

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

18 SEPTEMBER – 3 OCTOBER 2018

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This beautiful Striated (Sandhill) Grasswren showed so well near Uluru that it won bird of the tour! All photos by Josh Bergmark

There is a reason that the Northern Territory proves to be one of the top holiday destinations for Australians year after year. Warm and sunny, spectacular scenery, abundant wildlife and Australia's largest protected areas all rolled together into one package. What's even better is that the best birding season happens to be at the tail end of the tourist season, so we pretty much never need to worry about the crowds! Surprisingly, although many international birdwatchers do visit Darwin and Uluru, few get the chance to comprehensively explore the extremely varied regional biomes to the extent that we do on this tour. We commenced our journey once again in middle of the country by focusing on the birds of the Red Centre. An apt description for the area, we searched rolling orange sand dunes, brick-red rocky gorges and dusty backroads for some fantastic species, the first of which were around the outback town of Alice Springs. Diminutive Rufous-crowned Emuwren and hyperactive Dusky Grasswren were coaxed out of the spinifex while fantastic Western Bowerbirds and ridiculous Spinifex Pigeons proved positively tame at certain sites. Crepuscular Bourke's Parrots came down to drink in the evening only metres away from us while White-browed Treecreeper, Diamond Dove, Painted Finch and Splendid Fairywren were all sought out amongst some less spectacular but nevertheless important birds which include the restricted Slaty-backed Thornbill, and the strange (but well-named) rarity, Grey Honeyeater. Vibrant Orange and Crimson Chats were seen in places, Banded Lapwing and Brown Falcon were found from the vehicle, and the sewage works held a selection of bizarre Pink-eared Ducks, Black-tailed Nativehens, Black Swans, acrobatic White-backed Swallows, plus elegant Red-necked Avocets and Red-kneed Dotterels. Further south around Erldunda we worked hard to pin down some true desert birds, with well-camouflaged Inland Dotterels eventually located on their favourite open plain, adjacent to some scrubby saltbush which held the likes of Chiming Wedgebill, Cinnamon Quailthrush, White-winged Fairywren, and the superb Banded Whiteface. Imposing Wedge-tailed Eagles, Pink Cockatoos and Red-tailed Black Cockatoos showed off on the roadside, but we had to drive a little further to twitch the rare and declining Chestnut-breasted Whiteface. Some time around Uluru was dedicated to observing the impressive geological structure, but we mostly worked on finding certain birds like Little Woodswallow, Red-backed Kingfisher, Redthroat and Sandhill Grasswren. A pair of the latter showed so phenomenally well in front of us that the duo won bird of the trip!



These tame Spinifex Pigeons ran around our feet calling and displaying, which ended up culminating in this!

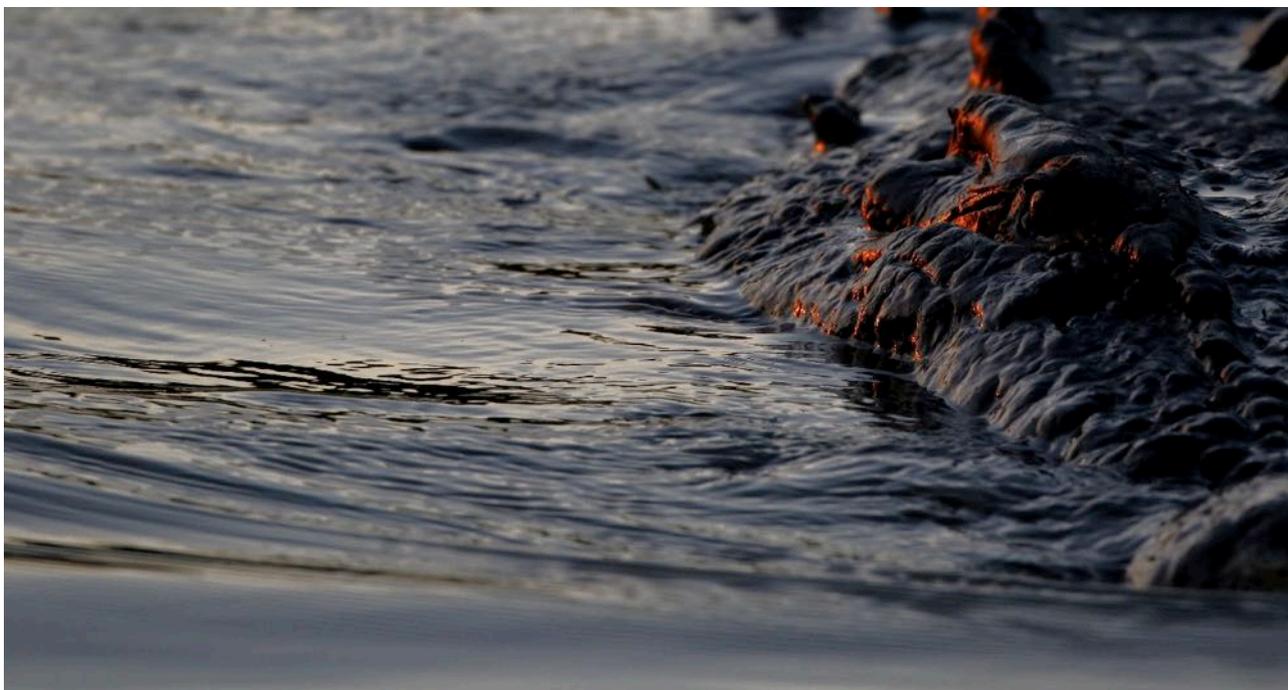
This smorgasbord of course was only stage one, and after arriving in the tropical Top End we set our sights on a completely new set of birds. We scored on the extremely difficult Chestnut Rail once again in the muddy mangroves of Darwin after some significant effort, along with Red-headed Myzomela, Broad-billed Flycatcher, Mangrove Golden and White-breasted Whistlers, Mangrove Robin, Mangrove Fantail, Torresian Kingfisher, Black Butcherbird and Canary White-eye. With some dedicated searching we also located some splendid Beach Stone-curlews along the shore, along with a host of waders like the declining Great Knot and Far Eastern Curlew, Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, Red-capped Plover, Pied Oystercatcher, and ubiquitous Raja Shelducks. It was certainly more relaxing to enjoy birds in the lush and green local parks however, highlighted by an impressive family of Rufous Owls at the Darwin Botanic Gardens, abundant Bush Stone-curlews and Orange-footed Scrubfowls running around like chickens, bubbling Green Orioles and Varied Trillers with Blue-winged Kookaburras and Red-collared Lorikeets ever-present. Certain parks even hold populations of the flamboyant Rainbow Pitta, one of which once again advertised his brilliance right next to us! Towards the edge of town some rarer species also showed up, with Little Curlew, Silver-backed Butcherbird, Barking Owl and Crimson Finch all seen in one afternoon no less!



Red-collared Lorikeets are common across the Top End, but how can you not love those colours?!

Moving inland to savannah country, we travelled through beautiful areas of rocky escarpments which tried to hide the endemic White-lined Honeyeater, Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon and Black-banded Fruit Dove, but all were found without much trouble. Billabongs which still held water at this late stage of the dry season were teeming with birds - Magpie Geese mixed with abundant Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks, beautiful Green Pygmy Geese, Azure and Little Kingfishers, Nankeen Night and Pied Herons, White-bellied Sea Eagles, dainty Comb-crested Jacanas, Brolgas and Black-necked Storks, plus of course some enormous Saltwater Crocodiles! The woodlands around Katherine produced yet more new species, some major highlights including the rare and endangered Red Goshawk at a nest, sublime Gouldian Finches and Hooded Parrots at local water holes, close and personal encounters with Australian Owlet-nightjar, Black-tailed Treecreeper, and deck views of both Little Buttonquail and the rare endemic Chestnut-backed Buttonquail. Towards to Western Australian border at Timber Creek we were in finch heaven, with a huge flock of Star Finches containing a handful of Yellow-rumped and Chestnut-breasted Mannikins, with some beautiful Masked and Long-tailed Finches nearby. The local open fields and airstrips were searched

thoroughly, turning up Oriental Plovers, Australian Pratincoles and stately Australian Bustards. The other specials here were White-quilled Rock Pigeon and the cracking Purple-crowned Fairywren, plus some responsive Buff-sided Robins and a Southern Boobook. We finished up with all the attainable Top End endemics and major specialties in the bag, recording 276 species overall with a bonus set of 15 mammals during the tour. There were a few big reptiles too...



We always make sure to stay a few metres back from the water while birding in the Top End. This big Saltwater Crocodile could certainly do some serious damage! Luckily this photo was taken from the relative safety of a boat!

We were welcomed to the heart of Australia by rare weather system which dropped the temperature by 10°C overnight and provided a very strong wind for three days straight. With this absence of the normal sweltering hot and dead still conditions which most of the birds in fact like around the Red Centre town of Alice Springs, we set about trying to find little brown jobs at the crack of dawn! Understandably this was extremely challenging, but nevertheless we managed a good selection of arid zone birds which was probably highlighted by a showy pair of pretty Red-browed Pardalotes in a severely swaying eucalyptus tree, a gorgeous electric blue male Splendid Fairywren with his harem, and an always-favoured male Red-capped Robin sheltering from the wind low to the ground. We were primarily in search of the rare and elusive Grey Honeyeater at this site, but the severe drought gripping much of the outback this year had seemingly cancelled the breeding season for almost all of the Red Centre birds, our target included. We focused on carefully searching through feeding flocks of small mulga birds, and in doing so were able to observe the fine plumage details and different eye colours which distinguish the lovely Chestnut-rumped Thornbill from within parties of similar Inland Thornbill, hear the sweet warble of Western Gerygone before tracking some down in a tree, and catch up with Australia's smallest bird, the Weebill. Some tour regulars such as Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Singing Honeyeater and White-plumed Honeyeater were observed during our walk, plus we admired our first gaudy Galahs while Black Kites and Whistling Kites circled overhead.

Staking out a nearby waterhole in the hope of drinking birds proved fruitless in these conditions (although a pair of Peregrine Falcons circling overhead and a tame Grey Shrikethrush were enjoyed), so we quickly returned to the vehicle and headed out to a special tract of old-growth spinifex which was known to our man-on-the-spot as an excellent area for Rufous-crowned Emuwren. This diminutive species has been struggling during recent years in accessible areas due to excessive burning and is now very difficult to find around Alice Springs, but we were successful in locating a big group consisting of at least a half-dozen individuals clambering around through the spinifex. One pale morph Little Eagle caused the first of many rapid roadside

halts on the tour as we proceeded to the town sewage ponds, with a handful of Black-faced Woodswallows and Rainbow Bee-eaters roadside along the way.



One particularly bold Western Bowerbird even displayed his hidden nape patch for us in Alice Springs!



First time visitors to Australia often have a hard time tearing themselves away from their first Splendid Fairywren! In fact, most birders struggle to look away when a male is in full breeding plumage in the sun like this!



Rufous-crowned Emu wrens showed exceptionally this year, but due to wind would not hop above the spinifex for a photo!

Access into the Alice Sewage Treatment Plant has become bureaucratic and cannot be guaranteed every tour these days, but once again local birding legend Mark Carter came to the rescue. Our short visit to the ponds proved very productive, with some standout birds including the lovely White-backed Swallow, a male Orange Chat, one very calm Australian Pratincole, and a quartet of beautifully strange Pink-eared Ducks. Overhead Little Corellas squawked while Straw-necked Ibis and Black Swans showed off. The endemic selection of other Australian waterfowl on offer was rapidly digested with Australasian Grebe, Hoary-headed Grebe, Hardhead, Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal and a lone male Chestnut Teal mixing with a number of superb Red-necked Avocets and turbo-charged Black-tailed Nativehen (known locally as turbo-chook!). The edges were dotted with a selection of other interesting specialties, with the dainty Australian endemic Red-capped Plover and striking Red-kneed Dotterels being the pick of the bunch amongst some Black-fronted Dotterels, White-headed Stilts, Wood Sandpipers, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Masked Lapwings. Some Whiskered Terns in breeding plumage were spotted circling the ponds with dozens of Fairy Martins before the phragmite-haunting Little Grassbird and Australian Reed Warbler rounded out our visit.



Elegant Red-necked Avocets are never guaranteed, as they move far and wide after inland rains. We saw a few though!

Lunch in town allowed us to see some common birds including Australian Magpie, Magpie-lark, Willie Wagtail, Australian Ringneck, and the funky Crested Pigeon sporting his head tuft and colourful wing flashes. Immediately after we sped north to Kunoth Bore, stopping once for an incredibly obliging Brown Falcon by the road. Near the bore a small flock of Banded Lapwings were found on an open field with cute little Southern Whitefaces feeding nearby. Many loops on foot through the dry and windy mulga woodland did not yield Grey Honeyeater, but other birds in the area included the lovely vibrant Mulga Parrot, a couple of prominently perching Hooded Robins, our first Yellow-rumped Thornbills, and a family party of noisy and curious White-browed Babblers. The main event came not long after sunset as Common Bronzewing started coming down to the bore itself to drink, followed by huge numbers of the stupendous pink-and-blue Bourke's Parrot. At least fifty of these Red Centre specialty birds came in from the surrounding parched landscape and offered excellent views in the torchlight.



I didn't use flash to avoid scaring him away, but we had a real close encounter with this male Bourke's Parrot coming to drink!

Dawn saw similar conditions to the previous day, but nevertheless we tried the Alice Springs Desert Park first for Grey Honeyeater, which we again could not find (for now...). Continuing towards the scenic West Macdonald Ranges, we located a pair of attractive Crimson Chats along the way by the roadside. On arrival at our favourite birding area, we spotted two big targets while pulling into our parking place! In contrast to previous visits, the stonking Spinifex Pigeon was sitting happily under the picnic table in front of us, and ran around our feet like a clockwork toy for as long as we wanted! The magnificent Western Bowerbird was also very confiding here, and we were able to delight in his bright pink nape patch and excellent Whistling Kite mimicry as he hopped around in the bushes. It didn't take long for bird number three to fall, with a pair of Dusky Grasswrens appearing on the rocky slope above us and coming down to say hello. This species is well-known to be the most confiding of the elusive grasswren group, and it is always a pleasure to watch them hopping around and going about their business only metres away from us. More Hooded Robins were hanging about, some Grey-crowned Babblers and Pied Butcherbirds hopped around the carpark, while eventually two Grey-headed Honeyeaters came down from the rocky slopes to a low shrub offering extended views. We were farewelled by a male Mistletoebird (the sole Australian flowerpecker) which truly did pose in front of us for his mugshot!

Our lunch at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens back in Alice gave us time to have another look at Western Bowerbird, this male tending to his magnificent bower and getting aggravated by a young corvid trying to tear it apart. Which species you ask? We were too busy watching the bowerbird! Santa Teresa Road beckoned us this afternoon, but the continuing wind remained challenging. Another Red Centre specialty, Slaty-backed Thornbill, was followed around for as long as we wanted in a nice patch of mulga, and a scarce Red-backed Kingfisher was searching for prey from one of the roadside power lines. Apart from a Grey Butcherbird and some White-winged Trillers, the only other entertainment of the afternoon was the *albicauda* race of Grey Fantail (maybe Desert Fantail in the future, with notably different behaviour and plumage to the rest of the strongly varied subspecies in this group). We were all very pleased after dark when our hard work produced the goods, with a Spotted Nightjar on the deck in front of the car.



Dusky Grasswrens are regarded as the easiest grasswren, and you usually get great looks at them jumping around on rocks!



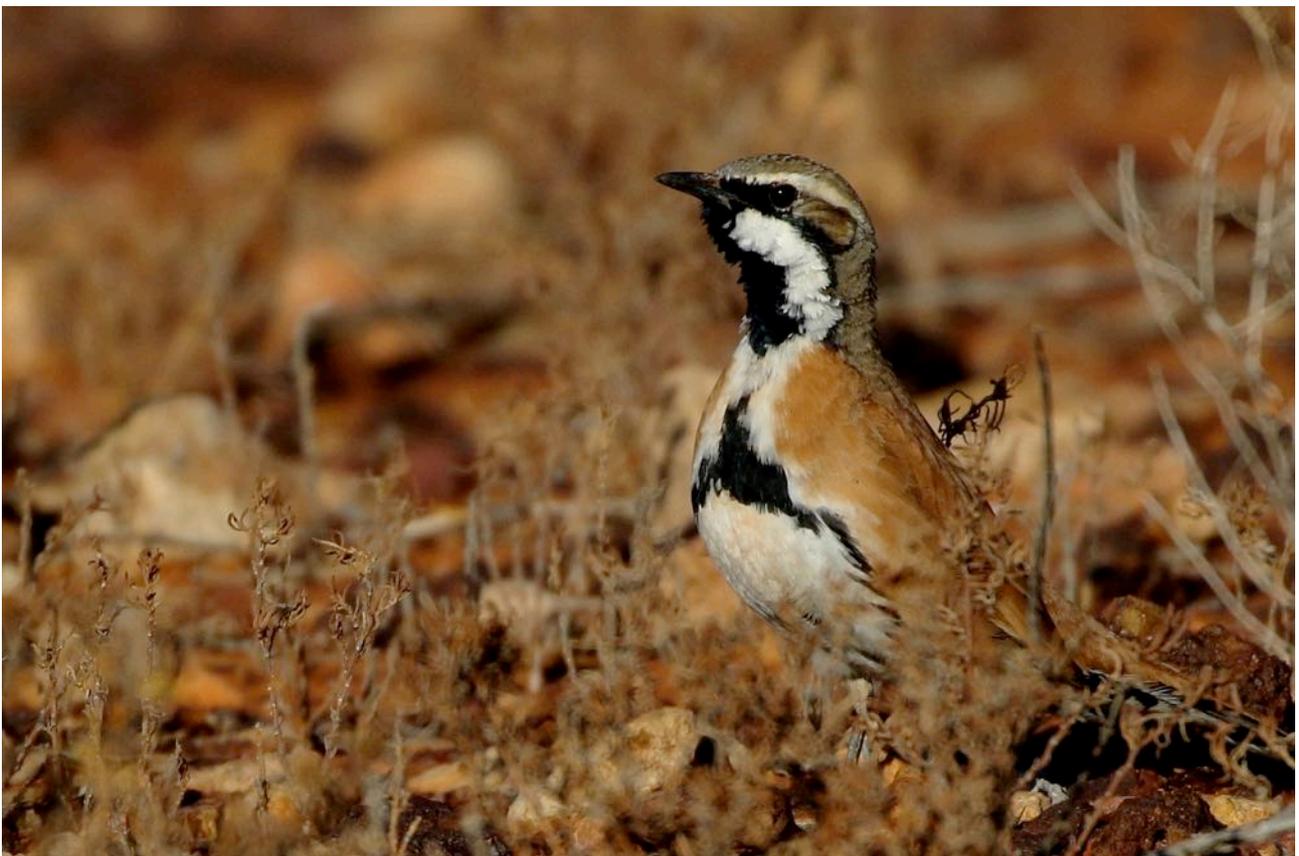
You often have to sift through a lot of little brown jobs before you find the rare Slaty-backed Thornbill, but we saw quite a few!

With the wind set to continue, we chose to abandon Grey Honeyeater for the moment and fairly radically add in a target bird 450km away in South Australia. The incredibly range-restricted and declining Chestnut-breasted Whiteface has disappeared in recent years on our usual Southern Australia route, so now the only place you have a chance at seeing one is an area of barren rocky plains hundreds of kilometres from everywhere! Martyn succeeded in locating this little beauty soon after arriving at the site, and after spending some time enjoying the cracking flock of birds we drove straight back north to Erldunda, which was to be our base in the coming days. Although it was a long morning, some quality birds were enjoyed in addition to the whiteface during our journey, with dozens of mighty Wedge-tailed Eagles feeding on the roadkill dotted along the highway, one fast flock of Budgerigars (very rare here this year due to the drought), some Australian Pipits, and a singing Crested Bellbird lured up onto a branch. One particularly juicy roadkill cluster had brought in a large flock of corvids, where two Australian Ravens at the northern edge of their range mingled with Little Crows (which were studied carefully this time to ensure identification of course). Also feeding here were no less than six Wedge-tailed Eagles!



An impromptu twitch this year allowed us to see the endangered Chestnut-breasted Whiteface. One of those Australian species which sadly is not coping well with long-term grazing and feral cats. It may be impossible to see anywhere within the decade...

To make up for a morning of sitting down, we spent the afternoon walking on some lengthy gibber plain transects. This desolate habitat is favoured by a couple of specialty birds which eke out a living in some of the most trialling conditions on Earth amongst the barren rocks, with no water or shelter, and only tiny morsels of food. A female Cinnamon Quailthrush was found from the car window en. route and sat in the open for many minutes – the first species of this top bird group for most participants! Once we got out away from the roadside, a male White-winged Fairywren showed beautifully in the afternoon sun, along with a Nankeen Kestrel. These were almost the only two birds we saw for an hour or two, after which we finally picked up an excellent roving party with Black-faced Woodswallows and Singing Honeyeaters this time accompanied by our second desert whiteface of the day – Banded Whiteface. This one is a real looker, and fascinating to watch as they hop around between the small pebbles in search of food, which they somehow find every now and then! Faint high-pitched contact calls alerted us to some more Cinnamon Quailthrush which were accompanying the flock, and a short burst of callback had three males and two females making a beeline straight towards us before pausing a few metres away and calling to each other! Gripping stuff! We returned to our classic outback Australian roadhouse accommodation well pleased, but still without the main gibber target – Inland Dotterel.



We had great views of Cinnamon Quailthrush! If you find the right pair and sit down patiently, often they will walk right over!

Before our big red rock visit, we wanted to give the dotterel another crack out on the gibber. Parking in a different area, we had walked around no more than 10 minutes before Martyn spotted a rock with eyes and suddenly a party of twelve Inland Dotterel apparated from the plain! We had excellent looks at these superb shorebirds with no shoreline in sight, watching as they melted in and out of the habitat which they somehow hide so well in as soon as they stop moving. Also here we briefly saw a Chiming Wedgebill, and some more Banded Whiteface.



Everyone was very pleased to see the enigmatic Inland Dotterel after a lot of walking around through the gibber. Always very well hidden amongst the stones, there are three birds in this shot.

Heading west towards the world famous Uluru we passed through what is these days a largely charred landscape with little old-growth habitat. A common theme throughout the north of Australia, with essentially unrestricted burning permissions given without much thought by those in charge. While these practices can be extremely beneficial to wildlife when done correctly as the Aborigines did for thousands of years, the regular blanket fires which now blaze every year are definitely not! We stopped near Yulara and walked over to a patch of good spinifex which has avoided the burns in recent years, where the healthy abundance of small reptiles and mammal tracks in the sand was exceedingly obvious. Certain birds also benefit from unburnt spinifex, the most sought after of which include the grasswren group. It was almost too easy this year, as we quickly found a pair of Sandhill Grasswren (still lumped with Striated Grasswren by most authorities, but strongly expected to be ratified in due course) just below the ridge of a dune. These charismatic birds which are usually so hard to get a look at in the binoculars were more than happy to sit up on bushes and run up to us while we watched, and performed so brilliantly that the pair made their way to #1 in our bird of the trip contest!



Mighty Wedge-tailed Eagles were regular on roadkill around Alice Springs.



A sleek Brown Falcon waiting for something to come out of this hole!

Moving back to Yulara the town (not to be confused with Uluru the rock) we spent the middle of the day searching gardens and parks with flowering trees for nomadic honeyeaters, which were again largely elsewhere this year, avoiding the drought. Right before lunch, a soft call alerted me to a White-fronted Honeyeater which suddenly flew overhead, perched up for a few seconds, before speeding like a bullet directly away from us. The views were fairly average, but really we did well to see the species at all this year! After a quick check of the fairly quiet sewage ponds and a lovely Red-backed Kingfisher which allowed close approach in the car, we drove a circuit on some backroads, where we had excellent views of the impressive Uluru monolith from some non-traditional angles! Some particular numerous Little Woodswallows hawked above us, and a nice patch of saltbush finally produced the interesting Redthroat, with a pair popping up to the tape. Sadly for the second tour running we found a roadkilled Thorny Devil, which was to be the only record for the trip. Such a shame to find such a stunning reptile in this state, but they are so small that most tourists would never realise their car had just hit an animal! As the sun went down, Uluru began its spectacular colour transformations which we watched while driving around searching for the resident Black-breasted Buzzards, which we sadly could not find. Our drive back to Erdunda after dinner had us dodging the usual cows and kangaroos, but some stranded locals with a decimated front wheel on the side of the highway were more unexpected!



Red-tailed Black Cockatoos look most spectacular when they take off!

Our final day in the Red Centre was spent enjoying some phenomenally effective targeting in the lovely warmer weather which had finally appeared. We first birded the roadside north of Eridunda to get better views of Chiming Wedgebill, and as we were watching one calling on top of a bush some Pink Cockatoos passed overhead on their morning rounds. Some quick playback had two of them circle back and land on a dead branch above us in the soft morning sun with their red crests erected in excitement. All cameras were in the car... Some roadside Red-tailed Black Cockatoos were watched as they fed unconcernedly a few metres away from us (the first of many flocks this tour), and not long after we pulled in to yet another stretch of mulga where yet again there were no Grey Honeyeaters, but this time there were two White-browed Treecreepers feeding in the ironwood stands. This is a very scarce species around Alice Springs (again due to fire and land management issues), so it was good to see them persisting at the same place we saw them last tour! Then we went back to the Desert Park and suddenly a Grey Honeyeater was calling right in front of us! He was hidden at first (resulting in some frantic repositioning), but soon appeared only metres away on an open branch affording excellent views for the whole group before he flew west never to be seen again! We were very pleased to finally connect with this rare specialty – a real birders bird! Down the road we staked out an excellent little waterhole, and after an hour of waiting and watching a number of Black-footed Rock Wallabies hop around above us, an immaculate adult Painted Finch appeared amongst the hundreds of Zebra Finches bathing in the pond. We were still not done however, as on the road out a Black-breasted Buzzard was expertly spotted off to the left of the road by Malcolm. We then went and had lunch, a little shell shocked, before heading to the airport for our flight to the Top End.



The best way to see Painted Finch is to wait until the sun is high and bright, then sit and wait near some water. It worked!

Our good fortune continued as we became acquainted with the birdlife around Darwin the following day. With the tides good for skulking mangrove-dwelling Chestnut Rails at Buffalo Creek we started here, but nothing rail-like was in evidence. An Azure Kingfisher flitted past a few times and perched up well for us eventually, and some Eastern Reef Egrets fed with skulking Striated Herons which caused a few false alarms! We had a good scan through the large wader roosts on the adjacent beach, which gave us the Australian endemic Pied Oystercatcher, the rapidly declining Far Eastern Curlew and Great Knot, mixed with Red Knot, Grey Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Terek Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Grey-tailed Tattler, Common Greenshank, Silver Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Caspian Tern, Greater Crested Tern, and Little Tern. Quite a haul! Brahminy Kites glided silently overhead while Torresian Imperial Pigeons whooshed by.

Birding in the adjacent coastal scrub was superb and gave us our first taste of the birds of the Top End. Brightly coloured male Red-headed Myzomelas mixed with pretty Canary White-eyes, while above us Brown Honeyeaters, Rufous-banded Honeyeaters and White-gaped Honeyeaters competed for our attention. The fairly localised Arafura Fantail showed superbly, and a family of Shining Flycatcher foraged around us. The nearby park held tame Orange-footed Scrubfowl (to become a regular occurrence in the coming days), a lovely Blue-winged Kookaburra, Masked Lapwings, Forest Kingfishers. Both Red-winged Parrots and Varied Lorikeets flew over under a handful of Pacific Swifts, but Red-collared Lorikeets perched low down in the morning sun for us. Easily overlooked Green-backed Gerygones came down to investigate us, while White-bellied Cuckooshrikes, Varied Trillers and Grey Whistlers were fairly noisy. Most large fig trees held the usual Australasian Figbirds and Green Orioles, with Spangled Drongos often hanging about close by.

The foreshore at Nightcliff did not hold our hoped-for Beach Stone-curlews, but excellent views of Little Friarbird and the coastal race of Helmeted Friarbird were appreciated, while raucous Sulphur-crested Cockatoos paraded on trees and White-breasted Woodswallows chirped above us. One nice patch of mangroves was searched at length for some tricky species, the first of which was a Buff-banded Rail which almost gave the poor leader a heart attack when it suddenly appeared on the mud in front of the group. Wrong rail! The world's showiest Broad-billed Flycatcher obliged, while both Mangrove Gerygones and Large-billed Gerygones allowed us to compare identification features. A Little Bronze Cuckoo was spotted sitting up in the open, but the highlight was a pair of rare White-breasted Whistlers (including a stunningly plumaged male) which were found hopping along the mangrove roots in search of food! Usually seen on Western Australia tours, it is a rare bird up here.



This dainty Broad-billed Flycatcher came right up to us while we were standing in the Darwin mangroves!



While his parents are well used to visiting birders looking up at them and hardly move an inch all day, this young Rufous Owl was very curious as to what the bunch of large apes were doing standing under his tree!

We attempted a little birding in the monsoon forest at East Point but it was way too hot, so the group adjourned for lunch in the botanic gardens. A few minutes after finishing our scrumptious meal, we headed

over to the waterfall. It took some searching (with a Pacific Koel seen in the process), but I finally found the family of Rufous Owls roosting a little distance away from their usual area. The parents sat regally and only looked down at us a few times, well used to visiting birders, but their adorable fluffy white baby was a lot more curious! One of the local lagoons was next, which was booming with a plethora of waterfowl as the late dry season conditions had forced many birds to congregate in the one place. The impressive list included Australian White Ibis, Royal Spoonbill, White-necked Heron, Great Egret, Intermediate Egret, the superb looking Pied Heron, Little Pied Cormorant, Little Black Cormorant, Australasian Darter, Magpie Goose, Wandering Whistling Duck, Plumed Whistling Duck, Green Pygmy Goose, Comb-crested Jacana, and to top it all off, three Little Curlews on the adjacent grass! Some flowering trees at the carpark proved very birdy too, with Red-tailed Black Cockatoos feeding with an abundance of Silver-crowned Friarbirds and Blue-faced Honeyeaters, plus a Collared Sparrowhawk passed overhead in good view. Great stuff!

We spent the afternoon at East Point where the slightly cooler conditions brought out some extra birds for our impressive day list. In the mangroves, two Torresian Kingfishers obliged happily on some open branches, while Lemon-bellied Flyrobins, Paperbark Flycatchers and Northern Fantails circled us catching insects on the walk out. Some Double-banded Finches and a Golden-headed Cisticola were appreciated, but were nothing compared to the icing on the cake, one stunning, vibrant, confident and responsive Rainbow Pitta which came bounding right in for everybody to marvel at! This is a good looking bird, as all pittas are, but to have one show so well next to the carpark is something which tends to only happen regularly with this particular species! Sadly some obscuring branches as he circled us made photos impossible this year, but the views were mega!



The Torresian Kingfisher is one of the species split from the widespread Collared Kingfisher, and is best found around Darwin.

There were a few birds left to see in Darwin, so we commenced the day back at Nightcliff Foreshore where the high-tide roost contained a number of new waders, namely Greater Sand Plover, Pacific Golden Plover and Red-necked Stint. Curlewless, we continued to East Point, where finally a triplet of Beach Stone-curlews were found at their high-tide roost. There were smiles all around after finally connecting after a dozen failures in the past 24 hours, and this approachable trio won a place in our bird of the trip contest! The mangrove boardwalk nearby held a pair of nesting Black Butcherbirds, a sneaky Mangrove Robin which was eventually

seen by everyone, and a very inquisitive Mangrove Fantail which came in too close every time I squeaked and wouldn't sit still in the open for the camera! On our way back to the car Dusky Honeyeaters fed in flowering trees and a Rose-crowned Fruit Dove was spied perched on a dead snag which we were able to wander over to for a closer look!

As the tide began to fall we made our way back to Buffalo Creek where the conditions were perfect. Two Chestnut Rails started calling loudly, seemingly only just out of view across the water, but they soon went silent and never came out to the water's edge... When the tide dropped even lower, we abandoned our vigil and visited another area of mangroves in town in search of Mangrove Golden Whistler, where a female bird appeared in our binoculars foraging with two Broad-billed Flycatchers. Also here was a calling Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo which perched in the tree above us for good views. Before lunch we went and twitched a family of endemic Silver-backed Butcherbirds in a park on the outskirts of Darwin (this savannah species can be missed at the usual haunts around Katherine, so best to get it early). Being park birds, they showed extremely well above the barbeque area! A hot afternoon in some nearby grassland gave us frustratingly unidentifiable flight views of two buttonquail, but this was made up for by excellent looks at a flock of Crimson Finches, and a responsive pair of the amazing partially diurnal Barking Owl which were woofed up well before sunset and swooped in to check us out from their small copse of trees.



We finally found some Beach Stone-curlews on the Darwin foreshore - a sweet reward, and one of the birds of the tour!

Our day searching for sandstone specialties began early, as we wanted to position ourselves at our special site before any other visitors arrived to have the best chance at seeing our main quarry. Two Sandstone Shrikethrush were heard and soon seen well, their calls echoing all around us as we stood between large sandstone outcrops, while a single Short-eared Rock Wallaby with his unusual sheep-like face appeared in view up on the slope. The day always warms up quickly in the escarpments, and by 8:30am the mercury was passing 30°C. If our target delayed showing much longer we may have been forced to resort to more drastic measures off-path, but luckily we rounded one of the last few bends of the hike and walking towards us was a family party of Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeons! They initially halted their progress when our heads appeared around the corner, but clearly on a mission they continued towards us, providing outrageous views of this subtly but beautifully patterned Top End endemic. We admired some Aboriginal rock art while watching the sandstone form of Helmeted Friarbird, and had some impressive views over the floodplains

complete with a passing Black-breasted Buzzard. Further down the road we searched some woodlands for the declining Partridge Pigeon, and even though it was already midday we soon achieved our goal, with a small flock crouched down by the roadside.



Had some superb encounters with the usually retiring Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon this year in the Top End escarpments!



Sandstone Shrike-thrush are regularly encountered in the sandstone areas.

After spending the early afternoon at our lovely lodge, we had the opportunity to explore a fine wetland by boat. Although we were seated with other punters, our captain always makes sure to 'treat the crazy birdos differently', and we had phenomenally close-up views of many species seen previously like Green Pygmy Goose, Magpie Goose, Plumed Whistling Duck, Azure Kingfisher, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Comb-crested Jacana, Pied Heron, Black-necked Stork, Nankeen Night Heron, Azure Kingfisher, and a somewhat surprising Pheasant Coucal. There were some nice list additions too with Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Australasian Swamphen, the recently-colonised Dusky Moorhen, Little Egret, and of course the star bird of the billabong – one diminutive Little Kingfisher. This area also has a fabulous congregation of Saltwater Crocodiles, of which we saw many huge individuals during the afternoon and were able to learn a little about the ecology of these powerful animals. After dinner we spent exactly 56 minutes searching for nightlife, and found no less than four Australian Owlet-nightjars (with two perched for an extended period), a Tawny Frogmouth, Bush Stone Curlew, Large-tailed Nightjar, plus Northern Brown Bandicoot, Brushtail Possum, and Black-footed Tree-rat. The local tame Dingo came to greet us when we pulled back in to the carpark, looking much happier and more well-fed than the scrawny individuals we had seen earlier in the bush!



The lovely Pied Heron is seen regularly in billabongs and waterholes across the Top End! What a bird!

We positioned ourselves at another sandstone site on dawn for our remaining two targets. A duo of Arnhemland endemic White-lined Honeyeaters were located fairly quickly, however it wasn't until we gave up on finding a fruiting fig tree along the trails and started scanning cliff faces that we picked up two distant Black-banded Fruit Doves perched on some open boughs. Another Tawny Frogmouth was seen well at his day roost before our content group headed south in search of another big Top End bird. Some flowering paperbark trees en. route contained a strange selection of birds, with Bar-breasted Honeyeater, White-throated Honeyeater, Red-backed Fairywrens and Crimson Finches all feeding either in or around the same canopy at one stage! Not long after this, John earned his gold star by spotting the raptor nest which we were looking for on this stretch of road. Sitting in full view on top was a sublime female Red Goshawk with her large chick, and in the next tree a loud yelping alerted us to her partner also perched up nicely. This impressive and very rare Australian raptor is only reliable at two or three nesting sites spread across the north, but these nests are not active every year, and do not always stay in the same tree!



This female Red Goshawk was quite noisy, and showed very well near her nest. The species is almost impossible to see without a known nesting site, so it cannot be guaranteed!

Our afternoon around Pine Creek was also very productive, starting before we even turned the corner onto the main street from our hotel where a whole bunch of sublime Hooded Parrot were sheltering from the heat of the day on low branches in a dense tree. At this time of year when water is all but gone from surrounding areas, the birds pretty much live in town, becoming a powerline species! Despite this apparent abundance, this Top End endemic remains endangered, relying land which is not overgrazed or overburnt with large undisturbed termite mounds to nest in. Having missed Cockatiel in the Red Centre due to the drought, we were pleased to find that a long-staying flock was still present around the sewage works east of town where this tiny charismatic cockatoo seemed to have recently bred, with adults feeding begging juveniles. Once we arrived at a scenic waterhole west of town, it became apparent that the poor state of the entrance road we had just driven was due to some fairly recent localised rain which had also filled the creek, meaning there was no real concentration of birds to focus on here. A few species were hanging about however, with the tour's only Olive-backed Oriole coming in to say hello, plus a pair of Leaden Flycatcher and our first Rufous-throated Honeyeaters. Some opportunistic callback during our return journey surprisingly resulted in a lovely Northern Rosella landing silently above us, causing a scramble as we positioned ourselves for what turned out to be an extended view. We finished the day back in the centre of Pine Creek township, where once again Hooded Parrots disgraced themselves in the setting sun (but seriously, the colours are even more stunning when you crawl up close!).



Hooded Parrots may be common in Pine Creek, but we will never forget this vibrant combination of turquoise and gold!



Some lovely encounters with the tiny Diamond Dove were enjoyed this year!

Wishing to continue the theme of brightly coloured birds the following morning, we positioned ourselves early at a waterhole popular with finches. The road was closed so we had to walk in, but it wasn't too far! Some elegant Long-tailed Finches came right down in front of us to take a sip, soon joined by Masked Finches and Crimson Finches, plus a host of other birds including more Rufous-throated Honeyeaters, White-throated Honeyeaters, Diamond Doves, Peaceful Doves and Black-faced Cuckooshrikes. Eventually the main event

arrived as a flock of stunning Gouldian Finches appeared above us in the staging tree, and slowly made their way down closer and closer to the water before hopping onto the rocks to drink. The males of these amazing Australian parrotfinches come in three distinct colour morphs, and we were treated to both the normal black-headed variety, and an immaculate red-headed individual. Moving into the Katherine area our first stop was at Chainman Creek, where we walked around until lunch hoping for buttonquail. A large convey of Brown Quail caused brief excitement, but otherwise in the heat of the day everything was silent except for a few Striated Pardalotes which showed well. We finally found a male Red-backed Fairywren as we were departing (all up until this point had been female-types), and a family party of Apostlebirds were spotted as we drove into town. Our evening birding excursion saw us walking a long stretch of open woodland in search of Northern Crested Shrike-tits (a small and rare subspecies which surely warrants specific status), and although we were not successful on this front, everyone was pleased with some phenomenal showings of Black-tailed Treecreeper, Varied Sittella, and a surprising flock of 60+ Gouldian Finches which allowed quite a close approach while they were feeding on the ground. Our honeyeater list grew here too, with Banded Honeyeater, Black-chinned Honeyeater (here of the Golden-backed subspecies), and Yellow-tinted Honeyeater all hanging around.



A male black headed Gouldian Finch impressed us as usual one afternoon (top), and in the same area a Black-tailed Treecreeper (bottom) allowed much closer approach than normal!

The next morning we rose early and began crisscrossing rocky hillsides in earnest for the Top End's tricky endemic buttonquail (this time at Chinaman Creek). The species is rare and relatively unpredictable to the level that it is still high on the wishlist of many top Australian birders who have certainly tried more than once! Our expectations were moderated as we walked kilometre after kilometre and the sun got hotter and hotter, but suddenly Michael flushed a buttonquail from a bush next to his foot and it landed in the open before running for cover. Our excitement was palpable as we stalked closer to the bird until it ran into view, where my suspicions were confirmed. It was in fact a nomadic Little Buttonquail, which does not usually occur at this site! Pleased, but also somewhat dissatisfied, we continued our quest. Some more Brown Quail were seen, and various common woodland species from previous days were noted. Suddenly eight Chestnut-backed Buttonquail flushed up in front of me, scattering in every direction. With some careful following, we were able to sneak closer and after a few tries managed phenomenal deck views of this excellent rare bird.



The leader had a great time gripping off his Australian mates after this phenomenal encounter with a Chestnut-backed Buttonquail, which is only rarely seen, and almost never this well!

A brief visit to a lovely lunch café allowed us to admire the great-looking Great Bowerbird bower, whose owner sat above our table while we ate, eyeing off the dining area for scraps of food, or new trinkets to enlarge his collection. The afternoon was spent searching again for Crested Shrike-tit, but we only saw the same list of species as previously before a stitch-up had us hurrying back to town.

Just as the sun was peeking over the horizon three magnificent Australian Bustards were savoured feeding by the roadside. Not long after we were hiking up yet another escarpment walk near Timber Creek in search of yet another endemic pigeon. The isolated *boothi* subspecies of White-quilled Rock Pigeon did not parade in front of us to the same degree as his cousins in the Arnhemland escarpments, but our views were still excellent for a few minutes before the pair flushed over the top of the hill and disappeared. Continuing through to town, we spent some time looking for finches and mannikins along the highway, but could not find any standing water this year to stake out. A young Spotted Harrier however was seen well after it flushed out

of a dense tree near the vehicle. On arrival in town the hot wind didn't help our cause, and despite checking dozens of different waterholes and drinking areas we didn't see a single finch which was not Double-barred Finch. One Freshwater Crocodile eyed us off as we tried unsuccessfully for Buff-sided Robin along the riverbank before we eventually called it a morning and headed back to our lodgings.



This male Purple-crowned Fairywren was good at hiding from my camera, but one photo shows his distinguishing feature!



Colourful Crimson Finches were regularly encountered at waterholes throughout the Top End.

Our afternoon was similarly frustrating, but even in the wind we managed to tempt out a pair of gorgeous Purple-crowned Fairywrens, the male in full breeding plumage of course. We will remember his brightly coloured head which he showed off ever so well for a long time! After this highlight, a Little Curlew was the biggest surprise, seen flying upriver towards us calling, before dropping into the middle for a quick drink, then continuing his flight upriver! We spent the remainder of the afternoon at a lovely waterhole, but only Crimson Finches were in evidence, with Little and Silver-crowned Friarbirds, plus a bonus party of Purple-backed Fairywrens with two breeding plumage males (this widespread inland species is now split under IOC from the Variegated Fairywren of coastal east Australia). Our luck picked up after dinner however, and even though it was still over 30°C, a beautiful Southern Boobook came straight in to my hoots and perched almost at eye-level in front of us for walkway views.

Our good fortune continued into the following morning, where a quick check of the airfield at Timber Creek at dawn revealed no less than eight Oriental Plovers which had materialised overnight, having not been there the day before. We can usually find one or two new arrivals towards the end of the tour in Darwin, but this confiding group was very welcome, as was the Horsfield's Bush Lark accompanying them. Over at nearby Policeman's Point the large flocks of finches which had been reported during early September seemed to have all but vanished. We counted ourselves lucky to finally spot a few hundred Star Finches feeding on the burnt ground beside the track in a tight flock, which was accompanied by a single Chestnut-breasted Mannikin and half-a-dozen rare Yellow-rumped Mannikin, the latter being a specialty of this region close to the Western Australia border. With these three key species locked down, we were able to relax a little, and headed down to survey the waterfront. Here we found a family of lovely Buff-sided Robins which put on a perfect show for us in their picturesque riverside habitat, while good looks of a big Budgerigar flock were long overdue. We watched mesmerised as the birds circled in front of us and dropping into the water to drink before swirling back up into the air to regroup before repeating the exercise. We successfully found three Grey-fronted Honeyeaters in some rocky woodland above the town just as the wind was picking up again, and then some excellent looks at thirsty Red-collared Lorikeets were obtained at a sprinkler while we had breakfast. Our drive back to Katherine saw us checking every roadside flock and puddle we could find for the rare Pictorella Mannikin without success, but a few Gouldian Finches and huge numbers of Cockatiels at one bore were lovely to see. We also had a Black Bittern flush up and perch next to the road at one point, but for the third time our afternoon session for Crested Shrike Tit drew a blank, with this tricky bird still not giving itself up after we had covered at least 15 kilometres of habitat in the past days.



Hundreds of Star Finches entertained us around Timber Creek, and some of the males showed very well indeed!

Early morning we were back at the Katherine drinking pools, however today the temperature had dropped substantially, so there was very little activity. By 8am we had seen small numbers of the main species (Gouldian, Long-tailed, Masked, Crimson and Double-barred Finch) and decided to head north back to Darwin for the lowering tide. Today the water level for Chestnut Rail was not right at Buffalo Creek until around 11am - we didn't particularly expect a sighting during our midday vigil. Despite this, the birds did indeed call, once again almost in view at the edge of the mangroves but not quite! We also gave it an evening session in some other mangroves south of town, but after waiting two hours in the fading light we had only heard a bird call distantly. Then suddenly one responded from not far away right on sunset from a burst of random tape playing and our attentions were focused. Unfortunately it chose to cross the path behind us, so only the leader and the Swede (who had already ticked the species on heard many days ago!) got to see the huge Chestnut Rail briefly flick across the muddy gap. Luckily when we came back in the morning before our flights, the same bird strutted straight out onto the muddy trail for a few seconds before silently melting back into the mangroves. A fantastic end to the tour!

BIRD OF THE TOUR (AS VOTED FOR BY THE GROUP)

1. Striated (Sandhill) Grasswren
2. Rainbow Pitta
- = 3. Chestnut-backed Buttonquail
- = 3. Inland Dotterel
5. Beach Stone-curlew



Green Pygmy Goose were quite common in the Top End!

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Total of bird species recorded: 276

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). IOC World Bird Names. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Emu ◊ *Dromaius novaehollandiae* Male with chicks near Musgrave, and numerous roadside birds near Winton

Magpie Goose ◊ *Anseranas semipalmata* Regularly noted throughout the Top End

Plumed Whistling Duck ◊ *Dendrocygna eytoni* Multiple good looks, particularly on our boat tour

Wandering Whistling Duck ◊ *Dendrocygna arcuata* Multiple good looks, particularly on our boat tour

Black Swan ◊ *Cygnus atratus* Handful residing at the Alice Springs STW

Raja Shelduck ◊ *Radjah radjah* Common around Darwin and at Buffalo Creek

Pink-eared Duck ◊ *Malacorhynchus membranaceus* Seen well at a few waterbodies in the Red Centre

Green Pygmy Goose ◊ *Nettapus pulchellus* Excellent views on our boat tour, in perfect light at sunset!

Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* Commonly seen throughout on bodies of water

Grey Teal *Anas gracilis* Abundant at waterholes in the Red Centre

Chestnut Teal *Anas castanea* Single vagrant male with Grey Teal at Alice Springs STW

Hardhead ◊ *Aythya australis* Big numbers at the Alice Springs STW

Orange-footed Scrubfowl ◊ *Megapodius reinwardt* Running around in Darwin like chickens!

Brown Quail ◊ *Coturnix ypsilophora* Birds flushed while looking for Buttonquail, with some seen well

Australasian Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* Small numbers throughout

Hoary-headed Grebe ◊ *Poliiocephalus poliocephalus* Some nice breeding plumaged birds at Alice STW

Black-necked Stork ◊ *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* A British couple of these hulking storks in the Top End

Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* Regular in the Top End

Straw-necked Ibis ◊ *Threskiornis spinicollis* Regular sightings throughout

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* Small numbers in the Top End

Royal Spoonbill ◊ *Platalea regia* First noted on the lagoon in Darwin, then elsewhere

Yellow-billed Spoonbill ◊ *Platalea flavipes* Single bird hiding from the drought on our cruise in the Top End

Black Bittern *Dupetor flavicollis* Single bird flushed and perching up on the roadside near Timber Creek

Nankeen Night Heron (Rufous N H) *Nycticorax caledonicus* Excellent looks on our evening boat cruise

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* Common on the Darwin mudflats at Buffalo Creek

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus* Common and regular

White-necked Heron ◊ (Pacific H) *Ardea pacifica* Only a few birds noted in the north

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Some birds in the Top End

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia* Commonly seen in the Top End

Pied Heron ◊ *Egretta picata* Lots of great views of this lovely waterbird around Darwin

White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae* One in Alice Springs at the Botanic Gardens, more in the north

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Regularly noted

Pacific Reef Heron (Eastern Reef E) *Egretta sacra* Regularly noted around Darwin

Australian Pelican ◊ *Pelecanus conspicillatus* Just one group seen flying overhead in the Top End

Little Pied Cormorant *Microcarbo melanoleucos* Some in the Top End

Little Black Cormorant *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris* Seen during our cruise in the Top End

Australian Pied Cormorant ◊ *Phalacrocorax varius* Single bird at Nightcliff Foreshore on day

Australasian Darter ◊ *Anhinga novaehollandiae* Singles and small numbers in the Top End



I haven't quite been this close to a wild White-bellied Sea Eagle before!

- Black-breasted Buzzard** ◇ (B-b Kite) *Hamirostra melanosternon* One near Alice Springs before our flight!
- Little Eagle** *Hieraaetus morphnoides* Just one near Alice Springs on our first morning!
- Wedge-tailed Eagle** ◇ *Aquila audax* Abundant on roadkill during our time in the Red Centre
- Red Goshawk** ◇ *Erythrotriorchis radiatu* Two adults at a nest with fledgling near Pine Creek
- Brown Goshawk** *Accipiter fasciatus* Singles seen on a few days of the tour
- Collared Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter cirrocephalus* Two individuals studied well in flight in the Top End
- Spotted Harrier** ◇ *Circus assimilis* Single immature bird along a dry creek near Timber Creek
- Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* An abundant species in Northern Australia
- Whistling Kite** *Haliastur sphenurus* An abundant species in Northern Australia
- Brahminy Kite** *Haliastur indus* Several around Darwin
- White-bellied Sea Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucogaster* Some fantastic looks at this cracker on our boat trip
- Australian Bustard** ◇ *Ardeotis australis* Three on the roadside en. route to Timber Creek, plus others
- Buff-banded Rail** *Gallirallus philippensis* One in the Darwin mangroves got us excited, but wrong rail!
- Chestnut Rail** ◇ *Eulabeornis castaneiventris* One on the sixth attempt got us very excited in Darwin!!!
- Australasian Swamphen** *Porphyrio melanotus* Seen during our boat cruise
- Dusky Moorhen** ◇ *Gallinula tenebrosa* Saw a few of this recent colonist to the Top End
- Black-tailed Nativehen** ◇ *Tribonyx ventralis* Some at Alice Springs STW seen very well
- Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra* Abundant at waterbodies in central areas
- Brolga** ◇ *Antigone rubicunda* Just a few birds near Kakadu National Park, seen very well
- Chestnut-backed Buttonquail** ◇ *Turnix castanotus* Mega views of this endemic on the ground near Katherine
- Little Buttonquail** ◇ *Turnix velox* Similar fantastic looks at this scarce nomad also near Katherine
- Bush Stone-curlew** ◇ (B Thick-knee) *Burhinus grallarius* Some around Darwin in the town parks
- Beach Stone-curlew** ◇ (B Thick-knee) *Esacus magnirostris* Eventually located in Darwin, and showed well!
- Pied Oystercatcher** ◇ (Australian Pied O) *Haematopus longirostris* Some noted on the Darwin mudflats
- Pied Stilt** ◇ *Himantopus leucocephalus* Small numbers at various wetlands during the tour
- Red-necked Avocet** ◇ *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* A dozen birds at the Alice Springs STW



Two of the Aussie buttonquails in the same trip! This Little Buttonquail was a great find!

- Banded Lapwing** ◇ *Vanellus tricolor* Five birds a field near Kunoth Bore north of Alice Springs
- Masked Lapwing** ◇ *Vanellus miles* An abundant parkland species throughout
- Red-kneed Dotterel** ◇ *Erythronyctes alba* Regular at bodies of water during the tour due to drought
- Inland Dotterel** ◇ *Peltohyas australis* Large party joyously located in the desolate gibber near Erldunda
- Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* Noted around Darwin
- Red-capped Plover** ◇ *Charadrius ruficapillus* Some seen around Alice Springs at the STW
- Lesser Sand Plover (Mongolian P)** *Charadrius [mongolus] mongolus* Noted around Darwin
- Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultia* Noted around Darwin, in lesser numbers than Lesser!
- Oriental Plover** ◇ *Charadrius veredus* Flock of eight arrived at Timber Creek Airstrip overnight during our stay
- Black-fronted Dotterel** ◇ *Elseyonis melanops* Endearing and regular throughout
- Comb-crested Jacana** ◇ *Irediparra gallinacea* Good numbers in the Top End
- Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* Seen around Darwin
- Little Curlew** ◇ *Numenius minutus* Three freshly arrived birds scoped up well at a Darwin lagoon
- Far Eastern Curlew** ◇ (Eastern C) *Numenius madagascariensis* Small numbers around Darwin
- Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* Smaller numbers around Darwin
- Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* A few around Darwin
- Great Knot** *Calidris tenuirostris* A couple of hundred of these endangered birds on the Darwin mudflats
- Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* Two dozen birds mixing with Great Knots in Darwin
- Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** *Calidris acuminata* Noted throughout regularly
- Red-necked Stint** *Calidris ruficollis* Just a few birds near the Beach Stone Curlews in Darwin
- Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* Some on the flats around Darwin
- Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* Around Darwin
- Grey-tailed Tattler** *Tringa brevipes* Darwin mudflats
- Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* Some at the Alice Springs STW
- Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* Two on our first scan of the Darwin mudflats



One of the Banded Lapwings we lucked across near Alice Springs – a great find after so few records this year!

- Australian Pratincole** *Stiltia isabella* One confiding bird at the Alice Springs STW
- Silver Gull** ◇ *Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae* Common around Darwin
- Gull-billed Tern** ◇ *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* Both Australian and Asian subspecies around Darwin
- Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* One observed on the Darwin mudflats
- Greater Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bergii* Small group on our first day in Darwin
- Little Tern** *Sternula albifrons* Single bird with the Greater Crested Terns
- Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybrida* A handful of birds throughout the tour
- Spotted Dove (introduced)** *Spilopelia chinensis* Only around Alice Springs
- Pacific Emerald Dove** *Chalcophaps longirostris* One of the park birds around Darwin!
- Common Bronzewing** ◇ *Phaps chalcoptera* Big numbers coming to drink in the evening at Kunoth
- Crested Pigeon** ◇ *Ocyphaps lophotes* Common and beautiful, especially around Erdunda
- Spinifex Pigeon** ◇ *Geophaps plumifera* Hilariously good looks west of Alice – running under the leader!
- Partridge Pigeon** ◇ *Geophaps smithii* Two groups of birds seen near Kakadu National Park
- Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeon** ◇ *Petrophassa rufipennis* Astounding looks at this skittish pigeon!
- White-quilled Rock Pigeon** ◇ *Petrophassa albipennis* Not as astounding, but great looks at this one too!
- Diamond Dove** ◇ *Geopelia cuneate* Some coming to drink at a waterhole near Alice showed brilliantly
- Peaceful Dove** *Geopelia placida* Common throughout the Top End
- Bar-shouldered Dove** *Geopelia humeralis* Common throughout the Top End
- Black-banded Fruit Dove** ◇ *Ptilinopus alligator* Two birds scoped up on a rocky escarpment near Kakadu
- Rose-crowned Fruit Dove** ◇ *Ptilinopus regina* Great looks at a calling bird in the morning sun at East Point
- Torresian Imperial Pigeon** ◇ *Ducula spilorrhoa* Abundant in Darwin
- Pheasant Coucal** *Centropus phasianinus* Some good looks at this attractive cuckoo this year
- Pacific Koel (Australian K)** *Eudynamys orientalis* Heard often, seen in a fig tree near the Rufous Owls
- Channel-billed Cuckoo** ◇ *Scythrops novaehollandiae* Heard only in the Top End (H)
- Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo** ◇ *Chrysococcyx basalis* Scarce this year, just one in Darwin on a dead tree
- Little Bronze Cuckoo** ◇ *Chrysococcyx minutillus* Some individuals in the mangroves of Darwin
- Pallid Cuckoo** ◇ *Cacomantis pallidus* One heard very distantly on the Central Arnhem Highway (H)
- Brush Cuckoo** *Cacomantis variolosus* Singles around Katherine while searching for quail



Crested Pigeons are the common cousins of Spinifex Pigeon, and are a regular sight in town parks and gardens!



Another angle on one of the Chestnut-quilled Rock Pigeons which showed ever so well!

Rufous Owl ◇ *Ninox rufa* Phenomenal looks at two adults with their cute youngling eyeballing us below!
Barking Owl ◇ *Ninox connivens* Woofed in during the mid-afternoon in Darwin – quite an experience!
Southern Boobook ◇ *Ninox boobook* Hooted in, perching up for walkaway views near Timber Creek!
Tawny Frogmouth ◇ *Podargus strigoides* Spotlit in some paperbark swamp forest near Kakadu NP
Spotted Nightjar ◇ *Eurostopodus argus* On the road in the evening as we headed back to Alice Springs
Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus* One briefly while spotlighting, but heard elsewhere
Australian Owlet-Nightjar ◇ *Aegotheles cristatus* Cripplingly close views of this species in paperbark forest
Pacific Swift (Fork-tailed S) *Apus pacificusi* One flock overhead on our first morning at Buffalo Creek
Oriental Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* Noted in the north
Blue-winged Kookaburra ◇ *Dacelo leachii* Quite regular in the north, with some great looks
Forest Kingfisher *Todiramphus macleayii* Common throughout the Top End
Torresian Kingfisher ◇ *Todiramphus sordidus* Excellent views of a calling pair at East Point
Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus* Some in the Top End
Red-backed Kingfisher ◇ *Todiramphus pyrrhopygius* Multiple birds by the roadside near Alice and Yulara
Azure Kingfisher *Ceyx azureus* Multiple individuals perched up well on our boat tour
Little Kingfisher ◇ *Ceyx pusillus* One tiny kingfisher finally spotted on our boat tour, great looks!
Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatusi* One of the best Bee-eaters, seen most days of the tour
Nankeen Kestrel (Australian K) *Falco cenchroides* Seen most days in the Red Centre
Brown Falcon *Falco berigora* Common in the Red Centre, with a confiding pale morph very welcome
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Two pairs seen very well near Alice Springs
Cockatiel ◇ *Nymphicus hollandicus* Caught up with some confiding birds near Pine Creek sewage works
Red-tailed Black Cockatoo ◇ *Calyptorhynchus banksii* Many flocks seen throughout the tour
Galah ◇ *Eolophus roseicapilla* Attractively common in large numbers
Pink Cockatoo ◇ (Major Mitchell's C) *Lophochroa leadbeateri* Perched views in the sun above us near Alice
Little Corella ◇ *Cacatua sanguinea* A couple of large flocks seen throughout
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* Some in the north, mainly around Nightcliff
Red-winged Parrot ◇ *Aprosmictus erythropterus* Small numbers in the north in flight, some perched
Mulga Parrot ◇ *Psephotellus varius* Superb views of a feeding party at Kunoth Bore



Partridge Pigeon are in severe decline due to new fire regimes across northern Australia and take some effort to locate.



This adult Rufous Owl had a little look at us before going back to sleep – the fur and blood from last night is still on his talons!

Hooded Parrot ◇ *Psephotellus dissimilis* Disgracing themselves in Pine Creek parks and gardens yet again!
Northern Rosella ◇ *Platycercus venustus* One surprisingly appeared at a random stop near Pine Creek!
Australian Ringneck ◇ (Port Lincoln R) *Barnardius [zonarius] zonarius* Common around Alice Springs
Bourke's Parrot ◇ *Neopsephotus bourkii* Big numbers coming to drink at Kunoth, seen well in the torch
Varied Lorikeet ◇ *Psitteuteles versicolor* Quite a few flocks overhead in the Top End, but never perched
Red-collared Lorikeet *Trichoglossus rubritorquis* Noisy, colourful, and easy to watch!
Budgerigar ◇ *Melopsittacus undulates* One lucky flock seen well this year at Timber Creek coming to drink
Rainbow Pitta ◇ *Pitta iris* This cracking bird came straight in while we were walking around East Point – wow!
Western Bowerbird ◇ *Chlamydera guttata* This lovely bowerbird was common yet charismatic around Alice
Great Bowerbird ◇ *Chlamydera nuchalis* One cheeky bird and his bower observed north of Katherine
White-browed Treecreeper ◇ *Climacteris affinis* Two at one of the last good Ironwood stands near Alice
Black-tailed Treecreeper ◇ *Climacteris melanurusi* Common at our site on the Central Arnhem Highway
Purple-backed Fairywren ◇ *Malurus lamberti* Some in the Red Centre, two males drinking near Timber Creek
Splendid Fairywren ◇ *Malurus splendens* Common around Alice Springs, with some nice breeding males too!
Purple-crowned Fairywren ◇ *Malurus coronatus* Such a beautiful species, seen perfectly near Timber Creek
Red-backed Fairywren ◇ *Malurus melanocephalus* Quite regularly observed in the Top End
White-winged Fairywren ◇ *Malurus leucopterus* Some of these lovely birds seen out on the gibber plains



Male White-winged Fairywren perched atop a saltbush near Erdunda.

Rufous-crowned Emu-wren ◇ *Stipiturus ruficeps* Tricky this year, but eventually seen up on a rocky ridge
Striated Grasswren (Sandhill G) *Amytornis [striatus] oweni* Pair running around near Yulara – magnificent!
Dusky Grasswren ◇ *Amytornis purnelli* As usual, very confiding birds seen around Alice Springs
Dusky Myzomela ◇ *Myzomela obscura* Some noted in the Darwin mangroves
Red-headed Myzomela ◇ *Myzomela erythrocephala* Some cracking males around Darwin
Banded Honeyeater ◇ *Cissomela pectoralis* Common in some places near Katherine, like along the CA Hwy

Brown Honeyeater ◇ *Lichmera indistincta* Noted throughout, bigger numbers in the north
Little Friarbird ◇ *Philemon citreogularis* Quite common in the Top End throughout various habitats
Helmeted Friarbird ◇ *Philemon buceroides* Both the Coastal and Sandstone forms seen in the Top End
Silver-crowned Friarbird ◇ *Philemon argenticeps* Fantastic looks at a flowering tree near our Darwin lagoon
Blue-faced Honeyeater ◇ *Entomyzon cyanotis* Fantastic looks with the aforementioned friarbirds in Darwin
Black-chinned Honeyeater ◇ (Golden-backed H) *Melithreptus [gularis] laetior* Some seen near Katherine
White-throated Honeyeater *Melithreptus albogularis* Noted throughout the Top End
Crimson Chat ◇ *Epthianura tricolor* Just a few birds seen west of Alice Springs by the roadside
Orange Chat ◇ *Epthianura aurifrons* Sparse this year, with just a single male seen at the Alice Sewage Works
Rufous-banded Honeyeater ◇ *Conopophila albogularis* Common around Darwin, especially along the coast
Rufous-throated Honeyeater ◇ *Conopophila rufogularis* Regularly seen throughout the inland Top End
Grey Honeyeater ◇ *Conopophila whitei* Finally saw one very well after many attempts at the Desert Park
Bar-breasted Honeyeater ◇ *Ramsayornis fasciatus* Just one in some flowering paperbark near Pine Creek
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater ◇ *Acanthagenys rufogularis* Common around Alice Springs
Yellow-throated Miner ◇ *Manorina flavigula* One of the main town birds in Alice Springs
White-fronted Honeyeater ◇ *Purnella albifrons* Single seen briefly perched, then speeding away in Yulara
White-gaped Honeyeater ◇ *Stomiopera unicolor* Quite a few around Darwin and the Top End
Singing Honeyeater ◇ *Gavicalis virescens* Regular throughout the Red Centre
Yellow-tinted Honeyeater ◇ *Ptilotula flavescens* Many in the Top End
Grey-headed Honeyeater ◇ *Ptilotula keartlandi* Seen well in the rocky gorges near Alice Springs
Grey-fronted Honeyeater ◇ *Ptilotula plumula* Three birds located in some rough country near Timber Creek
White-plumed Honeyeater ◇ *Ptilotula penicillata* Abundant inland
White-lined Honeyeater ◇ *Meliphaga albilineata* This Arnhemland endemic was seen well near Kakadu
Red-browed Pardalote ◇ *Pardalotus rubricatus* Two birds on our first morning in Alice Springs
Striated Pardalote ◇ *Pardalotus striatus* Quite a few in the Katherine area



Grey-headed Honeyeater in the ranges west of Alice Springs showed well.

Redthroat ◇ *Pyrrholaemus brunneus* Eventually located a pair near Yulara in some classic saltbush
Weebill ◇ *Smicrornis brevirostris* Common throughout
Mangrove Gerygone ◇ *Gerygone levigaster* Noted in the mangroves around Darwin
Western Gerygone ◇ *Gerygone fusca* We checked many small groups of these for Grey Honeyeater!
Large-billed Gerygone ◇ *Gerygone magnirostris* Noted in the mangroves around Darwin
Green-backed Gerygone ◇ *Gerygone chloronota* Noted along the coast around Darwin
Inland Thornbill ◇ *Acanthiza apicalis* The common thornbill around Alice Springs
Chestnut-rumped Thornbill ◇ *Acanthiza uropygialis* Regularly observed around Alice with a little white eye
Yellow-rumped Thornbill ◇ *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa* Some seen in the Alice Springs vicinity
Slaty-backed Thornbill ◇ *Acanthiza robustirostris* This rare Red Centre specialty was seen a few times
Southern Whiteface ◇ *Aphelocephala leucopsis* One flock at Kunothe Bore seen well
Chestnut-breasted Whiteface ◇ *Aphelocephala pectoralis* Twitched these declining birds south of Eridunda
Banded Whiteface ◇ *Aphelocephala nigricincta* Multiple small groups and excellent views near Eridunda
Grey-crowned Babbler ◇ *Pomatostomus temporalis* Noted throughout
White-browed Babbler ◇ *Pomatostomus superciliosus* Two flocks in the Kunothe Bore mulga
Chiming Wedgebill ◇ *Psophodes occidentalis* Took a while to get good looks, but seen well near Eridunda
Cinnamon Quail-thrush ◇ *Cinclosoma cinnamomeum* Did not take long to get good looks near Eridunda!
White-breasted Woodswallow ◇ *Artamus leucorhynchus* Some around Darwin
Black-faced Woodswallow ◇ *Artamus cinereus* Common throughout the tour
Little Woodswallow ◇ *Artamus minor* Some near Uluru, and others in the savannah around Katherine
Black Butcherbird ◇ *Melloria quoyi* Nesting pair above the mangrove boardwalk at East Point
Australian Magpie ◇ *Gymnorhina tibicen* Lovely bird, seen everywhere regularly
Grey Butcherbird ◇ *Cracticus torquatus* One individual in the mulga on Santa Teresa Road
Silver-backed Butcherbird ◇ *Cracticus argenteus* Small family twitched at a park in Darwin
Pied Butcherbird ◇ *Cracticus nigrogularis* Common throughout
Black-faced Cuckooshrike ◇ *Coracina novaehollandiae* Moderate numbers in the Top End
White-bellied Cuckooshrike ◇ *Coracina papuensis* Common throughout the Top End
White-winged Triller ◇ *Lalage tricolor* Seen both in the Red Centre and the Top End
Varied Triller ◇ *Lalage leucomela* Common and vocal around the Darwin coastline in particular
Varied Sittella ◇ *Daphoenositta chrysoptera* Three different flocks along the Central Arnhem Highway
Crested Bellbird ◇ *Oreoica gutturalis* Superb looks at a singing male by the road en. route to South Australia
Grey Whistler ◇ *Pachycephala simplex* Around Darwin, this form is likely distinct from those in Queensland
Mangrove Golden Whistler ◇ *Pachycephala melanura* One female in the mangroves of Darwin
Rufous Whistler ◇ *Pachycephala rufiventris* Abundant in the hot and dry areas
White-breasted Whistler ◇ *Pachycephala lanioides* A pair of these attractive birds tracked down in Darwin
Little Shrikethrush ◇ *Colluricincla megarhyncha* Singles in Darwin only
Grey Shrikethrush ◇ *Colluricincla harmonica* Some great looks around Alice Springs at drinking pools
Sandstone Shrikethrush ◇ *Colluricincla woodwardi* A few birds on our first day in the Top End escarpments
Australasian Figbird ◇ (Green F) *Sphecothebes vieillotii* Common around Darwin
Olive-backed Oriole ◇ *Oriolus sagittatus* Just one bird in the bush near Pine Creek
Green Oriole ◇ *Oriolus flavocinctus* Lots of these lovely birds with their chortling call around Darwin
Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus* Regular in the Top End
Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* Many of these charismatic fantails enjoyed throughout
Northern Fantail *Rhipidura rufiventris* Great looks on the trail at East Point
Grey Fantail ◇ *Rhipidura albiscapa* Good looks at the scarce desert subspecies near Alice – a good split?
Mangrove Fantail ◇ (M Grey F) *Rhipidura phasiana* One lured out of the East Point mangroves
Arafura Fantail ◇ *Rhipidura dryas* Common around Darwin coastal areas, showing very well
Magpie-lark ◇ (Australian M-l) *Grallina cyanoleuca* Lovely bird seen throughout
Leaden Flycatcher ◇ *Myiagra rubecula* Mainly females seen in the Top End, but a nice male at Pine Creek
Broad-billed Flycatcher ◇ *Myiagra ruficollis* Superb looks in the Darwin mangroves
Shining Flycatcher ◇ *Myiagra slecto* Regular around waterbodies in the north
Paperbark Flycatcher ◇ *Myiagra nana* Regular in all inland areas during our Top End leg
Torresian Crow ◇ *Corvus orru* Common in the Top End
Little Crow ◇ *Corvus bennetti* Common around Eridunda especially



This Mangrove Fantail was very active when we eventually tracked him down in Darwin, often coming too close for our optics!



Buff-sided Robins were found near Timber Creek.



This male Hooded Robin showed near Alice.

- Australian Raven** ◇ *Corvus coronoides* A couple of birds at a roadkill just over the South Australia border
- Apostlebird** ◇ *Struthidea cinerea* Some flocks around Katherine were the only ones seen
- Buff-sided Robin** ◇ *Poecilodryas cerviniventris* Some very responsive birds flying around us at Timber Creek
- Mangrove Robin** ◇ *Peneoenanthe pulverulenta* One skulking individual seen by all in the Darwin mangroves
- Hooded Robin** ◇ *Melanodryas cucullata* Regular in the Red Centre - some very confiding birds west of Alice
- Lemon-bellied Flyrobin** ◇ *Microeca flavigaster* A couple seen very well on the way to East Point mangroves
- Jacky Winter** ◇ *Microeca fascinans* Good looks along the Central Arnhem Highway
- Red-capped Robin** ◇ *Petroica goodenovii* Superb bird, regularly encountered in the Red Centre
- Horsfield's Bush Lark (Australasian B)** *Mirafra javanica* Just one bird at Timber Creek Airfield
- White-backed Swallow** ◇ *Cheramoeca leucosterna* Some at the Alice Springs Sewage Works
- Fairy Martin** ◇ *Petrochelidon ariel* Common in the Red Centre
- Tree Martin** ◇ *Petrochelidon nigricans* Common in the Top End
- Australian Reed Warbler** ◇ *Acrocephalus australis* Several at the Alice Springs STW
- Little Grassbird** ◇ *Poodytes gramineus* Several at the Alice Springs STW
- Rufous Songlark** ◇ *Megalurus mathewsi* Some along the Central Arnhem Highway, but silent and skittish
- Golden-headed Cisticola (Bright-headed C)** *Cisticola exilis* Some around Darwin in the nearby grasslands
- Canary White-eye** ◇ *Zosterops luteus* Common in the coastal mangroves
- Mistletoebird** ◇ *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* Fantastic looks west of Alice Springs, and noted throughout
- Painted Finch** ◇ *Emblema pictum* One single bird came to drink near Alice, luckily a good plumaged adult!
- Crimson Finch** ◇ *Neochmia phaeton* One of the more common finches at waterholes in the Top End
- Star Finch** ◇ *Neochmia ruficauda* One flock, hundreds of birds strong, feeding near Timber Creek
- Masked Finch** ◇ *Poephila personata* Smaller numbers of this beauty usually mixed in with Long-tailed Finches
- Long-tailed Finch** ◇ *Poephila acuticauda* Fairly common coming to waterholes in the Top End
- Zebra Finch** ◇ *Taeniopygia guttata* Abundant in the Red Centre
- Double-barred Finch** ◇ *Taeniopygia bichenovii* Noted in Darwin, and coming in to drink at various waterholes

Gouldian Finch ◊ *Erythrura gouldiae* Flocks seen both drinking and feeding in the bush – great looks!
Yellow-rumped Mannikin ◊ *Lonchura flaviprymna* Just a handful mixed in with other finches at Timber Creek
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin *Lonchura castaneothorax* Single adult bird with Yellow-rumped Mannikins
Australian Pipit *Anthus australis* Seen a few times in the Red Centre by the roadside



Male Mistletoebird low down in a eucalypt near Alice Springs.

MAMMALS

Total of mammal species recorded: 15

Northern Brown Bandicoot *Isodon macrourus* Spotlit one night in the Top End
Agile Wallaby *Macropus agilis* Abundant in the Top End
Common Wallaroo (Common Wallaroo) *Macropus robustus* One seen near Timber Creek (NL)
Red Kangaroo *Macropus rufus* Quite a few around Erldunda and Yulara
Short-eared Rock Wallaby ◊ *Petrogale brachyotis* Some in the top end escarpments seen well
Black-footed Rock Wallaby ◊ (Black-footed R W) *Petrogale lateralis* Lovely looks near Alice Springs
Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus Vulpecula* Spotlit on night in the Top End
European Rabbit (introduced) *Oryctolagus cuniculus* One crossing the road near Alice Springs
Black-footed Tree-rat *Mesembriomys gouldii* Spotlit one night in the Top End
Dingo *Canis [lupus] dingo* Quite a few east of Darwin, and a tame individual at our lodgings one night
African Wild Ass (introduced) (Donkey) *Equus africanus* Between Katherine and Timber Creek
Feral Horse (introduced) *Equus [ferus] caballus* On our boat cruise
Domestic Water Buffalo (introduced) *Bubalus bubalis* On our boat cruise
Black Flying Fox (Central F-f) *Pteropus alecto* Big colony in Pine Creek township on the left-hand tree
Little Red Flying Fox *Pteropus scapulatus* Big colony in Pine Creek township on the right-hand tree!



One more photo of our friendly Western Bowerbird!



There were a few impressive fires seen during the tour – this one made us change our plans one afternoon near Katherine!



The group with a biiiiiig termite mound in the Top End - thanks for a great trip guys!