

THE BIRDS OF THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK 2018



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We have been home now for 2 weeks after another taxing back to back trip and are just about over the jet lag and the bug we picked up while criss-crossing Indonesia on multiple flights. Still it was a successful trip with two more families under the belt- the Hylocitrea in Sulawesi, and the Noisy Scrub Bird in Cheynes Beach SW Australia- Unfortunately I never managed a photo of either. Looking back on the trip now I realise just how fortunate we were. We left Hongkong 24 hours before the typhoon struck and we flew into Palu Sulawesi just 4 weeks before the dreadful tsunami and earthquake devastated the place.



We booked with Rockjumper on their Highlights of Eastern Indonesia trip over a year ago (highlights are more than enough for us as Indonesia is a truly dreadful place) The Hylocitrea was the number one target, but Halmahera offered the bizarre Standardwing and West Papua the Wilsons Bird of Paradise- a strong contender for the most beautiful bird in the world. We then found another trip whilst idly trawling the web one day. Bellbird tours were offering a trip called the “great Northern Air Safari” which offered the opportunity of seeing most of Australia’s outback, including a visit to Ayers Rock (Uluru). The timing was perfect - it finished a week before the Indonesia trip started leaving us time to visit on our own SW Australia to look for the Noisy Scrubbird at a small beach resort called Cheynes Beach a few kilometres east of Albany.

Now there is only one way to visit most of the outback in 12 days and that is to fly and the plane we used- a 12 seat Cessna twin turbo prop was ideal for landing at all the small mining and cattle station airstrips we visited. This was a seriously capable plane which could reach speeds of 600 kilometres



an hour and fly at 29000 feet- and our Captain was just a slip of a lad only 24 years old, entrusted with a \$2mill dollar plane and not old enough to obtain a 4x4 licence in Australia. It is amazing how attached you can become to a little plane in just 12 days and we all (us and another 3 Aussie couples) thoroughly enjoyed our flying time each day.

We arrived in Melbourne a day early which gave us time to walk through the old arcades in the



city centre and go visit the Blue Penguins at St Kilda's Pier and watch the grebes and cormorants fishing along the rocks

We left Melbourne's Essendon airport early on a wet and cold winters' morning on our way to Mount Isa, a large mining town in QLD. Two hours later we dropped down into Broken Hill, another lead and silver mine to refuel. (I never knew that the BHP in BHP Billiton stood for Broken Hill Propriety) before flying on to Birdsville for lunch. The old outback pub is just 100 metres from

the runway and we had time for half an hours birding there before flying on to Mount Isa.

We had 2 nights at Mnt Isa – one of the few places where we stayed two nights. Bellbird are well known for their Grasswren tours and while they offered all 6 northern grasswrens (cut to 5 when permits could not be organised for access to the White-throated Grasswren) on this trip, over 200 other outback species were on offer. I did not realise the amount of time that would be dedicated to finding these grasswrens- especially when 2 of them the Sandstone and Pilbara are still only recognised as sub species on IOC. This was a problem for us as we had a list of over 100 species we wanted to find and would have been happy with 70 -our normal seen to wanted ratio so to get less than 60 was extremely disappointing. We simply did not have enough time for general birding until the last few days in Kakadu. Ideally the trip should have been a couple of days longer with an extra day in Broome (we had to leave an hour before the tide would have brought all the waders within reach) and an extra day in either Alice Springs or Mount Isa. Bellbird needs to realise not everyone is a Grasswren fanatic! especially when the specialised habitat of these birds – spinifex covered rocky hillsides and plains hold so few other species.

Having got my gripe out of the way, the trip overall was really great, offering a real insight into the Aussie way of life in the outback. Our first full morning at Mnt Isa was devoted to finding the Carpentarian Grasswren and despite hours of searching we never heard a squeak nor glimpsed the flash of tail. Still we did find a couple of species along the way. We had good views of Black-tailed Treecreeper. Red-browed Pardalote, Zebra Finch and Spinifexbird and brief views of Spinifex Pigeon- a stunning bird which we were to get much better views of in Alice Springs. Honeyeaters were on offer as well and we picked up Yellow-tinted, Grey-fronted, Grey-headed and Black- chinned. After a long a hot morning we retired to lake Moondarra for lunch passing several Wedge-tailed Eagles on the road side on the way. Little Woodswallows flew around us and we picked up a Painted Finch and the usual waterbirds. The Australian Finch family has to be one of the best-looking families in the world. They are just stunning little birds and we saw six different species on our travels



We then headed back to Mnt Isa. On a hill at the top end of town you can find the Kalkadoon Grasswren. This guy was easier to track down and we had difficult views staring uphill directly into the sun. Add to that Varied Parakeet, Silver-crowned Friarbird, Budgerigar, Paperbark Flycatcher and Purple-backed Fairywren and we had actually got off to a brilliant start little realising how things would slow down in the coming days.



Another early morning start saw us on our way to Alice Springs. Here we picked up a local guide, found a Little Crow and headed out to Simpson's Gap to look for a very difficult and little-known Honeyeater- Grey Honeyeater. A couple of hours did not produce the Honeyeater- Just lots of Thornbills- Yellow and Chestnut-rumped and Inland and a Weebill before it was time to move on to Ormiston Gorge to look for more exciting stuff. Ormiston Gorge lies in the eastern Macdonnell range and we stopped at the Botanic garden for lunch surrounded by Spinifex Pigeons, Western Bowerbirds, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters and Grey-crowned Babblers. The main target however was another Grasswren – Dusky Grasswren and here after following the river through the Gorge(very picturesque) we found 3 Grasswrens intent on coming down for a drink- great views and great pics.

We were back in Alice Springs just in time to have another go at the Grey Honeyeater and this time we were in luck and retired to the motel with another good days birding under our belt.

We had time the next morning for a little general birding before flying on to Ayers Rock. We looked hard for Banded Whiteface but it was not around but picked up Mulga Parrot, Slate-backed Thornbill, and more Zebra finches and Babblers before heading for the plane. We had great views of the Rock and another huge outcrop called the Olgas before landing at Ayers Rock and headed for our hotel – a dreadful place full of tourists and backpackers- that managed to lose my bag for hours- (put in the wrong room). We then headed out for yet another Grasswren- this time the recently split Sandstone Grasswren. IOC doesn't agree. In a habitat where nothing else was seen or heard calling we finally got brief and distant views of a couple of birds.



Then finally we could go visit the iconic Uluru. We walked around the base for an hour before retiring to watch the sunset and the colours change on the rock from deep red to a murky kind of brown. We watched people scurrying down the descent to leave the park before the gates closed and then joined the thousands of mainly oriental tourists (I could not believe the number of coaches there) heading back to their hotels.



We managed to negotiate a room upgrade before a grotty evening meal and tried to look forward to another Grasswren. This time it was the turn of the Pilbara. We flew from Ayers Rock, refuelling at Warburton (a closed Aboriginal Community- where alcohol is banned and entry for outsiders only allowed with a permit) – what would our fellow South Africans think of that! before arriving In Newman, another mining community in the far North West of WA. More hours were spent in another birdless habitat before some saw

the flick of tail and the Pilbara Grasswren was added to the list. The Chiming Wedgebill, another possibility here was conspicuous by its absence.

The morning offered hopefully better views of the Pilbara which we declined and in fact it was not seen again before we piled on onboard our trusty Cessna for the flight to Broome in the Kimberley.

Broome was a quaint little tourist spot with temperatures well into thirties and we had lunch there with a Pheasant Coucal in the tree above the courtyard before some afternoon birding- more of that tomorrow

After lunch it was time to check out the Broome water treatment plant and adjoining golf course before checking the mangroves for 5 or 6 mangrove specialists. The treatment ponds were full of Plumed Whistling Ducks being watched by dozens of Black Kites. Ducks included Pacific Black, Pink-eared and Grey Teal while Stilts, Spoonbills, the odd wader, Straw-necked Ibis, and Whiskered Terns added to the mix. Nothing wildly exciting here so it was on to the golf course where we found White-gaped Honeyeater, Red-winged Parrot, Great Bowerbird, and Brush Cuckoo.

Then it was back into town where we headed for a small jetty which lead out into the mangroves. Here we found Dusky Gerygone (but not Mangrove Gerygone), Red-headed Honeyeater, Mangrove Golden Whistler, Mangrove Grey Fantail, Broad-billed Flycatcher and Yellow (Canary) White-eye.

Our base for the night was Broome Bird Observatory 12 k's out of town out on the peninsula. The accommodation was basic but OK and the next day (no Grasswrens-whew) offered some interesting birding. We piled onto two game viewers and set off into the surrounding grasslands where two Australian Bustards quickly showed, followed by Yellow Chat and Golden-crowned Cisticolas. Brown Songlarks called



from their perches and then it was back to the mangroves for Rufous-banded Honeyeater- the male is really attractive but it was the much drabber female who always showed the better. We went down to the beach but the tide was a million miles out and even with the scopes the waders were dots in the distance.



Our plane was waiting and we had to move on but we did pick Rufous-throated Honeyeater and White-throated Gerygone before leaping into the van. Our next destination was the Drysdale River Station a cattle ranch in the middle of the Kimberley . This was to be our base from which the search for the Black Grasswren began.

To find a Black Grasswren you need to fly to Drysdale (the nearest accommodation), rise at the crack and fly 200 k's (20 mins) to the base of the Mitchells Plateau. Transfer to a helicopter for a 15 min ride along the plateau before embarking on a 4 hour hike with temperatures in the mid-thirties searching through the rock strewn slopes covered with Spinifex (a sharp needle pointed grass which can do you serious damage- most of the party wore leg guards) and if you are extremely fortunate you get to glimpse the Black Grasswren. Our party did find it along with a few other good birds including the Kimberley Honeyeater- recently split form White-lined, White-quilled Rock-Pigeon, and Buff-sided Robin. We had time for some late evening birding back at Drysdale along the creek where we found Brolga, Crimson Finch, Bar-breasted Honeyeater, and Paperbark Flycatcher.

Early the next morning we hit the skies again taking off from our short dirt airstrip heading for Kakadu . Our base was to be the Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge for a whole 2 nights. Here we birded the swamps and lagoons and enjoyed a boat trip up the Mary River- even better we had finished with the Grasswrens. The birding was great here. The small patch of rain forest gave us Rainbow Pitta and Rose-crowned Fruit Dove. The Lodge grounds held Double-barred, Long-tailed and the brilliantly coloured Gouldian Finch. The river trip gave us close views of many herons, egrets, cormorants, swamphens, Kites, Sea-eagles, and Little, Azure and Sacred Kingfishers. Mistake Billabong was full of birds – Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks, Crescent-combed Jacanas, Green Pygmy Geese, and we even had great views of White-browed Crake. More Importantly



Stephanie saw her first Dingo on the far side of the billabong.

Our final day saw us leaving Point Stuart by road and crossing Kakadu looking for some Arnhem land specials on our way to Coinda. We were pressed for time but did find Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon and Banded Fruit Dove. Darkness came while still hoping for views of Sandstone Shrike-thrush. Tomorrow we had the long

flight back to Melbourne. Darcy our pilot flew in to Coinda airstrip to pick us up. He chased off the Brown Falcon I had been photographing at the end of the airstrip and eight hours later we were back in a cold damp and soggy Melbourne having travelled 9500 kilometres around the outback.

This was a great trip- the Grasswrens really were not that bad, and we left with many memories of the outback- a trip we would not want to do by road although many Australian grey nomads do.

We said farewell to our fellow travellers and overnighted once again in Melbourne before flying out to Perth in the morning.

