

At the Sanctuary – April 2019

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Was it autumn, or was it spring? The new growth on so many plants and the loud ubiquitous birdsong radiated the energy of spring days. The extensive generous rainfall was lifeblood to the sanctuary and its flora and fauna, making such a contrast to the previous month.

Peaceful Doves, Laughing Kookaburras, Scarlet Honeyeaters and Grey Shrike-thrush were on or beside the road, and Double-barred Finches were feeding in the productive seeding grasses. The carpark often provides great birding and some days in April were incredibly good. Top of the list would be eight male Golden Whistlers chasing through the trees and competing in song. (Another eight males and two females were sighted in the melaleucas and riverside mangroves that same day.) Brown Cuckoo-Doves, Brown Thornbills, Shining Bronze-Cuckoos, a Fantail Cuckoo and Spectacled Monarchs joined the chorus and the Varied Trillers had returned. On the other side of the garden, near the shelter, Little Shrike-thrush, Grey Fantails (they seemed to be all along the walks), Mistletoebirds, and Silvereyes were enjoying the insects from the foliage. Unfortunately, they must not favour mosquitoes as their numbers have been as high as they were many years ago prior to any treatments being administered.



One of the Double-barred Finches and one of many Golden Whistlers (male) seen in the carpark

The long hot dry weather claimed another victim. The Pink Euodia which provided glorious pink displays overhanging the concrete walkway succumbed and fell across the track. Even mature trees cannot always cope. The flowering of the Flooded Gums made a nighttime feast for Grey-headed Flying Foxes, moths, and Blossom Bats, and honeyeaters frequented them during the day.

The Parsonsia vines flowered well and Scrambling Lily was producing blossom towards the end of the month. The Mangrove Vines had a real growth spurt.



Flowers of the Scrambling Lily

Progressing into the Melaleuca Forest, it seemed every species had bright new growth – Mangrove Fern, Parsonsia, Climbing Maidenhair, Supplejack, Coastal Boobialla, young Acacias, and the Cotton Trees. The Four-coloured Milk-Vine Bugs were still present along with the usual bees, beetles, and so on, but very few butterflies. A couple of Soft-winged Flower Beetles were on fresh leaves. It is interesting to observe how the membranous flight wings are carefully folded to fit under the protection of the elytra, the hardened outer wings. The elytra are extremely short, leaving much of the soft abdomen unprotected. An unusual visitor was a young Black-Spotted Semi-Slug (*Macularion aquila*) which has been seen in the rainforest on a few occasions, but not in the Melaleuca forest. The shell of this creature is so small that it is more like a cap than a structure to retreat into.



The Soft-winged Flower Beetle



Black-spotted Semi-slug. It is not easy to distinguish the shell.

Most of the fruit of the River Mangroves had fallen. The Orange Mangroves had flowered but hypocotyls were not yet forming. Milky Mangroves were still fruiting well. The Grey Mangroves whose flowering was so disrupted by the heat and lack of rain had eventually produced fruit, but much was dropping when only a few millimetres in size.

Since the young mangroves have grown in what used to be virtual “desert”, it has been difficult to find Two-toned Fiddler Crabs which once inhabited that region. Their colony has been pushed further from the boardwalk (they need open area) and tends to be hidden by fallen trees and the young vegetation, so it is a real joy to be there when the crabs are out feeding in the right position to be spotted – just a few, but enough to prove the colony is still active.



Two-toned Fiddler Crab – It is quite different from the more common Orange-clawed Fiddler Crab

It was a perfect day for finding crabs, lots of species and just about all as prolific as could be imagined. The Marine Couch was thick and healthy, the best it had been in many years. The crab-viewing platform was the ideal site to rest and observe. Besides the crabs, the bird activity was wonderful. The Grey Shrike-thrush provided beautiful melody, the Mangrove Gerygones warbled softly, the Rufous Whistler sang, the Collared Kingfisher's "keek-keek-keek" rang out, the Azure Kingfisher flew along the waterway just above the surface, more Grey Fantails flitted about, and the Shining Flycatchers hid amongst the mangroves, but grating and buzzing made their presence known. The female is a specialist at hiding and seems to make a hobby of teasing visitors.



A Maroon Mangrove Crab feeding near female and male Orange-clawed Fiddler Crabs



There were many more Broad-fronted Mangrove Crabs than are usually seen

The pleasure was suddenly disrupted by the low flight of the FA18 Super Hornet. Such din! Absolutely deafening for a few seconds, but what a sight. The amazing thing was that the wildlife was not disturbed at all. The crabs continued to feed and jostle one another, and the bird calls continued unabated. After a couple of moments, the peace and serenity continued again in the mangroves.



The only Barred Mudskipper seen for the morning just near the crab-viewing platform. This fellow was only about 40 mm long.



These strange tracks were made by Estuarine Slugs near the “ballroom”. They syphon the surface mud as they feed.



The Collared Kingfisher in mangroves near the crab-viewing platform