



Tropical Australia: October 2-9, 2022 Trip Report

[Link: Tropical Australia: October 2-9, 2022 Trip Report](#)

Tropical Australia: October 2-9, 2022 Trip Report

Day 1

October 2, 2022 After quick introductions at our hotel overlooking Darwin Harbour, we head to the Darwin Sailing Club for a sunset dinner at their waterfront bistro. Before dinner, much of the group had an opportunity to go birdwatching along the esplanade in front of our hotel, a 3-km paved walkway surrounded by lush green lawns and palms that wraps around the harbour - birds common here included Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Torresian Imperial-Pigeon, Masked Lapwing, Silver Gull, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Red-collared Lorikeets and Magpie-larks.



Sulphur-crested Cockatoo © Chris Burney

Day 2

October 3, 2022 Our target this morning is Gouldian Finch, one of the most iconic birds for northern Australia. These finches have experienced a dramatic population crash due to a number of factors, but climate change and fire frequency are thought to be the biggest contributors since they affect the seasonal availability of food for these specialist seed-eaters. Normally, we go further inland to find this species, but this year, flocks are regularly being seen in and around Darwin so we head to a patch of bushland near Lee Point where most of the recent reports have been posted. On a side note, the Gouldian finches at this site have become the poster child for conservation efforts to “Save Lee Point” from housing development encroaching nearby, and have also generated a lot of new interest in birdwatching in the local community. We spent much of the early morning here, and though we failed to find Gouldians, we racked up an impressive list of birds. Highlights include: Brahminy Kite, Blue-winged Kookaburra, Rainbow Bee-eater, Dollarbird, Red-winged Parrot, Bar-breasted Honeyeater, Banded Honeyeater, Striated Pardalote, Crimson Finch and Masked Finch. To and from breakfast, we had our first looks at Magpie Geese, Rajah Shelducks, Australian and Straw-necked Ibis, Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos, and Little Corellas. We made a quick stop to follow up on another lead for Gouldians that didn't yield any finches, but we found a perched Brown Goshawk. It was getting hot, so we made one last stop before lunch at Lee Point to scan the beaches - new birds here included Sooty Oystercatcher, Far Eastern Curlew, Gray-tailed Tattler, Little Tern, Great Crested Tern, Striated Heron and Great Bowerbirds. For lunch, we went to the cafe in the George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens, where we had very refreshing ginger beers and delicious food, but had little luck finding the resident Rufous Owls. We did see our first Forest Kingfisher, Spangled Drongo and White-gaped Honeyeaters for the trip. In the late afternoon, we went back out to Lee Point - this time, visiting the mangrove forests and sandflats at Buffalo Creek. It's low tide, and shorebirds were present in the 1000's, but a bit far for viewing. Our main target here was the large and secretive Chestnut Rail. Though we heard several birds giving their raucous grunts nearby, we only had fleeting looks since no birds popped out along the tidal channels to feed. Other new birds here included: Pied Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, and Pacific Reef-heron.

Day 3

October 4, 2022 Today, we headed inland towards Kakadu National Park, making several stops along the way. The first stop was Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve. Fogg dam was built in the mid-1950's to provide irrigation for the Humpty Doo Rice Project, and when the agricultural scheme failed the dam had already become a dry season refuge for wildlife, especially waterbirds. Fogg Dam was declared a Conservation Reserve in 1982, and is now a birding mecca in the 'Top End' (northernmost section of the Northern Territory). We birded a combination of rainforest, lotus wetlands and open marsh, and tallied over 50 species quickly, including some stunners such as Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove and Rainbow Pitta. Other notables included Plumed and Wandering Whistling-ducks, Green Pygmy-goose, White-browed Crake, Brolga, Comb-crested Jacana, Pied Heron, Nankeen Night-Heron, Glossy Ibis, Gray Whistler, Arafura Fantail, Paperbark and Shining Flycatchers, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher and Golden-headed Cisticola. Continuing on, we stopped for lunch on the Adelaide River, and also looked for riparian forest birds. At the cafe, we had great looks at Red-headed Myzomela and Broad-billed Flycatcher. Along the highway, we saw our first Black-necked Stork - resembling the Jabiru of the New World, this Amerindian name found its way to Australia and became the nickname for storks here (also the name of the town we headed to today) and is not an aboriginal word as some suspect. Eventually, we found our main target, the Black-tailed Whistler and as a bonus, our first Diamond Dove. When we entered Kakadu National Park, our first stop was Mamukala Billabong, a vast wetland with great viewing platforms. While similar to the species found at Fogg Dam, we had better views/pics of some and found a few new ones including Pied Stilt, Pacific Black Duck, Whiskered Terns, Australian Pelican and Leaden Flycatcher. We finished the day with a Thai dinner in Jabiru and a Barking Owl above our cabins.



Barking Owl © Chris Burney

Day 4

October 5, 2022 We started the day with an early morning boat trip on the Yellow Water Billabong. Billabong is an Australian term for an oxbow lake, and when watersheds throughout the Top End recede during the dry season, these pools remain wet and become concentrated with wildlife. The

main draw for tourists here are the big crocs, and we ran into many sizeable Saltwater Crocodiles during our cruise, including a bold individual trying to float a pig carcass past several larger crocs, unsuccessfully.



Saltwater Crocodile © Chris Burney

The birds were impressive too, and we had amazing views of Azure Kingfisher, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Black-necked Stork and more waterfowl. New birds included Australian Pratincole, Pacific Heron, and Royal Spoonbill.



Black-necked Stork © Chris Burney

After breakfast in Coinda, we birded the nearby caravan park and boat launch, and saw our first Rufous-throated Honeyeaters and Rufous Whistler, plus had better looks at Forest Kingfisher, Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Mistletoebird and various honeyeaters.



Mistletoebird © Chris Burney

Before lunch, we made a quick visit to the Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Center to see some of the exhibits and check out a family of Bush Thick-knees at the entrance gate. Once it cooled off a bit, we headed to Ubirr to look for sandstone specialties, ancient aboriginal art, and had a beautiful sunset overlooking the Nadab floodplain. We stopped at Cahills Crossing on the way, and unexpectedly found more Rainbow Pittas, but not much else.



Sunset overlooking Nadab floodplain © Chris Burney

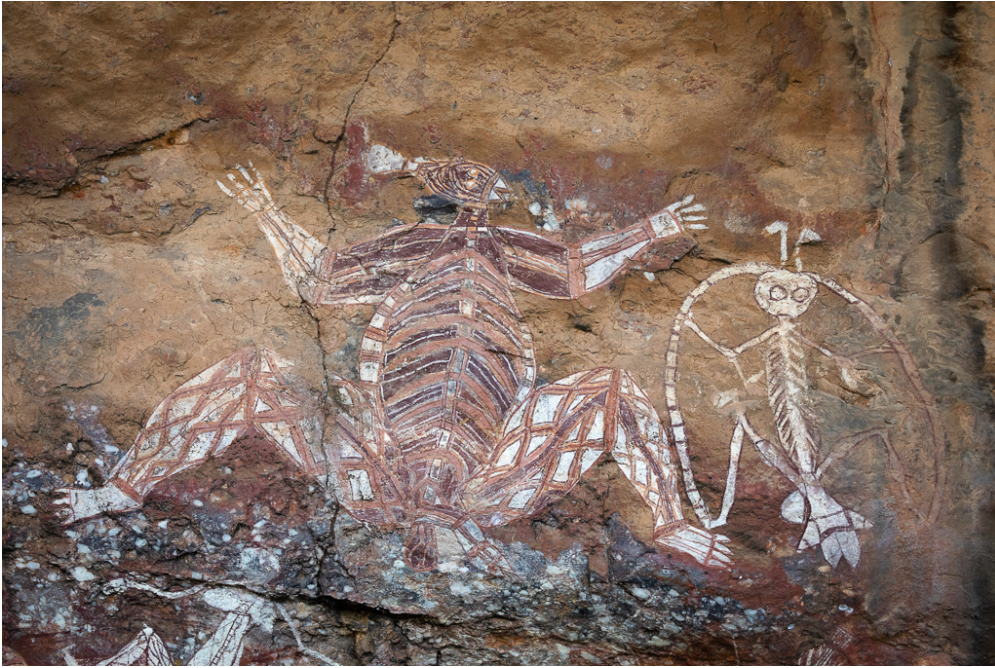
At Ubirr, we checked out the various rock galleries featuring fish, turtles, goanna, Tasmanian tiger (extinct on the mainland more than two thousand years ago), examples of x-ray painting and art depicting encounters with early Europeans. Unfortunately, we come up empty on new birds, but the gorgeous sunset provides a little consolation.



Aboriginal art © Chris Burney

Day 5

October 6, 2022 Our morning foray was another search for the sandstone species at a different outcrop in Kakadu NP. We went to Nourlangie Rock which, like Ubirr, also has an impressive collection of aboriginal art including the Anbangbang gallery which depicts the creation ancestors including Namarrgon, the Lightning Man.



Aboriginal art with Lightning man on right © Chris Burney

We also heard White-lined Honeyeaters and Sandstone Shrikethrush, and saw a Black Wallaroo, a macropod unique to this region. After breakfast and more views of the Barking Owls, possibly nesting near our cabins, we headed to Bowali Visitors Center to look for Partridge Pigeons. No luck, but we did get repeated views of a Black-breasted Kite soaring over us. Before lunch, we made a quick stop at the Jabiru Wastewater Treatment Plant to pick up some more new birds: Gray Teal, Hardhead and a pair of Red-backed Kingfishers.



Black-breasted Kite © Chris Burney

In the late afternoon, we went back to Nourlangie Rock to get better looks at some of the sandstone specialties, but didn't have much luck, so we head to a different stack of rocks at the Nawurlandja Lookout, and again came up empty with the sandstone birds. We did find Gray Goshawk and Gray-crowned Babbler, and had brief glimpses at a Wilkins' Rock-wallaby.



Nourlangie Rock © Chris Burney



Nawurlandja Lookout © Chris Burney

Day 6

October 7, 2022 We made one last attempt for the sandstone specialties at Bardedjilidji Sandstone Walk. The outcrops here look like stacked pancakes. The trail weaved through the stacks and through archways, and eventually, we found one of our main targets, the Chestnut-quilled Rock-

Pigeon. This species is only found within the sandstone region of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory where it hangs out on rocky cliffs and towers much of the day. Other new birds included Pacific Emerald Dove and we finally got a great view of Brush Cuckoo.



Bardedjilidji Sandstone Walk © Chris Burney



Chestnut-quilled Rock-pigeon © Chris Burney

After lunch, we left Jabiru and Kakadu NP, and headed southwest to Pine Creek. We arrived at our

new accommodations in the late afternoon with time to bird in town. We didn't go far and we didn't need to, it was birdy and the big sprawling trees were loaded with Black Flying Foxes.



Black Flying Foxes © Chris Burney

One of the new exciting birds was Hooded Parrot which roost in the dozens in palm trees near the gas station. We also checked out a bower of the Great Bowerbird in a nearby caravan park. We found an impressive diversity of birds and had better looks at Diamond Dove, Gray-crowned Babbler, Pied Butcherbird, White-breasted Woodswallow, various honeyeaters and Masked Finch.



Hooded Parrot © Chris Burney

Day 7

October 8, 2022 We headed towards Edith Falls early and set up on a drying creekbed with a few wet pools. We were now in a vast expanse of tropical savanna, an important habitat for one of NT's most iconic species, the Gouldian Finch. Unfortunately, recent rains gave the finches more options for water, so we split up and waited. Eventually, a large flock of Gouldians arrived, giving us a chance to see the variation in plumage between types, sexes and age. Other finches in the mix included Crimson, Double-barred, Masked and Long-tailed. We birded the creek margins and found several new birds: White-faced Heron, Collared Sparrowhawk, Brown Falcon, Cockatiel, Red-backed Fairywren and Weebill. Next, we continued on to Edith Falls in Nitmiluk National Park. A popular tourist attraction, the large pool below the falls is one of the safest places to swim in the region though crocodiles are occasionally removed following the wet season. The bird activity was fairly slow, but we finally had some good views of Pacific Koel. For lunch, we ordered our first meat pies, a popular dish in Australia. In the afternoon, we explored a few sites around Pine Creek. While we waited out a storm, we inspected a beautifully tended bower that has a blanket of green and white ornaments at the entrance - chalky white snail shells, fragments of green glass, white plastic pieces, etc. When the weather cleared up a bit, we found a few new birds nearby: Australian Owlet-nightjar and Northern Rosella. Before we headed back, we quickly checked the Pine Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant and found a nice mix of birds including Australasian Grebe, Pied Stilt, Black-fronted Dotterel, Red-necked Stint, and Common Sandpiper.



Australian Owlet-nightjar © Chris Burney



Black-fronted Dotterel © Chris Burney

Day 8

October 9, 2022 Before we started back towards Darwin, we spent the morning birding around Pine Creek again. While walking through a patch of tropical savanna, we kicked up a buttonquail, but failed to relocate it and pinpoint the ID. Continuing on, we found more great birds including Diamond Dove, Pallid Cuckoo, Australian Owlet-nightjar, Red-backed Kingfisher, Australian Hobby, Black-tailed Treecreeper, Varied Sittella, Jacky-winter, Long-tailed Finch, and Gouldian Finch. Another stop at the wastewater treatment plant didn't yield anything new except for another Red-backed Kingfisher. On our way back to town, we found another Northern Rosella. For lunch, we stopped at Riverside Park along the Adelaide River. After a visit to the WWII Memorial, we birded the area getting better views of Varied Lorikeets. Continuing on to Darwin, we made a detour to visit the magnetic termite mounds in Litchfield National Park - magnetic because they run north-south. Because it is hot during the day and cool at night, the termites orientate the thin axis of the mound to better control the climate (temp and humidity) within the mound. Our last birds for the trip were along the highway to Darwin, and highlights include Brolgas and Wedge-tailed Eagle.



EET group at Termite mound © Chris Burney

We ended the trip where we started with a gorgeous sunset at the Darwin Sailing Club.



Sunset at Darwin sailing club © Chris Burney



Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve - watching White-browed Crake © Chris Burney



Group at Edith Falls © Chris Burney

