

## At The Sanctuary February 2015

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I love watching the changes at the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary during different seasons, rainfall (or lack of rainfall) conditions, the effects of strong winds, and floods and their aftermath, so I could not resist a visit during the minor flooding of the river after cyclone Marcia.

I was able to walk half way to the river without getting my feet wet, but then took no risks with the slipperiness when water is over the boardwalks. This meant that plants such as the Clerodendrum which had been in danger of dying during the extreme heat and dry, was sitting in almost two feet of water. For the second consecutive year, it had flowered poorly with modified short tube length to its flowers and very few flowers. The branches of this scrambling shrub had begun to evidence some leaf growth, but the leaves were small. There obviously will be poor fruit production.

The Mangrove Fern had some spore on the ends of the fronds, but not the usual quantities. The ferns were suffering prior to the rains that had fallen in the previous month or five weeks, but were sitting in water. The ferns themselves will do well after the inundation, but I was wondering what was happening to the ground-dwelling mammals which live in this habitat. Reptiles and arboreal mammals simply take to the trees, but our native rats are terrestrial. They and some of the arboreal mammals are dependent on fresh shoots of many of our plants, especially the Mangrove Fern. One small part of the question was answered by finding a partly-eaten hypocotyl (cigar-shaped fruit) of the Orange Mangrove on the walkway. It was in an area where I know that the Swamp Rat used to have runways and I often have found evidence of its feeding. Whilst it does not like swimming, it will do so when necessary, and judging by the fine tooth marks on the hypocotyl, at least one Swamp Rat had found some way of keeping itself safe and dry, and utilised the available food source. Other mammals such as the various possum species, the Melomys, and the Antechinus are basically arboreal and would spend time in hollows to avoid the worst of the weather but their normal food sources are found in trees, so they would happily browse, their only problem occurring when it was necessary to move between trees. Our Water Mice would have difficulty with food during floods. They seal their mound entries and use air traps and s-bends to keep dry and safe in an upper part of the mound below high water level. However, their normal foods (crustaceans and worms) would not be available even if they had the capacity to leave the mound. They somehow must survive without food during flooding, though it has been impossible to conduct such studies.

Numbers of birds seem to have been down, and when the Bird Observers visited in February, they did not find the numbers of species expected. It was late in the morning of a hot day which is not an ideal time for observing. Interestingly, there were some mosquitoes on that day but six days later, they were quite unbearable. One thing from that day which was of interest was that a Martin's Skink was sunning on the stone-work below the garden shelter shed. It is so similar to the Bar-sided Skink that it takes a close look at the upper vent to tail section to be sure which species it is.

The lack of birds was atoned for by the ready visibility of the crabs. Hundreds of crabs of several species were out feeding on the mud, and many did not disappear down burrows. The Orange-clawed Fiddlers are always interesting to those who don't "crab watch" regularly, and varied sizes just continued to feed as we observed. At the far crab hide, Sunburst Fiddlers were easily seen once pointed out. It was lovely for so many to be able to see the crabs so easily. When on one's own, it is

easy to be still and quiet and observe crabs, but generally when in a group, the noise and movement frightens them back to their burrows.

The oddity of the seasons, and possibly the excessive heat for over a month, has caused strange timing of flowering and fruiting. Some of the River Mangroves have fruited very well, whilst others have not done so well. Grey Mangroves should have been well in flower, but I noted very few blooms.



Mangrove Fern developing fresh spore