

Quick Visits to the Sanctuary

Our president requested a couple of photographs which were not available in our files, so I went to oblige on 26th May (2010). Unfortunately, the mosquitoes were still prolific, though not nearly as bad as they have been so far this year. The area right throughout the various forest habitats was quite wet, allowing continuing breeding.

The sand and mud in the mangroves had benefitted from tidal inundation, so plenty of crabs were feeding. Furry-clawed Crabs, Red-fingered Marsh Crabs, and some of the fiddlers (Two-toned, Orange-clawed, Grey-clawed and *Uca dussumieri*) were most obvious. Many of the birds were silent, though the Eastern Whipbirds were loud near the crab area, and Rufous Fantails were calling all around. The Azure Kingfisher was flitting up and down the Punt Road waterway, but landing out of my vision, and the Mangrove Gerygones were singing in the same area.

I had not been visiting at low tide for some while, so it was an opportunity to look for evidence of the Water Rats. They had actually used the boardwalk itself as a feeding platform, but I also found both adult and juvenile footprints near the far crab hide. They do breed at any time of the year, but spring and summer are the peak periods, so I was surprised to find juvenile prints. The prints were so tiny. I think the young must have been on one of their first expeditions with their mother outside the burrow. The young are suckled for about four weeks before embarking on a further four weeks of steep learning with their mother, attaining independence at about two months old.

I decided to venture out again on 5th June. The mosquito numbers had decreased, but it was still necessary to use repellent. Very late in the year for mosquitoes!

The birds were just wonderful.... more like the loud and joyous calling of breeding season. There were so many Brown Thornbills, Golden Whistlers, Brown Honeyeaters and Mangrove Gerygones. Even the Eastern Whipbirds were quite vocal. The Grey Shrike-thrushes were calling melodiously out along the river. The birds were about thirty metres apart, and called back and forth to each other several times. The crabs were also very active, mostly in the mud-flat areas, rather than along the Punt Road drain.

I headed to the far crab hide, mostly to check for Water Rat prints again - I did find them later -, but before I made it to the platform, an Azure Kingfisher darted to the surface of the water, then back up the stream. Next, there was a great splashing in the water, and I could not imagine what was creating the disturbance. I looked upstream for the kingfisher, and found it bobbing on one of its favourite perches, calling its very high-pitched single note. There was also a White-faced Heron further along, stalking small fish. The loud splash occurred again and I found the culprit – a whip-tailed stingray. It was cruising through the murky water, then suddenly rising up through the surface and crashing back down. It didn't seem to be a feeding activity, more like a bit of fun! For the half hour or more I was there, it kept up the same behaviour. My attention was distracted, though, by slow, deliberate movement up near the kingfisher and heron. It was the Striated Heron, a mangrove specialist. It spends considerable time between the two crab hides, and I often disturb it there. This time, it worked along one side of the water, then strolled through the shallows across to the opposite bank. It stalked close to the water, posing unmoving, then darting its head towards prey, before moving a little further along. It then strolled up the bank and worked under the overhanging trees about two or three metres from the water. My position on the crab hide was well camouflaged by a Grey Mangrove, so I was able to watch and photograph for half an hour. I did not actually see it succeed with any of its lunges to capture prey, and it eventually flew off deeper into the Orange Mangroves on the up-river side of the drain.

Robyn Howard



Striated Heron - stalking



Azure Kingfisher - fishing