

Of Emus and Fairy-wrens: Photographing Australia's Endemic Birds

Monthly Newsletter

September 2006

So here I sit to write to you again. This time I am in the shade of a eucalypt not 20 meters from a gorgeous white sand beach facing north into the Torres Straits. That's right, I have made it to the tip of the Cape York Peninsula, the absolute northern most point of the Australian mainland. It has been a pretty amazing eight weeks, as I got on the road and really began to see some of this amazingly diverse country. It was only a few weeks ago that I was bundled up to combat freezing nights and now I am well north of the Tropic of Capricorn and its quite warm even though it is only very early spring or late winter depending on who you ask.

But here I am, having just traveled up one of the more famous and rugged tracks in Australia, the Overland Telegraph Line (OTL) track. When I was first trying to plan this project just about a year ago, I had envisioned this portion of the trek to be my grand finale, the big adventure at the end of the year. However, when I really got down to the planning, it worked better now rather than next June, so it was a crash course in all the necessary skills and to The Tip I went. Now this is supposed to be a monthly newsletter and since I am only half way through this particular adventure and there were three other weeks in the month, I won't go into all the details here. Be sure to check out the Travel Log section under my Weblog on the website for a full account and lots of photographs.

So when I wrote the August newsletter, I had just left Sydney and was camped out in the Blue Mountains trying to photograph the Regent Honeyeater. After four days of sitting under a single tree waiting, I finally got the photograph and moved north. I spent the next few days in the ancient volcanic mountains of the Warrumbungles where I saw my first Emus and kangaroos up close. From there I continued my drive north, leaving New South Wales and arriving in Queensland where I spent a week camping in Lamington National Park near the world famous O'Reiley's Rainforest Guesthouse. After a week of ups and downs due to rain and brief car troubles but lots of new birds and some spectacular rainforest, I began my trek to the far north. For several days I made my way up the Queensland coast, driving at a leisurely pace and doing a bit of birding along the way. My final stop before heading up the Cape York Peninsula was at the small birding lodge and campground, Kingfisher Park in Julatten. After four days of local birding I prepared for my trip up the Cape and set off.

I think the theme for this month has been rainforest and with rainforests I have mixed feelings. First off, rainforests are one of those things that have to be experienced to be understood. They are hugely diverse, dense, chaotic places where every nook or cranny could be hiding something fascinating. Photographically speaking, this diversity and chaos combined with the lack of natural light near the forest floor makes things immensely difficult. Furthermore, it seems that most birds prefer either the chaos of the forest floor or the sun and fruit filled canopy high above. Needless to say, artistic and natural looking images are extremely difficult to make.

That being said, I wouldn't trade the time I have spent in these places for anything, but often I had to simply leave my camera behind in order to avoid the frustration that often came with trying to use it. However, not all was frustrating as I did manage to capture a number of the rainforest and in many cases am very pleased with the images. It doesn't hurt that the birds themselves are often extremely pleasing to the eye with bright colors and patterns.

From here, I am headed back south. I plan to spend a few days at Kingfisher Park again getting organized and preparing and planning for the next month or so that I will spend exploring Queensland. Queensland is home to a large percentage of the birds that are found in Australia as well as a fair number of endemics to regions such as the Atherton Tableland or Wet Tropics. This state deserves a

lot of time for exploration so I plan to devote much of the spring to exploring its wide range of habitats.

Announcements

By the time this newsletter is sent I will have completed a massive update to my website. Be sure to check out the weblog section as the daily Bird Log will be up to date and the Travel Log will have an extensive essay on my trip up and down Cape York. I also will have updated the gallery section with a large number of photographs of birds as well as some mammals and scenics.

For the photographers out there, I am also writing a monthly article for the online magazine of the Nature Photographers Network. If you are interested in reading those articles you can find them at www.naturephotographers.net or through direct links listed under the Travel Log section.

The Photos



Regent Honeyeater – Glen Alice, Capertee Valley, Blue Mountains, New South Wales

Photographing the Regent Honeyeater was my goal during the writing of my last newsletter and while it took four days, I succeeded! These striking honeyeaters are highly endangered and difficult to see due to this and their nomadic behavior as they follow flowering eucalypts.



Rapid on Moran Creek – Lamington National Park, Queensland

I spent nearly a week in the subtropical rainforests of Lamington National Park, on the Queensland/New South Wales border. The park is famous for its rainforests and endemic birdlife, but the park is also full of waterfalls and small rapids. This particular rapid is just upstream of Moran Falls where Moran Creek drops several hundred meters down a sheer cliff.



Jacky Winter – Glen Alice, Capertee Valley, Blue Mountains, New South Wales

A member of the Australian Robin family, Petroicidae, the Jacky Winter is quite a tenacious little bird that seems to sing constantly. I was told the story by an experienced bird bander who had once caught a Jacky Winter in his mist net and after taking it out placed it in a cloth bag until he could band and measure the bird, a typical practice. This normally quiets the bird down, but this particular Jacky Winter continued to sing, even in the darkness inside a bag. They are quite amazing little birds and I really enjoyed the morning I was able to photograph this individual.



Noisy Pitta – Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Queensland

The Noisy Pitta is a very colorful, ground dwelling bird that inhabits the rainforests of Queensland and northern New South Wales. These amazing birds are often very secretive and difficult to see, despite their gaudy coloring. There are two resident pairs at Kingfisher Park and one of the birds proved to be very cooperative the first morning I was there as it foraged in the leaf litter.



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot – Portland Roads, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland

The Double-eyed Fig-Parrot is Australia's smallest parrot and is rather cute. There are three distinct races, this being the race found on the Cape York Peninsula. I was fortunate enough to be directed to a pair that was just beginning to excavate a nest cavity at Portland Roads, just outside Iron Ranges National Park. The male bird (on the right) sat by and watched while the female (left) did most of the work while I was there.



Golden-shouldered Parrot – Artemis Station, Cape York Peninsula, Queensland

One of the birds I most wanted to see during my travels this year was a Golden-shouldered Parrot and I would only have one chance. These birds are confined to a very small area of the Cape York Peninsula where they breed in large ant mounds. Due to changing fire regimes, livestock grazing, and other human influences, these birds are highly endangered with population estimates somewhere between 500 and 1000 birds with only about 150 breeding pairs. I had dedicated three days on the way north and made available two days on the way back south if necessary to see the birds. While I was without luck on the way north, my trip back south was successful, providing close views of at least 25 birds. (Note: this picture was added to the already written newsletter later, but I was so thrilled that I wanted to include it)



Large-tailed Nightjar on Nest – Iron Ranges National Park, Queensland

During my stay at Iron Ranges National Park, this nightjar nest was discovered by some other campers who were camping nearby. They were very kind to point it out as it was so well camouflaged that despite having someone to point at it, it still took me several minutes to actually see the bird.



Driving North – Scrubby Creek, Overland Telegraph Route, Queensland

I had to post this as it might give you an idea of the driving conditions of Overland Telegraph Line Track, plus it gives “creek crossing” a bit more definition. This image is indeed me in my Landcruiser crossing Scrubby Creek on my travels north up the Cape. What this image doesn’t show is that about 5 meters in front of me is a deeper hole and my right headlight (left from this perspective) goes well underwater. I would have images but taking photos was a bit difficult considering I had to wade across, set up the camera, start the timer, and then wade back across as quickly as possible and start driving trying to get it all timed correctly. To be perfectly honest, I did this particular creek 3 times because the camera malfunctioned the first time and I decided to go back and do it again.



Eliot Falls – Eliot Creek, Heathlands Reserve, Queensland

So you may be asking why I would choose to travel a road like this when there is a perfectly good, albeit heavily corrugated, dirt bypass road. Well, it is scenes like this that greet you along the OTL Track that are completely absent along the dusty Bypass roads. This is Eliot Falls and just around the corner from here was Twin Falls and just a few kilometers upstream was Fruit Bat Falls. This area is a very popular campsite and often crowded, though I was fortunate to have a relatively quiet evening there.



The Tip – Cape York Peninsula, Queensland

Again, why would someone drive over 1,000 kilometers from Cairns (the closest city) over rough roads just to stand on the northernmost point of the Australian continent? Well, The Tip just so happens to be a gorgeous place with rocky headlands, white sand beaches, and emerald green water (with crocs, sharks, and stingers so no swimming). This particular image was taken about 500 meters from the actual Tip (off to the right) and is looking back along the beach to where I am camped, and writing this, down at the other end. It has been quite an adventure, one that not many people get to experience, and I am sure glad that I decided to do it.

Until next month be sure to check out the website as it has just been fully updated!

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