

With the continuation of rain and showers throughout March, vegetation has been doing well. So many plants have new growth, and the Mangrove Ferns are so thick at the entry to the Melaleuca Forest that they have overtaken some of the low-growing plants in that area.



New growth on the Tuckerroo

Australasian Figbirds were the common bird on one visit, but I could not see what they were eating. They were back and forth between the garden and a couple of Flooded Gums at the beginning of the walk. The pair of Varied Trillers which are always somewhere about were in the trees in the middle of the carpark, along with a Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Lewin's Honeyeaters, Blue-faced Honeyeaters, a Grey Shrike-Thrush and Bar-shouldered Doves. On a later visit, four male Golden Whistlers were in that same vegetation. They were carrying on as though it was mating season and two were trying to chase the other two away – unsuccessfully. I thought they may be trying to impress a female, but I could not find her and had to move on before the battle was resolved. As I passed through the various forest types, it sounded like spring again. The Brown Honeyeaters were as rowdy as ever, the Mangrove Gerygones were in full voice, the Kingfishers called back and forth to mates, Brown Thornbills trilled, Scarlet Honeyeaters called melodically, and Eastern Whipbirds loudly proclaimed their presence.



Brown Cuckoo-Dove – tucked amongst the foliage, but its call gave it away

Some of the cicadas were calling in the garden – Black Prince, Razor Grinder, Brown Bunyip and Floury Baker. When I went down to the Mangroves, the only cicada I could hear was the Mangrove Cicada. We are past the peak time for adult cicadas, but some insects have thrived in the warm damp conditions. There were literally hundreds of Red-shouldered Beetles, and the small orange moths which fly amongst the mangrove buttresses were in good numbers.

Out on the boardwalk, I encountered two gentlemen, one of whom walks there whenever he has the opportunity and the other enjoying it for the first time. It is amazing how many locals have not yet discovered the wonders of the wetlands.

One of the Dollarbirds which had been around in February was still present, and six Australian White Ibis picked their way through the mud finding crabs. Royal Spoonbills were in one of their favourite sites at the spot where the waterway joins the river. As I stood on the crab viewing platform, three Noisy Friarbirds were living up to their name, and bait fish were being chased through the waterway. The water was murky after the rain and all I could see of the predator fish were occasional silver flashes as it came near the surface.





Australian White Ibis – mud is great for feeding, but I sure get grubby

The various species of crabs were enjoying the wet mud and warm conditions. Red-fingered Marsh Crabs, Scarlet Three-spined Mangrove Crabs, Furry-clawed Crabs, Maroon Mangrove Crabs, Purple and Cream Shore Crabs, and inevitably the Orange-clawed Fiddler Crabs in their hundreds were all on the surface feeding. The extent of the Orange-clawed Fiddler Crab colonies has been extending, and I have been seeing them in new places as well as in denser assemblies in the existing colonies. I was uncertain of the identity of one particular crab species. It was similar to the pink form of Haswell's Shore Crab, but some features seemed wrong. It proved impossible to take a well-focused photo, so I am left wondering. Crabs and Barred Mudskippers seem to live happily as neighbours along the edges of the waterways. I enjoy watching the antics of the mudskippers as they peck tiny aquatic insects from the mud and skim across the water. There are often Estuarine Slugs on the mudflats past where the first loop goes to the bird hide, but they were more widespread and in greater numbers. I counted to 165 before I lost track of the population.

Butterflies appeared to enjoy the damp and warm weather. Some days, there are plenty of butterflies whilst on others there are far fewer. The favourite site for the small butterflies is at the edge of the garden and beside the concrete path. So many Brown Ringlets, and many Skippers and Grass-darts, but they are so difficult to identify. I'm sure some of those I photograph are not in the field Guide! Well, they will be, if only I could find them. I found three tiny katydid nymphs one day. I photographed them (though the photos are not great), and it is possible they were early instars of the Naskrecki's Bush Katydid which loves to sit on fronds of the Mangrove Fern, but these were at least forty metres from any of the ferns, perched instead on the Monkey Rope vine. I have returned a few times to search for later instars, but without success.



Brown Ringlet – beside the path



Katydid Nymphs – best photo I could get on the day!

There are skinks which I see regularly on my visits, perhaps the Garden Skink and Wall Skink being the most common. As one would expect, the Garden Skink is found in gardens and other lush habitats, but the Wall Skink prefers sunny dry positions, especially on the boardwalk or on tree trunks. In urban areas, they frequent timber fences.

The population of Australian Brush Turkeys continues to increase. They are a relatively recent addition to our fauna. Perhaps the Wilvos use the sanctuary as a release site. One of the birds I noticed during March had a deformed leg. He endeavoured to use it as a normal limb, trying to scratch the ground to find insects or berries, etc. I suspect the deformity is the result of an injury which has healed badly as I imagine he would not be using it if he was born with the abnormality.





Australian Brush Turkey – the deformed leg is much shorter than the left leg.

It is not unusual to see what appears to be spit on some trees or shrubs both in home gardens and at the sanctuary. Some of the natives they prefer include Callistemons, Acacias, Eucalypts and Casuarinas. In March, there seemed more than usual. It is visual evidence that Spittlebugs are present. Spittlebugs are the nymphal stage of Froghoppers. Females use their ovipositor to penetrate the stems of plants to lay their eggs. They hatch into the nymphs, Spittlebugs, which begin to feed on the plant secretions. A Spittlebug uses its rostrum to pierce the stem and suck out the liquid. As it excretes, the Spittlebug waggles its rear end, trapping air in the sticky solution, thus forming the “spittle” which covers the nymph. The “spittle” provides protection against dehydration, predators and parasites. Once the nymph is fully grown and ceases feeding, the “spittle” dries and retracts and the nymph settles and waits for a final moult when it becomes an adult Froghopper. Froghoppers belong to the same order as cicadas and plant hoppers, and are named because they superficially resemble a frog from the front view, and because they have extraordinary jumping abilities.



Spittlebugs in *Casuarina glauca*