

At the Sanctuary – February, 2018

Robyn Howard

Many things conspired against my spending the time I would have liked at the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary during February. As well as a very busy life, much of the month was too hot and humid to expend energy, even on pleasure. Once the weather cooled, dodging the storms and heavy rainfall became the priority. However, I did manage a little time in the garden and strolling along the boardwalks, and as always, it was worthwhile.

My main visit was on a day of heavy cloud and light showers, immediately following abundant rainfall and strong winds, and I don't remember the car park and gardens being quieter.

Although we have not noted large numbers of adult cane toads recently, they have obviously bred strongly over summer with many hundreds of toadlets in the gardens, leaf-litter and undergrowth.

Along the boardwalk, the results of windy weather were noticeable with fallen leaves and lots of twigs on and near the track. Very few branches had come down, though there was a large dead Maiden's Wattle (*Acacia maidenii*) snapped in half. The loss of leaves and twigs seems a natural clean-up for vegetation which is not strong during storms. Water pooled in the Rainforest, the Melaleuca Forest and the Casuarina Forest, all of the water the colour of strong black tea. Even where the water flowed into the natural drainage channel after high tide the colour was still evident.



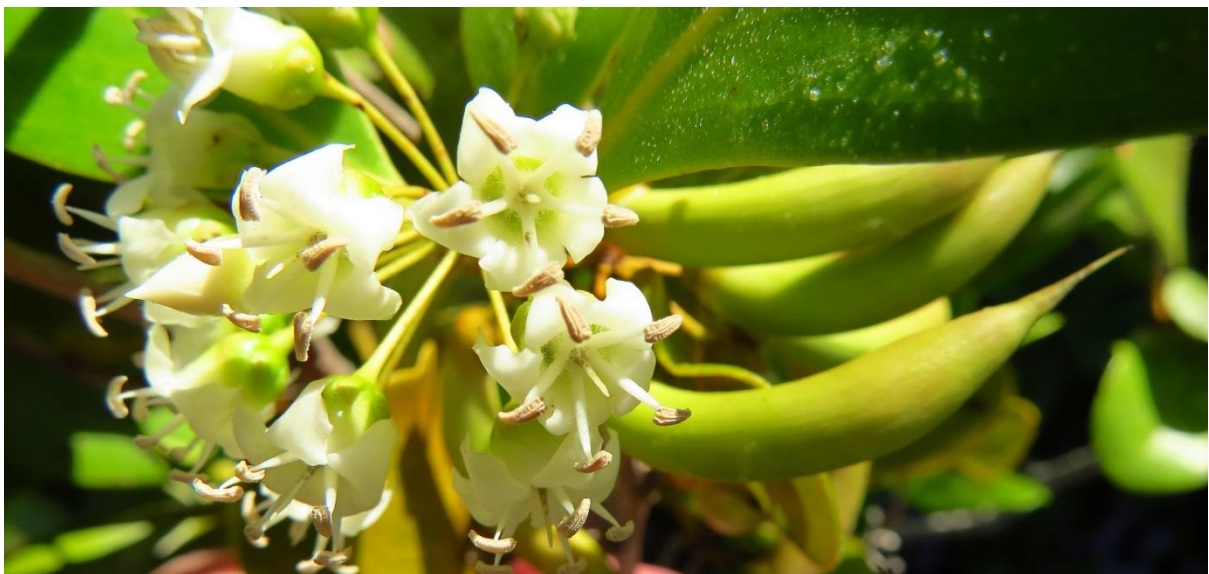
Fallen Leaves in tea-coloured ephemeral water

Other than mosquitoes, insect numbers were low. Very few cicadas called, butterflies were absent, few beetles or bugs were around, and bees and other pollinators were nowhere to be found.

I'd chosen to visit after days of widespread rain expecting to be witnessing flooding. Although the water was extremely turbid from run-off upstream, levels appeared to be similar to normal tides. Reasonable numbers of crabs were feeding on the mudflats. The first seen were at the edge of the Casuarina Forest, several female Red-fingered Marsh Crabs which were skittish. Further along the walk, it was Maroon Mangrove Crabs, and as usual, the Orange-Clawed Fiddlers which predominated.



The dark carapace of the female Red-fingered Marsh Crab camouflages her amongst the fallen needles of the Swamp Oak on the mud. The male of this species has a bright green carapace. There was an amazing amount of horn-shaped fruit on the River Mangroves, while the Orange Mangroves bore both buds and mature hypocotyls and everything in between.



River Mangrove with flowers and fruit on one twig!

Birds were more active amongst the mangroves but still fewer individuals than normal were seen. Sacred and Collared Kingfishers called regularly, as did the ubiquitous Brown Honeyeaters. On the drive in, I had encountered Willie Wagtails, Peaceful Doves and Bar-shouldered Doves. An interesting sighting was two Dollarbirds in the Casuarina Forest. They once used to breed annually in a Eucalypt hollow in the garden, but there seems to have been no breeding activity there in recent years and Dollarbirds are not a regular sighting here now. It will soon be time for them to make their northern migration to winter in Papua New Guinea and nearby islands.



Dollarbird [Photo T R Shankar Raman]

After a recent workshop for our volunteers on setting specimens in acrylic (an excellent additional skill), George spied a Carpet Python on the concrete path. Even on this warm day, the cloud cover must have kept the reptile too cold, meaning it moved ever so slowly, giving us a wonderful opportunity to examine its scales and patterns.



Carpet Python Photo: George Cowie



Carpet Python - Scales and Patterns

Last month, we included a night photo of a microbat which we had tentatively identified as an Eastern Freetail Bat. That ID is now confirmed with George able to take a daylight photo of the same species.



Eastern Freetail Bat Photo: George Cowie

George has continued to set up our motion-activated camera at various sites with some great results. At one site, at least four different Water Mice could be identified – a pregnant female, two other adults, and a juvenile.

For years, we had both Eastern Grey Kangaroos and Swamp Wallabies within the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary, but only Swamp Wallabies were being seen or photographed. Recently, one Grey Kangaroo announced its presence by hopping into camera range. The numbers of Eastern Grey Kangaroos are dropping around the Sunshine Coast, so it would be marvellous if a breeding colony were to establish here.

Probably the most exciting photos captured on the camera in February were of the Noisy Pitta. In the past, we have known it as a winter visitor from about April to August, or maybe early September, but never before were we aware of them at the sanctuary in FEBRUARY! Maybe they have been here in summer in the past and we have not heard calls nor seen them or seen signs of feeding activity. Most interesting and a valuable record.



Noisy Pitta Photo: George Cowie

Dragonflies were flying or perching over open still waters. It is not unusual to witness them laying eggs here, but strangely, even after the rain, no laying activity was seen.

With reasonably regular rainfall during the summer months, the vegetation in the forests has been looking wonderful – green, clean and growing well. A comparison to last summer's rain is striking –

Dec 2016	53 mm	Dec 2017	278 mm
Jan 2017	39 mm	Jan 2018	74 mm
Feb 2017	37 mm	Feb 2018	449 mm

It was claimed on TV weather forecasts that our average daily high temperatures last summer were degrees above what they should have been, mostly due to increased ocean temperatures so evaporation rates would have been higher than normal also. Last summer's rainfall statistics above are from records at the Sunshine Coast Airport and the current summer statistics are for rainfall recorded at the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary itself. Nature somehow copes, but I find it much more pleasant to look at the forests as they are so far this season rather than seeing the dry wilting and dying plants last summer. There is always something new to learn or observe and no two visits are ever the same.