

At The Sanctuary – April, 2017

Robyn Howard

It is amazing how quickly nature recovers after adversity. It was often sad to see the suffering of plants in the drought and heat, but as soon as we had some decent rainfalls, it was noticeable that plants were looking different and producing new green finery.

I visited the sanctuary on 1st April, just a couple of days after ex-TC Debbie had done its worst, but in doing its worst with the winds, it also brought much-needed rain. Twigs and leaves still littered the boardwalk and roadway, but all seemed so refreshed. The small birds were having a wonderful time and seeming so excited. I went to investigate the bird noise behind the toilets and found a mixed flock of Brown Thornbills, Golden Whistlers, White-browed Scrubwrens, Lewin's Honeyeaters, Grey Fantails, and Silvereyes chattering and feeding. They must have found a patch with lots of insects and eventually just moved off in different directions. The same thing happened in the Melaleuca Forest and out in the Mangroves, obviously a surfeit of insects after regular rain over the previous two weeks. Life really is different as soon as the rain falls and nature celebrates. Some of the Casuarina glauca cones which had been torn off and landed on the boardwalk had shed their seeds, trying to take any opportunity to reproduce.

Late though they might be, the wet weather and warmth have produced plenty of fungi. There are so many types from tiny to quite large with varying colours. The lichens and mosses are many and varied and interesting to really observe. Fungi are so valuable in the environment.

With the continuing warmth, the reptiles are still active. The wall skinks love sunning on the boardwalk, and the Eastern Water Skinks choose small fallen branches in the casuarina forest to seek their warmth. They blend in so well, it is difficult to find them unless they move.

Nobody else was using the sanctuary when I arrived and I disturbed a Large-tailed Nightjar out on the boardwalk. It probably found that to be a cosy dry spot since the ground was wet and much of it flooded. I only caught a glimpse in flight as it was far more aware of me than I was of it, but its silent flight and white wing mark indicated which species it was. I stayed out near the river for some time, and disturbed the bird again near the same spot on the way back. I had heard them there before but not managed to see them at all. The area the White-throated Nightjars frequent has been changed by the death of many trees during the drought.

The Noisy Pittas have returned. A small number come down from the hills to spend winter with us. I found a large snail which had been eaten in the fashion common to our Pittas, and one bird was captured on the motion camera. For several weeks, Rainbow Bee-eaters have been flying over in groups heading north and were still migrating for the first part of April. The drought must have affected the production of rainforest fruits, especially the figs, as very few fruit-doves frequented the sanctuary this summer. In most years, Rose-crowned Fruit-Doves are present from October or November through to April. Rufous Fantails have been in residence continuously for several years, but this summer, they disappeared some time early in the year and have not yet returned. Grey Fantails have remained and on one visit, I saw at least fifteen birds including those along the roadway.

The crabs have been plentiful, and I even managed to find the *Sarmatium germaini* again on two occasions. I am quite fascinated by them, but there are roughly fifteen or more species I see regularly. The Two-toned Fiddler Crabs have been difficult to find since the “desert” area along the loop to the first crab hide has filled with regrowth, but for the last few weeks I have found up to twelve of them, so that is really great. They like open very damp areas, so when their habitat changed, they needed to relocate.

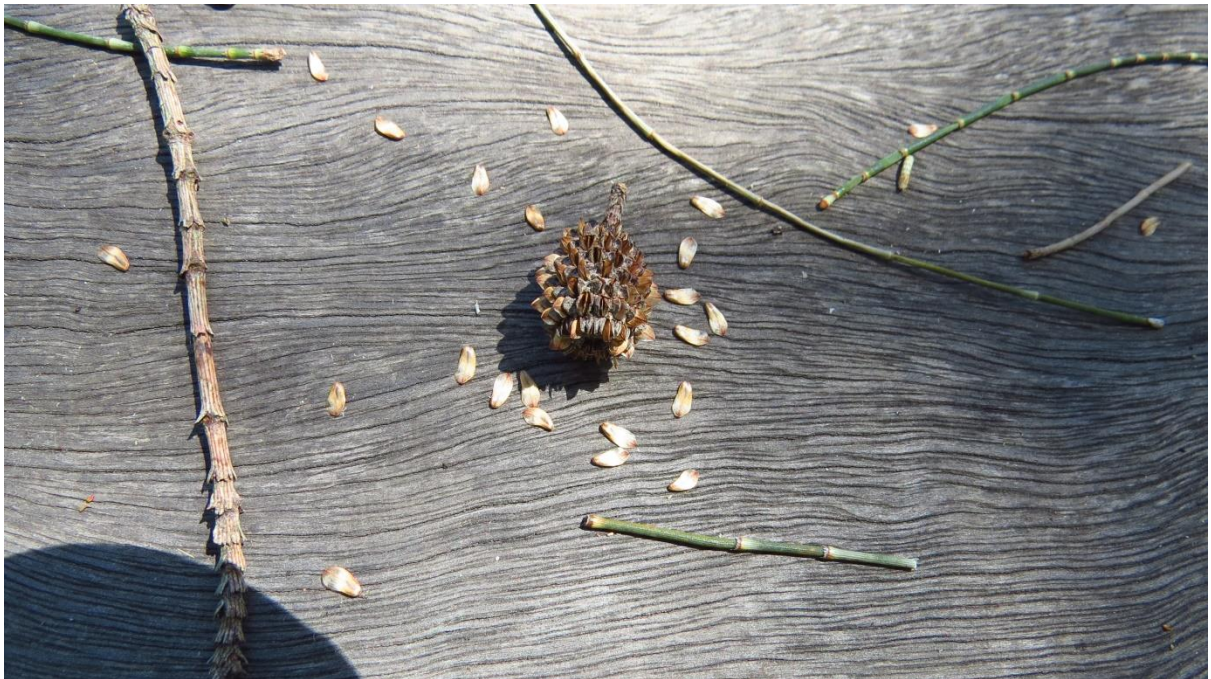
Insects breed quickly in favourable conditions and are providing food for birds and small mammals. Most of the cicadas are in their underground phases, but bugs, beetles, dragonflies and butterflies are common. The Small Green-banded Blue Butterflies must have had a good hatching recently.



Mangrove Fern suffering in the drought



Mangrove Fern in recovery after some good rains – lots of fresh fronds



Swamp Oak (*Casuarina glauca*) cone brought down by ex-TC Debbie has cast its seed trying to provide new plants.



Small Green-banded Blue Butterfly