

“Some days are like diamonds”

Report by Wendy Phillips and
photographs by Bob Daly



Azure Kingfisher (Yellow Water, Kakadu NT, 23 July 2024)

When it comes to “top end” birdwatching specialists, they certainly are!

On this trip, Bob Daly and I had an exhilarating adventure with Luke, our tour guide extraordinaire. By the end of the 10 days, we were exhausted, but in a happy “birding” way. We saw about 170 species and discovered some rare and interesting birds. Luke made sure we all got to see them through his scope and had time to photograph them. Luke is very talented at recognizing bird calls, and then locating them. Thankfully, the photos Bob took will help both of us to remember all the amazing sites we visited during those frantic 10 days as we travelled from Darwin to Kakadu NP, Katherine and Kununurra, covering about 2,000 km.

The set price included all our accommodation and meals. Sarah (Luke’s wife) prepacked a varied menu for breakfast and lunch, which we ate in style anywhere that was suitable to stop and set up in shade whilst travelling. Dinner each night was at the accommodation restaurant/café, and we could choose anything from the menu, only paying for our drinks. With 8 customers on the tour, we were able to spread out in the 15-seater bus, and to rotate seating positions.

On the first day, we visited a few different sites around Darwin, including Lee Point and the Botanic Gardens.

I was thrilled to see several new birds, including a Beachstone Curlew, which I thought I’d never see in my lifetime. As we watched a Black-necked Stork strolling on the beach, a couple of Orange-footed Scrubfowl unexpectedly emerged from the bush onto the sand. A Sea Eagle, Brahminy Kite and Osprey also put on a good show.



Comb-crested Jacana
(Fogg Dam Middle Point NT, 22 July, 2024)

Top End Bird Tour – “Some days are like diamonds” *(continued)*



Pheasant Coucal (*Mary River Region NT, 22 July 2024*)



Rose-crowned Fruit Dove (*Darwin NT, 21 July 2024*)

In the afternoon at Darwin Botanic Gardens, we found colourful bush birds, like Oriole, Figbird and Rose-crowned Fruit-dove. Luke’s inside knowledge allowed us to find the resident Rufous Owl and Barking Owl resting in the treetops.

The next day we visited Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve, about an hour’s drive from Darwin. The wetlands were unbelievable. There was so much happening, and we spent several hours there. Tour buses flock to this area and the 2-storey bird hide gives visitors a great view of the massive expanse of wetland that stretches 37 square kilometres. It was such a joy to see so many water birds in one place. The Pied Herons and Whistling Ducks took flight in large numbers before resettling. It seemed like every waterbird was gathered at Fogg Dam. That night we stayed at the Bark Hut Inn on the Arnhem Highway, and while having dinner rushed outside to see a Channel-billed Cuckoo which someone in our group had found. It is the largest parasitic cuckoo in the world, using Currawongs, Magpies or Crows to raise its young.

At Jabiru, we had a 2-night stay in delightful cabins, which gave us a chance to explore different areas of Kakadu NP. It was busy, with tourists around the popular sights enjoying the 33-degree days and warm nights. We caught up with John Gitsham several times, and he joined us for an evening meal. With Luke’s perseverance and patience, we discovered more new birds, including the elusive Rainbow Pitta scratching in the leaf litter near a busy car park. This little bird certainly kept the photographers happy as it hopped around seemingly unaware of its audience.

Next day we left our cabins at 5.00 am (in the dark) for the “Yellow Waters Sunrise Boat Cruise” and witnessed a brilliant sunrise reflecting on the water, which added to the magic of the place. There were five boats waiting. Each one takes 50 passengers, and clearly the cruise is the most popular tourist event in Kakadu.



Rufous Owl
(*Darwin NT, 21 July 2024*)



Black-necked Stork
(*Lee Point, Darwin NT, 21 July 2024*)



Red-winged Parrot
(*Kakadu, 23 July 2024*)



Forest Kingfisher
(*Fogg Dam Middle Point NT, 22 July 2024*)

Top End Bird Tour – “Some days are like diamonds” (continued)



Hooded Parrots (Pine Creek NT, 25 July 2024)



Yellow Chat (Lake Argyle, 30 July 2024)

They do several trips a day, 7 days a week. The birds seemed oblivious to us as we cruised slowly along various water channels. We had good sightings of the Azure, Sacred and Forest Kingfishers, several Flycatchers, Wandering and Plumed Whistling Ducks, Egrets, Ibis, Herons and birds of prey. There were a few crocodiles lazing on the banks and we were hoping one would jump up and demolish a wild cat we saw walking nearby.

When the tour finished, we were all ready for breakfast which Luke set up nearby with trestle tables and chairs under shady trees. While we were eating, we were constantly watching and listening for more birds. We visited a Great Bowerbird site full of bleached snail shells with a bit of green for decoration. At our next lunch stop we saw the Northern Race of the Grey Butcherbird, known as a “Silverback”, several Varied Lorikeets and a beautiful Northern Rosella.

On leaving the southern area of Kakadu NP, we drove to Pine Creek on the Stuart Highway where we stayed overnight. A Tawny Frogmouth was sitting motionless on the front verandah of cabin 2 and stayed there for several hours. A large group of Hooded Parrots, which you would normally expect to find in the bush, were present in the township, feeding on the watered lawns.

Heading south to Katherine the next day, we called in to Edith Falls waterhole. It was busy with campers, some carrying their “noodles” as they went for a swim, as we walked around the grounds with our binoculars checking out the trees for birds. Sadly, we didn’t have time to test the water there, but later after booking into the motel at Katherine some of us cooled off in the swimming pool. It was great to find that most of our accommodation places along the route had pools even though we didn’t always get time to use them!

Travelling through the countryside, Luke would pull up and we’d follow him into the bush. He’d say, “look out for such and such a bird” and sure enough he would whistle,

and the birds appeared! He knew all the calls of the Honeyeaters, Pardalotes, Finches etc. On one occasion, he stopped at a little dam on the side of the road where Brahman cattle were feeding and coming in for a drink and we witnessed a “finch frenzy” happening around us. There was a group of 80-100 Star Finches, with a few Chestnut-breasted Mannikins amongst them flying back and forth, then a few skittish Cockatiels wheeled in for a quick drink before speeding off.

From Timber Creek we visited several areas in the district, particularly along the creeks. We kept watch for Gouldian Finches, Purple-crowned Fairywren and Chestnut-breasted Mannikin — and the rare Yellow-rumped Mannikin, which we finally found with Luke’s help. I expected to see my first Gouldian Finches in a group on the ground, but instead they were in trees, and despite their striking colours, not that easy to spot amongst the leaves.

On day 9, we crossed the border into WA and stayed at the Country Club Resort in Kunnanurra where we had a beautiful evening meal. Next morning we left very early (4.15 am) to do a boat cruise on Lake Argyle specifically for our group. Greg, our skipper, provided breakfast on board and we travelled 32 km to reach “Yellow Chat” Island, where we went for a walk to see this special little bird. Along the way, we passed stunning scenery of rocky cliffs and small islands and saw a few rock kangaroos. The whole experience was “another day in heaven”. There were so many birds on land, lake and in the sky.

Summary: What a trip! ... and if you can afford it, Bob and I thoroughly recommend booking with *NT Bird Specialists*. Before leaving home I was hoping to see Gouldian Finches in the wild for the first time, but I didn’t expect to add about 30 new birds to my list. This included sub-species of some of our southern birds. Since returning home, this tour has also inspired me to do little watercolour sketches of some of the birds seen.

Wendy Phillips



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