

At the Sanctuary – September, 2018

Robyn Howard

The Pittosporum and Hoveas began flowering in August and continued into September. The Red-fruited Palm Lilies were heavily in bud, and just beginning to blossom. Mistletoes ranged from budding to flowering.



Flowers of the gorgeous *Hovea acutifolia*

An evening walk early in the month told the story of the beginning of breeding for the Large-tailed Nightjars. Close to the “ballroom”, two birds started their “Chop-chop” calls, responding back and forth for just a minute or two. Two more took up the chorus from near the crab hide, then at least two from across the river and another within the sanctuary, but further down-stream. The whole period of calling lasted only about ten minutes. One of the birds near the crab hide was calling as they do at dawn. None of the birds could be found when I went looking for them. I sometimes see the White-throated Nightjar near the boardwalk and occasionally hear one from a nearby hillside, but that night, a lone bird called from within the sanctuary.

Before dusk, Scarlet Honeyeaters, Brown Cuckoo-Doves, Bar-shouldered Doves, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, Welcome Swallows and Grey Shrike-thrush were in the Mangroves, while four Straw-necked Ibis, and a couple of small flocks of Australian White Ibis flew over. Grey Fantails were chasing insects, but the birds which were in flight or calling during full light did not necessarily continue as light faded. Only very close to sunset did the Eastern Yellow Robins announce their presence, and they kept up their calls until well after the sun had disappeared. Likewise with the Spangled Drongo which had been silent or just flew in late. It called about twenty times before falling silent. The Brown Thornbill trilled a couple of times and the Spectacled Monarch called several times. Both those species are usually seen in the garden, the rainforest or the Melaleuca Forest, so that was interesting to have them calling so late beside the river. In full darkness, an Australian Owlet-Nightjar called from three different positions but the mix of shadow, light and leaf flutter made it impossible to see any movement. It is probable that the bird was calling to a mate on a nest, but that could not be proved. They have not nested in the site where they chose for the previous two years (with sad results), so they are hopefully using one of the nesting-boxes which Bruce built for them.



A nesting box provided for the Australian Owlet-nightjars near the river

A daylight visit later in the month showed the results of a dry winter and early spring. Many leaves, especially on Orange Mangroves, were yellowing and the forest floor had a carpet of fallen leaves. The Scrambling Clerodendrums were looking poorly and the 9 Spotted Leaf Beetles had deserted them. Some of the Coastal Boobialla were wilting badly and it appeared that fruits which had not yet ripened had begun to drop as a means of conserving limited resources. The Hard Quandong in the garden had bloomed wonderfully, attracting so many birds and insects as it always does, but suddenly looked quite tired. Robin, our president, saw that some of our small garden plants would not survive without a drink and took the hose to remedy that situation.



So many birds and insects love the “ballerina” flowers of the Hard Quandong

Birds were still active and noisy throughout the forests. Five Spangled Drongos had returned and two Black-faced Monarchs joined the Spectacled Monarchs at the edge of the rainforest. There was wonderful activity in a patch of Mangrove Fern in the Casuarina Forest. Low in the ferns, White-

browed Scrubwrens chased insects, joined by three Brown Thornbills, several Rufous Fantails, a Grey Fantail, a Little Shrike-thrush, a couple of Golden Whistlers, Lewin's Honeyeaters, and an Eastern Whipbird. Above them, two Brown Gerygones, more Golden Whistlers, a Mistletoebird, another Brown Thornbill and several Brown Honeyeaters were feeding. Another bird, which I eventually identified as a juvenile Little Bronze-Cuckoo, sat quiet and still amongst leaves and twigs. It had no clear markings around the eyes and very soft barring on its undersides near the wings. Its position precluded a photo, unfortunately.



Photo: Glen Fergus Brown Thornbill This tiny (10 cm) bird keeps contact with the group using soft often repeated "zit" calls, and from time to time does a sweet distinctive trill.

The River Mangroves are continuing to bloom over a long period. Honey Bees predominated with just a few native bees. Even Brown Honeyeaters were sipping at the flowers.

Crabs have become more active with the warmer weather, especially the Pacific Blue-clawed Sentinels, though feeding was limited to wet areas where the tide had inundated, mostly banks. Most of the mud flats which would normally be feeding zones were so dry that it was impossible for crabs to feed there. A few Barred Mudskippers were on wetter areas, along with high numbers of some type of fly, possibly related to water-skating flies. They must have special means of dealing with salt intake as the water is salty.



Female Orange-clawed Fiddler Crab sporting one of their colour variations



Lots of these flies were on wet areas. Possibly members of the Ephydriidae family.

Plenty of birds occupied the vegetation around the crab-viewing platform. The Azue Kingfisher relaxed a little away from the water, but called intermittently. Rainbow Bee-eaters darted out from perches I could not see, Scarlet Honeyeaters were calling, a Willie Wagtail scampered on the ground then darted back to a branch, and a Grey Shrike-thrush entertained with its beautiful song. An Eastern Great Egret glided in and landed at the edge of the waterway inland from the hide. It majestically moved to the centre of the water which was low on an outgoing tide. Watching the water, it carefully and slowly moved, making irregular jabs into the water, sometimes coming up with a small fish. The loud raucous call overhead drew attention to the Channel-billed Cuckoo, closely followed by a Torresian Crow which was ensuring the cuckoo would not stay comfortably in the crow's territory.

The best sighting of all was the female Shining Flycatcher taking a bath. I had noticed her on the bank, but she changed position to a small overhanging branch. From there, she dropped into the water with a splash, then returned to her perch where she preened vigorously before repeating the process several times. At first, the fascination meant no thought of a photo, but later on, the results were not great. A video showed just a couple of brilliant unfocussed orange flashes and does not do justice to the experience. Later, the male flew across the water on the river side of the platform.



This does not do justice to the chestnut, black and white plumage of the female Shining Flycatcher.

As I headed to the pontoon, I was stalked by an Australian Brush Turkey! As soon as it saw me, it flew onto the boardwalk behind me, and stayed two paces away, fully expecting to be fed! All the way to the pontoon it followed. A river craft belonging to the SES was tied to bollards. They had chosen our beautiful sanctuary for a lunch break during a training exercise.

With warmer weather, more butterflies were present, including a wonderful Tailed Emperor, perhaps the offspring of the one sighted in June, as well as Swamp Tigers, Scarlet and Black Jezebels, several skippers and the currently very common Brown Ringlet. Since the beginning of the month, a couple of species of cicadas have begun stridulating – Black Tree-tickers and Floury Bakers.

Some good rain fell during the last few days of the month, so perhaps that will help plants cope with the coming hot weather of October.