

At The Sanctuary – July 2018

Robyn Howard

It seemed July was a time for our tiny birds. There has rarely been a time during daylight when the birdsong has not been wonderful, but this month, so many small birds were to be both seen and heard. The Scarlet Honeyeaters were in very good numbers as has been the case over much of South East Queensland, and the Brown Honeyeaters never seem to fail to make themselves evident. Grey Fantails have been common this winter and that continues. I love the way they ignore visitors and continue to flit around after insects. A couple stopped to see why I was stationary on the path and joined with me to watch the fantail antics. They were quite fascinated with the activity and wore great smiles. Spectacled Monarchs are permanent residents, as are the White-browed Scrubwrens. The Scrubwrens usually keep low in vegetation, especially the Mangrove Ferns, where they are sometimes joined by Rufous Fantails and Red-browed Finches. Large-billed Scrubwrens occupy the middle storey of the forest and love to chase in and around climbing vines. The White-browed Scrubwrens which nested near the door to the Mangrove Room where we meet managed to successfully raise their young and were kept busy supplying enough food. The parents were like bullets entering and leaving the nest. Those who were aware of the nest viewed from a distance to ensure the birds were not disturbed.



Brown Honeyeater

Brown Thornbills, Eastern Yellow Robins and Golden Whistlers were constantly feeding in the Melaleuca Forest, where Fantail Cuckoos called to one another. The Brown Cuckoo-Doves flew between the Rainforest and Melaleucas. Large birds were in flight – the flock of 25 Little Black Cormorants which flew along the river, 9 Straw-necked Ibis overflew the Casuarinas (they rarely land here), and two small flocks of Torresian Crows totalling 22 passed over the tops of the Eucalypts.



Straw-necked Ibis (Photographed elsewhere)

Out in the mangroves, the Mangrove Gerygones were singing their warbling notes. There was lovely song, but they were more difficult to find than they often are. It was a wonderful time for Mistletoebirds. The news seemed to have been spread about the heavy fruiting of the Needle-Leaf Mistletoe (*Amyema cambagei*), and eight male and three female Mistletoebirds were spotted feasting on the small fruit. They carefully pick a ripe fruit, squeeze it to remove the skin which they discard, then swallow the flesh still with the seed inside.



The colourful fruit of the Needle-leaf Mistletoe - a feast for the Mistletoebirds

Beside the crab-viewing platform, a Sacred Kingfisher dropped from a Grey Mangrove to take something from the mud below. It seemed to disappear back into the tree, but I eventually found it perched quietly waiting for another morsel to appear. The grubby beak and breast proved where it had been feeding.



Sacred Kingfisher with muddy beak and breast

The Grey and Little Shrike-thrushes are still in good numbers. They are always at the edges of the rainforest and in the Melaleuca forest, and the Greys are in the mangroves, but the Littles have joined them there as well. Both species have melodic calls and it is a joy just to stand quietly listening. The Eastern Whipbirds are permanent residents, and their calls often ring out. Sometimes, they disregard visitors and continue tossing leaves aside seeking arthropods in the leaf-litter or less regularly under the bark on tree-trunks. Feeding on tree-trunks is not common at other sites and seems to be a learned behaviour.

The River Mangroves have begun to flower. Normally, flowering begins in October, but this season is atypical. Buds are just being produced on some shrubs and some are almost mature, so blossoms should be spread over a long period this year. They are not the only plants which are disturbed by unusual seasons. Keen eyes can find many flowers this winter. The Coastal Boobialla, Monkey Rope Vine, and Barbed-wire Vine have bloomed out of season.



Flowers of the Barbed-wire Vine

Crab numbers have been low, but they generally are in winter. One exception was the Smooth Sentinel Crab which is normally not seen in large numbers. To see ten on a visit is excellent, but on one visit, more than thirty were out on the mud. Fully grown adults are only 12 mm across the carapace, and their colour is similar to the background. They often stand with their legs stiffened to make them high above the mud and they may remain unmoving for ten or more minutes. I know of no reason for this behaviour.



Smooth Sentinel Crab

Most insect activity had decreased, but the Nine-spotted Leaf Beetles were active once again, and some butterflies were about, especially the Black Jezebels, but the one I enjoyed most was the Bordered Rustic. They often perch in awkward positions (awkward for the photographer, that is) so I followed this one until it was a little more cooperative.

Visitation increased during the school holidays at the beginning of the month when the Eco-hunt was in progress. Many families with children were keen to spot anything which moved, but it is difficult to get good photos on a mobile phone. I was excited by a call I heard. We have some birds which move down from the hills in winter, but not all of them come to the sanctuary. The Eastern Spinebill has come occasionally in the past, but it was exciting to hear its penetrating distinctive call. The species especially likes mistletoe flowers, and its slender long bill gives it an advantage in accessing the nectar at the base of tubular flowers. I was busy with visitors the first time I heard its call, but the following day, I managed to follow the sound and found it feeding in an Estuary Mistletoe in the Melaleuca Forest.



Photo: Glen Fergus - Eastern Spinebill (The bill is spine-like and allows the birds to penetrate deeply into narrow tubed flowers to access their nectar)