

## **At the Sanctuary – September, 2017**

Robyn Howard

Our final scheduled free guided walk for the year was on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, with fewer participants than for the previous events. The results of the lack of rain were sad to see. So much vegetation was wilting, so many leaves were dropping, some plants were obviously at the end of their resilience. Not many birds were nesting at a time which is normally the height of the breeding season because they had bred earlier, and because the insects necessary to feed the young were just not available. One bird which was behaving unusually was the Noisy Pitta. They visit during autumn and winter and are usually gone by spring, but on returning to the Information Centre, I heard several calls from at least one bird after midday. Their normal calling times are early morning or late afternoon and dusk. I had heard the bird give a single call a couple of days earlier so they must have been just a little later leaving the area.

The River Mangroves were beginning their white floral display.

Just after mid-month, I decided to do a walk in the late afternoon, extending through sunset until after dark. I was disturbed that I encountered four Brown Hares on the drive, two lone animals plus a female with a half-grown young. They are not natives and while they are not the pests that rabbits are, it would be a shame to see their numbers build up.

The carpark was quieter than on most visits, so some birds were preparing for their night's rest. A broken flock of around 30 Rainbow Bee-eaters flew over, and later as I traversed the open section of boardwalk in the mangroves, 26 Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos were in smaller groups heading to their roosts. At the bird bath, a Spectacled Monarch, a Grey Fantail and a Rufous Fantail shared early evening ablutions. As I strolled down the boardwalk, I noticed several birds still active both feeding and calling – Eastern Yellow Robins, White-throated Treecreepers, Scarlet and Lewin's Honeyeaters, Bar-shouldered Doves, and a Rufous Whistler. It was cloudy with a new moon, so I was surprised by the amount of light available. It is so beautiful just observing the differences from activities in the bright light of day and the changes in calls and sounds.

Even when it was becoming dark, several species were still calling, including both the Azure and Collared Kingfishers, the Mangrove Gerygones, Brown Honeyeaters, and both the fantails. My attention was also drawn to movement along the edge of the water under overhanging Grey Mangroves. A Royal Spoonbill was rhythmically swing its head from side to side, bill open, occasionally snapping it shut then throwing its head back to swallow. In the stillness, the clacking of the Pistol Shrimps hidden in their muddy burrows was penetratingly loud.

One of the main purposes of this particular visit was to check whether the pair of Large-tailed Nightjars which had moved to the area two years previously was still resident, so I ensured I was settled quietly at the crab-viewing platform before complete dark.

On the dot of 6:00 p.m., I heard the first call and the bird continued the single note call incessantly for six minutes before its mate responded with its “chop-chop” call, uttered several times. The first caller changed to the similar call, then a couple of other gentle calls. Shortly, I heard a bird directly across the river, then later another bird down-stream in the sanctuary, and another even further down-river. A sixth bird called from inland. This species only extended its known southern range in 2014, so numbers have increased quickly. I wonder how much further south their range has extended.

During this time, a lone silent Australian Owlet-Nightjar did a single circuit from the mangroves along the river, then disappeared again. The pair has nested again, but unfortunately chosen the same site as their unsuccessful nesting last year.

The atmosphere as evening falls is so beautiful. No boats or jet-skis on the river, only the sounds of the changing activities of nature. The diurnal birds falling silent and going to their rest, the nocturnal birds awakening and commencing the search for sustenance, the insects with their stridulations, the nocturnal animals and reptiles rustling the leaf-litter and foliage, gentle breezes making their own melodies through the tall vegetation.



Brown Hare in the forest



Rufous Fantail



Rainbow Bee-eater preening



Australian Owlet-Nightjar – photographed sunning in a tree hollow. Photo: Sandra Harald