

A man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a green shirt is looking through a telescope mounted on a tripod. He is standing on a wooden balcony or deck, looking out over a lush green wetland landscape with a body of water. The scene is bright and sunny.

Flight of fancy

Home to more than one-third of Australia's avian species, Kakadu National Park is a bird-lover's paradise, and Kakadu Bird Week is now attracting an annual migration of these twitchers to this Top End treasure.

STORY BY GEMMA CHILTON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON FUCHS

Bird expert and tour guide Luke Paterson looks out over Kakadu's Mamukala Wetlands from a bird hide.

Lake Jabiru, the centrepiece of Kakadu's small township, attracts a rich offering of the park's diverse bird life.



Drifting through a sea of water lilies on a sunrise birdwatching cruise on Yellow Water Billabong.



IT STARTS WITH a sudden break in eye contact – pupils dart up and to the right. Then, an index finger extends out and, as if responding to an invisible magnetism, hones in on a specific direction. I watch the process patiently.

Around us the bush thrums with life – insects buzzing, reptiles rustling through leaf litter and a chorus of birds. I can pick out the calls of a few magpie geese in the distance, but not the specific melody that has caused this interruption to our conversation. I'm a newcomer to all this and my ear isn't tuned in yet.

In the immediate vicinity, a dozen pairs of binoculars are lifted to eager faces, pointed towards the direction now indicated by our guide, who has singled out the call of one sought-after species. It'll be perched on a branch, a tiny spot against the landscape, and he'll explain in detail where to find it – “See that tree, with the straight trunk that forks to the right?” – until our binoculars finally settle on their target.

It feels almost voyeuristic to watch quietly from a distance, taking in every detail of the bird's beauty against a perfect circle of mottled green backdrop: delicate bill, dazzling plumage and restless movements, before it flutters out of sight, as if exiting stage left.

LOCATED ABOUT 200KM east of Darwin, Kakadu National Park's 20,000sq.km is home to 290 bird species. If you're a keen birdwatcher, it's probably already high on your list – but Kakadu Bird Week (held annually in October) offers an additional

incentive: a specialised program of tours, free guided walks and evening presentations, aimed at attracting both enthusiasts and the simply bird-curious.

People such as Peter Lloyd, a lawyer, kayaker and father of three from Sydney. Peter's family noticed the enthusiasm with which he reported his bird sightings from Sydney's waterways, so they bought him a field guide and issued him with a challenge – to spot 300 species before the year was out. “For someone who loves the outdoors, birdwatching was a completely new experience and one of the best things was seeing the kids get involved in the challenge,” he says.

I met Peter on a birdwatching tour of Darwin's East Point with guide Mike Jarvis, who turned his life-long love of birds into a career when he moved to the Top End a decade ago, and now runs tours through his organisation Experience the Wild. That day's outing would offer a taste of the region's birdlife, within cooee of the airport, before venturing into Kakadu.

A priority sighting was the rainbow pitta – a colourful but elusive bird, endemic to northern Australia. Throughout the day we saw many delightful locals, from orange-footed scrubfowls to nesting lemon-bellied fly-robins, but alas no rainbow pitta. As luck would have it, Peter learnt his family had spotted three of the shy little birds on their separate outing that day.

Birding, however, is as much about the experience as the results, and Peter remained stoic. “There's never any guarantee you'll see a particular bird, but I can guarantee I won't see any if I don't look,” he says.

“Twitcher implies tick and flick. But birdwatching is about much more than that.”

Besides, the missed rainbow pitta was compensated for when Peter spotted his first-ever red-headed honeyeater that same day among the mangroves of Darwin Harbour. It was an exciting find for him and equally pleasing for Mike. “I do love birdsong, but that sound [my clients] make, that ‘wow’ when they see a bird for the first time, is just as gratifying for me,” he says.

MY INTRODUCTION TO KAKADU took place on a sunset walk around Lake Jabiru, guided by one of Australia's most acclaimed naturalists, Ian Morris. A biologist, educator, conservationist and author, Ian has worked with the traditional owners of Arnhem Land for decades, and was involved in the formation of Kakadu as a national park and World Heritage Area in the 1970s and '80s.

Ian's involvement in Kakadu Bird Week was a coup for the organisers, and you could sense the pleasure of our small group, having found themselves in his knowledgeable hands. Leading us along the rough path around the man-made lake, Ian would first hear then

point out new species seemingly hiding in plain sight, bringing our surroundings to life before our eyes.

Our group of birdwatchers was as diverse as a flock around the last waterhole at the end of the Dry – there was Peter and his family, an Israeli couple, a South African businessman. The old-hats were easy to spot by their sharp eyes and keen ears; among them was Margaret Flint from Fremantle, Western Australia, who has been watching birds for almost a decade. There was also Helen Phillips from Gippsland, Victoria, who has spent 40 years with her eyes to the skies and tree-tops. Both said they see birdwatching as a way to be immersed in nature, and to learn new things. It's a simple sentiment that came up often – and it's why Mike had said back in Darwin he doesn't much like the term ‘twitcher’. “It implies tick and flick,” he says, “but birdwatching is about so much more than that.”

YOU'LL FIND MOST birdwatchers have their ‘conversion’ story. Luke Paterson – another expert and tour guide participating in Kakadu Bird Week – says he inherited his fascination for birds from his grandmother, but the defining moment came when he first saw a lyrebird. (“Yep, that'll do it!” was the general birders' consensus when Luke shared his story.) Originally from Bendigo, Victoria, Luke has built a reputation as an authority on Top End birds over the past 15 years. Together with park ranger Sarah Burgess, he runs tour company NT Bird Specialists.

I met Luke on a birdwatching sunrise cruise on ▶

IMAGES OVERLEAF: CHESTNUT-OUILLED ROCK PIGEON: LUKE PATERSON; GRASSBIREN: GRABME CHAPMAN; FALCON: HAL BERAL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COCKATOO: BUCK WINNIE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; KOOKABURRA: IMAGEROVER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; PIGEON: LUKE PATERSON; BUZZARD: AUSA CARE INTERNATIONAL PTY LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; PARROT: GREG C GRACE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; FINCH: JOANNE HARRIS AND DANIEL BUBNICH / SHUTTERSTOCK




HOME FROM HOME: KAKADU'S DIVERSE HABITATS

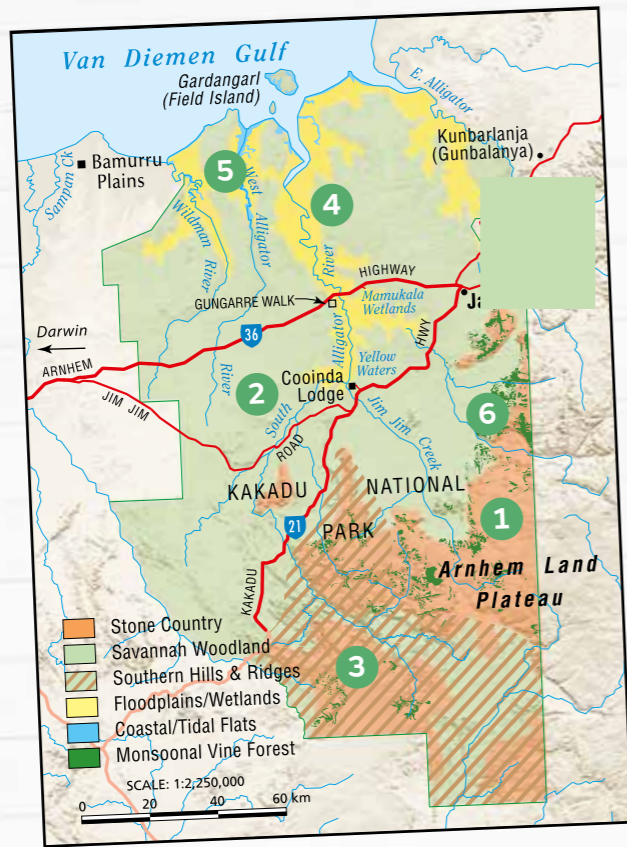
There are six distinct habitats within Kakadu National Park, which in part accounts for the diversity of bird species that call this place home.

1. STONE COUNTRY

Stone country encompasses the sandstone cliffs (some up to 300m high) of the Arnhem Land Plateau and escarpment at the eastern edge of the park. At the top, the plateau is dry and harsh, while deep gorges along the escarpment house lush monsoon forests.

LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Chestnut-quilled rock pigeon
Petrophassa rufipennis
-  White-throated grasswren
Amytornis woodwardi
-  Peregrine falcon
Falco peregrinus



2. SAVANNAH WOODLAND

The savannah woodlands, or lowlands, make up almost 80 per cent of Kakadu. Termite mounds feature prominently alongside eucalypts and tall grasses. This habitat may appear to have little activity, but in fact has the highest number of animals of all of Kakadu's habitats, and a diversity of birdlife.


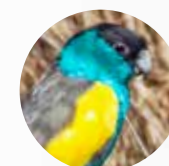
LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Red-tailed black cockatoo
Calyptorhynchus banksii
-  Blue-winged kookaburra
Dacelo leachii
-  Partridge pigeon
Geophaps smithii

3. SOUTHERN HILLS AND RIDGES

This habitat is characterised by rugged ridges and alluvial flats. The landscape is formed by ancient volcanic rocks exposed by the retreating Arnhem Land plateau, and can be easily observed from the top of Gunlom Falls.



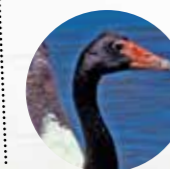
LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Black-breasted buzzard
Hamirostra melanosternon
-  Hooded parrot
Psephotus dissimilis
-  Gouldian finch
Erythrura gouldiae

4. FLOODPLAINS/WETLANDS

This landscape alters dramatically between the seasons. In the Wet it is a shallow freshwater sea, while in the Dry the water recedes into creeks, rivers and remote billabongs, where waterbirds and wildlife congregate and seek refuge.

LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Comb-crested jacana
Irediparra gallinacea
-  Eastern great egret
Ardea alba modesta
-  Magpie goose
Anseranas semipalmata

5. COASTAL/TIDAL FLATS

Kakadu has almost 500sq.km of coastal and estuarine areas, including tidal creeks and river systems extending up to 100km inland. These habitats are home to life adapted to the oxygen-deficient, salty environment, such as mangrove swamps and samphire flats.

LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Collared kingfisher
Todiramphus chloris
-  Broad-billed flycatcher
Myiagra ruficollis
-  Red-headed honeyeater
Myzomela erythrocephala

6. MONSOONAL VINE FOREST

This habitat depends on year-round water sources, often alongside rivers, springs, or at the base of the escarpment. Tall trees provide fruits for flying foxes and pigeons to spread from one isolated pocket of forest to another.

LOOK OUT FOR:

-  Banded fruit-dove
Ptilinopus cinctus
-  Rainbow pitta
Pitta iris
-  Orange-footed scrubfowl
Megapodius reinwardt



Striated and nankeen herons crept along the banks, and kingfishers posed in full view.

JACANA: RAY WILSON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; EGRET: MICHAEL STUBBLEFIELD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; MAGPIE GOOSE: ARCO IMAGES GMBH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; KINGFISHER: SARIN KUNTHONG / SHUTTERSTOCK; FLYCATCHER: WIKIMEDIA; HONEYEATER: GRAEME CHAPMAN; FRUIT-DOVE AND PITTA: LUKE PATERSON; SCRUBFOWL: MINDEN PICTURES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Yellow Waters Billabong, at the end of Jim Jim Creek. Setting off in the pre-morning dark, drifting over the inky waters, the sky was soon awash with colour and an endless flock of magpie geese passed overhead – so numerous they sounded more like swarming bees. A carpet of lotus flowers and water lilies spread out before us, and the occasional saltwater crocodile surfaced before lazily disappearing into the dark waters.

Striated and nankeen night herons crept along the banks, forest kingfishers posed in full view and honeyeaters and flycatchers darted through the trees, regularly stopping long enough to catch in the 'bins'. If a lyrebird turned Luke into a birdwatcher, then that morning may have been the tipping point for this fledgling birdwatcher – but I still had a lot to learn.

More accustomed to long-distance hikes, I had to adjust my expectations the following day when our car remained in sight after the first 20 minutes of our half-day tour. Setting off at sunrise again with Luke for a guided walk around Mamukala Wetlands, the group failed to gain much onward momentum as we captured in our sights bird after bird: willie wagtails, double-barred finches, crimson finches, and a juvenile white-bellied sea eagle overhead.

It was a lesson in a more mindful way of experiencing the bush – slow down and let it come to life around you. And never rush a group of birdwatchers.

A highlight was spotting an imposter channel-billed cuckoo being fed by a pair of crows, but it wasn't just birds that seemed to materialise into existence when



Clockwise from top left: writer Gemma Chilton watches dancing brolgas at the Bamurru Plains resort with manager John Cooper; a guided birdwatching tour at Lake Jabiru with acclaimed naturalist Ian Morris; magpie geese, called 'bamurru' in the local Aboriginal language, are plentiful in the Top End and congregate in large flocks.

you slowed down – northern dwarf tree frogs hid beneath pandanus leaves and camouflaged northern water dragons were statuesque against tree trunks.

We finished the tour at nearby Gungarra Walk through monsoonal rainforest. The place soon lived up to its name and the heavens opened, forcing the group to quicken its step back to the vehicle. We stood, steaming in our wet gear, while over the roar of the sudden downpour Luke talked through the birds we'd spotted. We could tick them off our lists: red-backed fairy wren, yellow oriole, comb-crested jacana...

Of course, there's much more to birding than list-ticking, but, in that moment, I couldn't help but appreciate why this ritual is half the fun.

“YOU DON'T NEED to be a birdwatcher to appreciate this,” said John Cooper from the driver's seat. It was my last day in the Top End, and I was perched on the back of an old modified Toyota LandCruiser watching brolgas leap and dance in the golden sunrise.

John is the manager of Bamurru Plains, a luxury resort located on 30,000ha Swim Creek station just ▶



Clockwise from left: Sydney-based Peter Lloyd keeps his all-important field guide close to his heart during Kakadu Bird Week; magpie geese flock over Yellow Water Billabong at sunrise; eight-year-old Sorell Diddams, daughter of local Kakadu Park Ranger Tracey Diddams, ticks off her latest bird sightings.



west of Kakadu. He'd taken us to see the brolgas on our way back from a visit to a male Australian bustard, right where he knew we'd find the bird in full mating display – throat sack inflated, tail feathers cocked.

As manager of Bamurru, John lives on the remote station year-round – including three months alone during the Wet, which is when he'll often enjoy sights such as these brolgas and the bustard – or, as he recalls, occasionally awake to enormous, deafening flocks of magpie geese passing overhead (bamurru is the local Aboriginal word for magpie goose).

The previous day John had taken us on a boat ride down nearby Sampan Creek, where enormous salties slid on their bellies down the muddy banks – and where we managed, after much searching, to spot a great-billed heron in the shadow of the mangroves.

As we watched the brolgas, I thought about what John had said about not having to be a birdwatcher to appreciate this. I understand what he meant – after all, we didn't have a list to tick or a species name to report back on. But it occurred to me that we already were birdwatchers – anyone who can appreciate these diverse and beautiful, sometimes wise, sometimes cheeky, modern-day flying dinosaurs really is.

And I think that's probably all of us.

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▶ **SEE** a short video and more images from 2016's Kakadu Bird Week at: www.australian-geographic.com.au/issue136

Flock to Kakadu

Birdwatching wetland cruises



WHAT: Kakadu Bird Week is an annual event organised by Parks Australia and supported by local operators and Tourism NT. It offers a program of activities for birdwatchers, including free guided walks at key birdwatching sites with local and national bird experts, and free evening slideshow presentations, as well as paid activities such as birdwatching wetland cruises and photography tours.

WHEN: Kakadu Bird Week 2017 will take place on 1–7 October.

GETTING THERE: All major domestic airlines fly to Darwin International Airport; from there it is about a three-hour drive into Kakadu's Jabiru township.

ACCOMMODATION: Find a room at the Mercure Kakadu Crocodile Hotel at Jabiru (08 8979 9000), the Coinda Lodge (08 8979 1500) or the Coinda Campground and Caravan Park. Find more information and book at: www.kakadutourism.com/accommodation

MORE INFORMATION: Learn more at: www.parksaustralia.gov.au/kakadu/do/bird-week.html



Mercure Crocodile Hotel