a nest. In the car park, we spotted a female Red-winged Parrot, blending perfectly into the landscape.

We searched for our next target, the Australian Bustard, in a completely different habitat - grasslands interspersed with eucalyptus forest. This nomadic species, one of the heaviest flying birds, has been steadily declining, and it took a good deal of scanning to find one. We finally located a male walking almost head height in the grasses of the tropical savannah around Maryfarms West Road. Diamond Doves and a Golden-headed Cisticola were also seen in this area.

At a roadside cafe in Mt. Malloy, we ordered sandwiches and drinks, and enjoyed picnicking at a local park a block away. Once a prosperous gold mining town, Mt. Malloy is now a small outpost with just a few necessary stores. We were grateful that one of them offered lunch on this gorgeous day.
Just outside the town of Atherton lies a large seasonal wetland within Hastie’s Swamp National Park. The tablelands supports an important population of Sarus and endemic Brolga Cranes. Both of these species were on show, feeding in a newly-plowed field. From the second floor of a two-story hide, we scoped numerous ducks, Eurasian Coots, Hardheads, Grey Teal and hundreds of Plumed Whistling Ducks lining the edge of the mudflats.

We reached Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat at dusk, and were warmly greeted by our hosts Peta and Jon. Our group’s accommodation was spread throughout the grounds, which featured intimate pole-and-timber treehouses built by Jon, each named for a bird species. Upon opening the door to the abode I was sharing with co-guide, Barry, and switching on the light, Barry calmly stated, “There is a python at your feet.” Indeed, a 5-foot long Jungle Carpet Python (above) was laid out at our feet on the door mat! I wondered if anyone else in our group had such an exciting encounter!

We enjoyed an excellent dinner on the outdoor deck, and anticipated another exciting day to come in Australia.

**Sept 26 - Rose Gums and Etty Bay**

The spring dawn chorus of Queensland, Australia provides a wonderful way to start any day. I awoke to the loud, cracking call of a Eastern Whipbird, and, from the deck of our cozy treehouse abode, tuned in to many other birds singing their morning songs. There was the “did you walk” call of a Brown Cuckoo-shrike, a yodel from a Black Butcherbird, the rat-tat-tat machine gun call of Lewin’s Honeyeater, the melodious song of a Golden Whistler, the namesake sound of Wompoo Fruit Dove, and the loud, tropical note of a Victoria’s Riflebird.

Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat is set on 230 acres, abutting Wooroonooran National Park. Giant, towering Rose Gums trees *Eucalyptus grandis*, endemic to the highlands of Northern Queensland, dominate the property, which features a mix of rainforest and wet sclerophyll. With superb treehouse abodes, stunning outdoor deck dining area, and amazing landscape, Rose Gums rates as one of the finest eco-birding lodges of the world, in my book!

Before going to breakfast, we split into two groups to take turns watching a delightful scene. Peta had set up a special feeding area for Musky Rat-Kangaroos, a mini version of the rat-like bandicoot. Food was set-out and covered by a cage with an opening just large enough for the rat-kangaroo, Australia’s smallest kangaroo. The cage keeps out Brush-turkey thieves, but allows the kangaroo to come and go at will, much to our delight in watching him. While half the group ogled the kangaroo, the other half was at the back of the reception area, watching a large flock of Rainbow Lorikeets (right) and a couple of Australasian King Parrots coming in for their morning feed.
Most of the group joined me for a trip to the coast to search for Southern Cassowary. On the way out, we stopped to see a Pheasant Coucal resting on a fence post and saw numerous Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes feeding in roadside trees.

Since much of the area is covered in dairy farms and agricultural plots, we assumed that a large flock of white birds, numbering in the hundreds, standing in a just-plowed field were Cattle Egrets. Closer inspection showed them to be Sulphur-crested Cockatoos.

We continued looking for the elusive Cassowary, canvassing back and forth along a short distance in Etty Bay (below), a picturesque spot at the base of the escarpment on the Cassowary Coast, surprisingly sparsely populated, considering it's proximity to Cairns. We walked around the camping ground and edge of the rainforest where it meets the beach. People commented on our search, “You should have been here yesterday,” and “This morning it walked right by our caravan.” Someone even showed us a picture they took of one that had walked inside their tent! We were temporarily diverted to look at a Goaana, a large monitor lizard walking on the sandy beach, tongue-flicking in search of food. Alas, we never located a Cassowary, but enjoyed a delicious lunch at the local cafe, sampling “Spanish Mackerel” and chips, some kind of fish! Queensland is certainly the best region in Australia for butterflies and we were rewarded with a real beauty, a Green-spotted Triangle.

With a few hours to relax back at Rose Gums, some of the group relaxed while others joined Barry and I to look for the Victoria’s Riflebird that we heard calling in the morning. Barry located it at the top of a stump, 15 feet up, from which it was calling to attract a mate. Sadly, it flew before any of us got to see it.

We ended another lovely day in Queensland with another exquisite meal, thinking about more Australian adventures to come!

**NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**Sept 27 - Transfer from Queensland to Darwin**

We spent half of the day transferring from Queensland to Darwin, but before leaving Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, we took another chance to look for the Victoria’s Riflebird that our co-guide, Barry, had spotted briefly yesterday. At first light we assembled on the edge of the forest near to its territory. It was not long before some of our group saw a black bird shoot across a forest opening, it's call confirming it's identity, as we peered heard to see it. Eventually, our patience was rewarded with amazing looks of this bird-of-paradise. It flew into a tree, then over a grassy area, landing on a bare branch on the forest edge, revealing brilliant, iridescent purple and green gorget. We also heard Channel-billed Cuckoo, Rose-breasted and Superb Fruit-Doves.

We said our goodbyes to Peta and Jon, our lovely hosts of Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, as we had a 2-hour drive to Cairns, to catch the late morning flight to Darwin. On the way, we stopped briefly to observe a large mob of Agile Wallabies and some Sarus Cranes in a field.
A two-hour flight to Darwin dropped us into Australia's Northern Territory. This is the “Top End” of the country, temperatures were the mid 90’s, and the build up to the wet season, torrential rains and stifling heat was about to begin.

Being close to the airport, we visited Knuckey Lagoons on our way into Darwin. An expansive pond held a large number of Magpie Goose and an assortment of waterfowl including Rajah Shelduck and Green Pygmy Goose. Waders included Wood, Marsh and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, along with a beautiful Pied Heron (right). Comb-crested Jacana walked atop floating vegetation, and Australian Pratincoles dotted surrounding grounds.

A nice flurry of avian activity along the woods edge and orchard included Little and Silver-crowned Friarbirds, White-gaped Honeyeater, Paperbark Flycatcher and two Grey-crowned Babblers. Red-collared Lories whizzed by and both Whistling and Black Kites made forays around the lagoon.

We checked into our hotel in downtown Darwin, located on Knuckey Street. Our inquiries revealed that Knuckey was one of the first surveyors of the Northern Territory, obviously making his mark!

Janis, Anna Marie, Vicki, Ginger, Marie, Joy, Barry and I headed to the East Point Preserve and walked the Mangrove Trail. We found a Lemon-bellied Flycatcher just beginning construction on its nest. This species now goes by the name of "Flyrobin," as it looks more like robin than a flycatcher! Leaden and Shining Flycatchers, members of the monarch flycatcher family, showed well. Brown Honeyeaters were most common, followed by White-gaped and Rufous-banded Honeyeaters. The nicest may have been the Red-headed Honeyeater. A Bar-shouldered Dove, Green Oriole, Northern Fantail and Forest Kingfisher were also seen. A Collared Sparrowhawk streaked towards the mangroves, where we got extraordinary looks at a Brahminy Kite flying low overhead.

We enjoyed a lovely dinner outside at the Darwin Yacht Club, with a pleasant sea breeze swaying the palm trees and cooling us off from the heat. Tomorrow would be our first full day in Australia's Northern Territory!

**Sept 28 - Darwin to Kakadu**

Today marked our first full day of exploring Australia’s Northern Territory, beginning in Darwin, the most populous city in the territory, with approximately 125,000 people. Named for the famed naturalist who promoted natural selection theories of evolution, Darwin has fittingly evolved from a pioneer outpost to a modern, multi-cultural city overlooking a harbour.

From here we journeyed 40 miles east to the Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve, a remnant of earlier attempts to produce rice on the Adelaide River floodplain, and not far from Humpty Doo (you just can’t make these names up!). The habitat around Fogg Dam consists of a fringe of rainforest around the dam, and tropical...
savannah woodlands dominated by eucalyptus species, including Darwin Woollybutt, a favorite feeding tree of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo.

The one-lane track leading over the dam was too busy for us to stop, and getting out of the vehicle is not recommended because of lurking crocodiles. We did see a small flock of colorful Crimson Finch feeding on grass seeds on the slope down to the waters edge. A Broad-billed Flycatcher perched in a small bush. We enjoyed up-close views of a gorgeous Comb-crested Jacana, and there was great excitement when Lisa spotted a shy White-browed Crane (right) scouring the shallow water along the edge.

We walked through the Melaleuca paperbark tree forest, where we encountered the first biting insects of the trip - mosquitos! Fortunately the birding provided ample distraction. A couple of Rufous Whistlers and Varied Triller showed well, and we found a Large-billed Gerygone at its nest. Cuckoos were represented by a Cicadabird that Joy found, and a Little Bronzed Cuckoo. We had previously glimpsed Mistletoebird, but we enjoyed the cooperative ones seen here. A lovely Arafura Fantail, the “Top End” counterpart to the Rufous Fantail of the East Coast, flittered about the midstory. A Rose-crowned Fruit-dove called from the tree canopy, and was seen well by everyone. A Brush Cuckoo did almost the same thing as the fruit-dove, moving about from one place to another, eventually showing itself. A nice variety of butterflies included Swamp Tiger, Evening Brown, Cedar Bush Brown, Common Crow and Chocolate Argus.

Further on, we encountered Black-faced Woodswallows perched on roadside fences, and a large wetlands area hosting many wading birds. Barry was impressed by the largest flock of Little Curlews he’d ever seen, numbering in the thousands. There was also a decent number of Wandering Whistling Ducks, and the only Red-kneed Dotterel we would see.

We stopped for lunch at the Adelaide River Queen Restaurant, home of the leaping crocodile! It being a major tourist attraction! We joked that it ate the Mangrove Golden Whistler, which was nowhere to be found. We found a Broad-billed Flycatcher on nest, along with Varied Triller and Paperback Flycatcher.

Barry led us to a roadside pool of water, where we enjoyed good views of Double-barred Finch and Masked Finch, as well as Diamond Dove amongst several Peaceful Doves.

We had rarely a dull moment during our journey, with clever road signs to keep us laughing. One sign cautioned driving carefully for wildlife, saying "We like our Lizards Frilled not Grilled," in deference to local Frilled Lizard species! On another, someone had had blotted out the two LL’s of frilled!

By mid afternoon we reached the vast Kakadu National Park, Australia’s largest, encompassing approximately 20,000 sq km. Nearly 80% of the landscape in this expansive sandstone plateau is savannah woodlands comprised of eucalyptus and tall grasses, as well as tropical forest and billabongs. It was quite dry this time of year, though poles with foot markers hinted at the amount of water that covers some lower parts of the park during monsoon season, rendering roads impassable.
Along the South Alligator River we found a lone Black-necked Stork, known locally as the Jabiru. Little Corellas perched near the river and Torresian Crows were common. The well-situated Mamukala Hide, aka bird blind (right), provided views of a marsh full of Giant Lotus Lilies and dozens of active Magpie Geese, Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks, Comb-crested Jacanas, Purple Swamphen, Glossy Ibis and Pied Heron. We compared sizes of Little, Intermediate and Great Egrets. We were entertained by the sight of a Willie Wagtail hitching a ride on the back of a feeding Agile Wallaby, oblivious to its presence.

Our final stop of the day was a cultural tour of the modern Bowali Visitors Center, whose building design was inspired by an aboriginal rock shelter. We learned a bit about aboriginal culture and the importance of preserving this ancient Australian heritage. While leaving, Nancy spotted a gorgeous male Red-winged Parrot feeding beside the path.

By sunset we checked into the Gagudju Lodge at Cooinda, and headed to dinner. Kangaroo was on the menu, and it was excellent! We tucked in, preparing for a full day in Kakadu tomorrow.

**Sept 29 - Kakadu NP**

"Our land has a big story. Some times we tell a little bit at a time. Come and hear our stories .... " Such was the aboriginal welcome we felt at Kakadu National Park, covering nearly 20,000 square kilometers of Australia's Northern Territory. As a designated World Heritage site, Kakadu National Park is protected for its cultural as well as natural values, featuring exceptional landscape and unique biodiversity. The Park is a haven for more than 290 bird species, and we spent a full day here to see as many as we could, many of which are endangered or threatened species.

Our day began like many others in Australia, departing before breakfast for a two-hour boat cruise on the Yellow Water Billabong (ox bow lake), which is part of the South Alligator River floodplain. We enjoyed seeing a variety of bird life up close, including amazing views of a Little Kingfisher with a crayfish in it's bill. Repeated signs warned us of the dangers of crocodiles, though with the exception on one gliding towards us, the rest were basking lazily!

We drifted quietly by Whistling Kite and White-bellied Sea Eagle, both perched on riverbank trees, and stopped to watch Green Pygmy Goose and Comb-crested Jacanas, aka Lily Trotters, foraging in aquatic vegetation. A Nankeen Night Heron stood motionless in the shadows. Magpie Geese, Glossy Ibis, Rajah Shelduck, Royal Spoonbill, Plumed and Wandering Whistling Duck were seen resting and feeding in the shallows, while a pair of Whiskered Terns hunted across the marsh.
A Black-necked Stork, known locally as Jabiru, not to be confused with the New World Jabiru, was the tallest bird we encountered, though we did get considerably closer to an Australian Pelican. This one had a hole in its pouch, no doubt due to an encounter with another pelican that speared it! The biggest mammal was a Swamp Buffalo. Introduced from Asia almost 200 years ago, these have not been domesticated and are not only dangerous but of serious concern to the environment. We pulled up to the bank to get a head height look at two Water Pythons basking on branches overhanging the water.

Our boat captain happily obliged when we asked him to stop for views of some small passerines, little appreciated by the non-birder boat passengers. This afforded us good looks at Rufous-breasted and Bar-breasted Honeyeaters,BUFF-sided Robin, and Arafura Fantail, along with Broad-billed, Shining and Paperbark Flycatcher (right), the latter sitting on its nest whose outer layer was constructed with paperbark - hence where it gets its name from.

Following breakfast at the Gagudju Lodge, we drove to Nourlangie Rocks, an escarpment of rocky outcroppings that provided shelter to early aborigine inhabitants. This location is well known for its aborigine rock-art (left) dating back 20,000 years. Walking towards the outcropping, we found a Sandstone Helmeted Friarbird on a nest. John got a gorgeous photo of an Orange Lacewing butterfly. We gazed at a line of Green Ants trekking up tree trunks towards their nests made of interwoven leaves. White-lined, White-gaped and White-throated Honeyeaters were seen near a rock art painting depicting a kangaroo hunt. On the way back to our bus, we found Cicadabird and Rufous Whistler.

In the shadow of Nourlangie Rock lies Anbangbang Billibong. Most of the activity here seemed to be on the far side, we could see a dozen or so Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos and a large flock Little Corellas flying about. White-necked and Pied Herons hunted in a pool of water lilies.

With temperatures reaching about 100-degrees F, we took a mid-afternoon break from the heat and humidity. Some of our group visited the Cultural Center while others napped or relaxed. As temperatures cooled a bit, we took a late afternoon stroll across the grounds, seeking shade under stately trees. Avian activity picked-up and we came across an interesting assortment of birds, including Leaden Flycatcher, White-throated Honeyeater, Great Bowerbird, Pale Lemon Flyrobin, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (right), Pied Imperial Pigeons, Spangled Drongo and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos taking a sip of water from a leaking spigot.

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Reaching the river, we heard growling sounds reminiscent of a Howler Monkey, coming from the far bank. Joy spotted the vocalist, a Great Billed Heron, which is about the size of a Great Blue Heron, but very secretive, preferring to stay concealed along the rivers edge. We also got to see a Whistling Kite on its nest and heard a Barking Owl while it was still light outside!

Kakadu National Park had shared many wonders with us, and we looked forward to exploring another area of the Northern Territory as we continue our Australian adventure.

**Sept 30 - Kakadu to Pine Creek**

Today we ended our brief birding tour of Kakadu National Park, in Australia’s Northern Territory, with a pre-breakfast run to Nourlangie Rock. We tracked down a Rainbow Pitta in the tree canopy adjacent to an interesting display of aborigine rock-art. The morning was overcast and drizzly, which cooled the normally high temperatures; birding activity was markedly increased at this time of day, versus late morning. We enjoyed some common birds - Grey and Rufous Whistlers, and Bar-shouldered Dove - and added some new species to our list, including several Northern Rosellas feeding atop a eucalyptus tree, endemic Sandstone Shrike-Thrush, elusive Banded Fruit-Dove, and three Little Woodswallows flying around the escarpment. Walking up the trail to the overlook, we saw a pair of Spangled Drongos flying onto the trunk of a eucalyptus picking off green ants.

Returning to Gagudju Lodge for breakfast, we spotted three Partridge Pigeons besides the road, and watched them walk away into the woodland leaf litter. We checked out of the lodge, and birded the parking area while Barry settled our bill, getting great looks at Blue-faced and Rufous-banded Honeyeaters, Mistletoebird and Peaceful Dove.

Our ultimate destination was Pine Creek, located off the Stuart Highway, about 250 kms south of Darwin. We took our time getting there, stopping to bird several places. Barry spotted a Black-tailed Treecreeper flying across the road, and we pulled over to find two of them. This stretch of road was good for raptors, including Brown Falcon, Brown Goshawk and Little Eagle. At the Gungurul Bridge, several Dollarbirds perched on a high vantage point, making sorties out and back, and we saw Olive-backed and Green Orioles.

We turned off the main road and headed 37 kms to Gunlom, still inside Kakadu National Park. The rock outcroppings reminded us of landscape at Nourlangie, appropriate habitat to find Peregrine, Brown Falcon and the rare Grey Falcon soaring around the escarpment. While Lisa and Barry took a swim in the clear pool at the base of the 200 foot waterfall (left), the rest of our group explored the site. Red-collared Lorikeets and Red-capped Parrot flashed across the landscape, Black-chinned Honeyeaters nectared on eucalyptus, and we found a Helmeted Friarbird sitting on her nest. Back on the road, we stopped to watch a Common Bronzewing walking into the sparse woodland. Our last birds of Kakadu National Park were a small flock of Varied Lorikeets and a Pheasant Coucal.
We reached our destination, the old gold mining town of Pine Creek, with about an hour of daylight remaining. We made a brief stop in the local Cemetery to see an impressive 18-foot termite mound. Grey-crowned Babblers chased each other through vegetation, and we found Olive-backed Oriole and Crested Pigeon.

After checking into the Railway Hotel in downtown Pine Creek, we took a short stroll around the parks adjacent to our accommodation. Three species, Australian Figbirds and Red-collared Lorikeets and White-browed Woodswallows, were active in the area.

We walked to the nearby Pine Creek Hotel for dinner, stopping along the way to admire the Flying Fox (Fruit Bat) colony roosting in a residential backyard. It was the cooks night off, so it was basically do it yourself. Fortunately, Barry’s abilities as a chef were on par with his birding skills, and he did a masterful job grilling steaks for us at the local pub!

**Oct 1 - Pine Creek to Darwin**

Today we are deep in the Northern Territory of Australia, about 250 km south of Darwin, in the small town of Pine Creek. We savored our last full day of the main part of the tour in these northern reaches of the country, amidst a landscape of hot, dry, savannah woodlands dotted with scenic, rocky outcroppings. We awoke in our lovely little "railway carriages" to enjoy a selection of bread, jams, fruits and juices that our local co-guide, Barry, had set out for us, with accompanying cereal, coffee and tea.

A walk around the town of Pine Creek produced our first Hooded Parrots, along with six other parrot species: Northern Rosella, Little Corella, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Galah, Red-collared Lorikeet and Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. We took another look at the Grey-headed Flying Fox colony that we’d seen last night, and visited the impressive bower (display area) of a Great Bowerbird (right), featuring a tidy, open space with small grey stones at the entrances. Honeyeaters, Australia’s largest family of bird species, continued to be numerous, with Brown, Blue-faced, White-throated and White-gaped Honeyeaters all showing well. Barry decided to demonstrate boomerang-throwing on the cricket pitch grounds, but it didn’t work out exactly as expected, as the boomerang did not return to him!

Leaving Pine Creek, we began our journey back to Darwin, stopping frequently as we worked our way northward. We found hundreds of Galahs ground-feeding in a short grassy area, and watched them all fly off to another spot. A roadside stop highlighted a Black-breasted Buzzard, and two Wedge-tailed Eagles cruising over a ridge. While watching the raptors we also found White-winged Triller and Varied Lorikeets.

We stopped at the Adelaide River War Cemetery to find a variety of birds, including a very friendly Silver-backed Butcherbird. Lisa found the first of several Rufous-throated Honeyeaters amongst the more common Rufous-breasted Honeyeater. We watched in amazement as a Collared Sparrowhawk picked off a Cane Toad right from the claws of a Black Kite. The cemetery was a sobering reminder of the impact of World War II on the Northern Territory. 443 people died as a result of Japanese bombing raids from 1942-1943.

We lunched at a Subway, which is not so unusual for birders, but this one was inside a suburban mall! We looked unsuccessfully for a reported Rufous Owl at a nature park, but found a Tata Lizard and a number of butterflies including Chocolate Argus (left) and Common Crow.
Our last stop of the day was at Buffalo Creek, a northern suburb of Darwin, on the edge of the Timor Sea, to scan for waders on mudflats. While walking through the tropical woods and mangroves leading to the beach, we had wonderful looks at Red-headed Honeyeater, Green-backed Gerygone and Pale Yellow White-eye. The mudflats at low tide were well-exposed, and we edged far out on the mud to enjoy closer views of Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, Grey Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Great Knots, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Ruddy Turnstone, as well as 3 species of Terns - Little, Gull-billed and Caspian.

For dinner we returned to the Yacht Club at which we had dined many days ago, for another excellent meal outdoors, and reminiscing about the many wonderful memories of our two-week tour 'Down Under.' We bid fond farewells to Janis, Vicki and Lisa, who were not joining us on the trip extension to Western Australia.