

Of Emus and Fairy-wrens: Photographing Australia's Endemic Birds

Monthly Newsletter

November 2006

Note: This was written on December 1st but I have not been able to send it until now. The December newsletter will probably be sent in mid January. Thanks for putting up with my crazy schedule.

Well I wish I could say I was writing this from some romantic local like the past few months, but today I am writing from the reception area at a Toyota dealership in Canberra where I am waiting for my car to be serviced. It isn't exactly the ideal way to spend a day but it something that needs to be done, and it will give me a full day to get some computer work done.

Anyway, this month has been a relatively productive month and while I haven't covered as much ground as last month, I still have seen a lot of different habitats. After last month when I felt like I was constantly on the move, I decided to slow down this month and try and stay in locations more than one night and really focus on specific areas. This turned out to be a good idea, especially towards the end of the month as I was starting to revisit some areas and had to focus on the difficult birds.

Last I wrote, I was in northern New South Wales but if I remember correctly, I did not talk about my time in southeast Queensland and in fact left off with my time at Bowra Station. From Bowra, I headed to the coast back to Inskip Point near Fraser Island in order to try and hunt down a Black-breasted Button-Quail. The button-quail in general are extremely difficult to see, much less photograph and while the Black-breasted Button-Quail is found in a relatively limited area, Inskip Point seems to be a reliable site. Sure enough, I found a pair but was unable to get any photos despite following them for over an hour.

From Inskip, I headed to the Sunshine Coast where I spent several days with Wayne Ellis a local photographer who was kind enough to show me around the area. I was able to pick up several new birds there that I had missed on my way north and really enjoyed the time I spent with him and his family. From the Sunshine Coast, I crossed back into New South Wales and dedicated the next few weeks to a single bird species, the Rufous Scrub-bird. This bird is notoriously difficult to see as it lives in dense thickets where it calls loudly but rarely leaves the cover. I had several places to check and despite spending several days each at Border Ranges National Park, Werrikimbe National Park, and Barrington Tops National Park, I never saw one of these birds though I think I may have heard them in Werrikimbe.

I really enjoyed each of these parks despite my failure to see the scrub-bird and the absurd weather that fluctuated from rain to heat and even to snow one day. The high altitude forests were beautiful and full of bird life. I was able to spend time photographing as well as relaxing as I was in need of a break from the daily pursuit of birds. While I can't imagine doing anything else this year, getting up before sunrise every day and going all day everyday can take a toll. In Werrikimbe in particular I took some time off and simply enjoyed sitting and reading while trying to catch up on some sleep.

After leaving Barrington Tops, I headed back into Sydney where I once again was taken in by Nevil Lazarus and his wife Sharon who took great care of me. While I only first met them in August, it was great to see a familiar face after nearly four months of constant traveling. I had prepared a list of target birds for the Sydney area and Nevil and I worked hard to get most of them. Nevil was able to deliver nearly every bird he promised and those that we missed we blame on the extreme heat. Afterwards I had planned to go from there into the Blue Mountains but the heat and dry winds had caused several fires that caused me to avoid the area.

Instead, I headed south to Wollongong and once again went on a pelagic trip to try and see more of the birds of the Southern Ocean. Calm winds made for a pleasant day but it also meant that we had fewer birds than we hoped for. Despite the disappointment of the more experienced birders, I was thrilled with the birds we did see and got numerous photos with which I was quite pleased.

After my trip, I headed inland once again and up into the mountains. I spent several days at Barren Grounds Nature Reserve with hopes of photographing the endangered Eastern Bristlebird. After four days of trying I ended up with a single frame of the bird. It isn't the most spectacular photo but it does show the bird in its habitat and I was pleased to at least have that image. From Barren Grounds I continued inland to Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory where I am now.

I will be leaving here in a day or two and heading south to explore the Riverina area and then follow the Murray River along the border of Victoria and New South Wales to the Mallee area of western Victoria. I will be returning to Melbourne just before the holidays and then spending the rest of the year in the Victorian Highlands. I think it should be a great month as I will be entering all new territory and exploring some of the most spectacular mountains and coastline in the country.

Website Announcements

I don't have much to announce at the moment. My weblog is up to date and I hope to update my galleries with November's images but haven't had a chance yet.

The Photos



Striated Heron – Moffit Beach, Sunshine Coast, Queensland

This Striated Heron was feeding along the rocks between two popular beaches on the Sunshine Coast. It was a bit shy but I was able to get an image or two before he flew off down the shoreline. I happened to be handholding my lens for this image which enabled me to react much faster than if I was working on the tripod like usual. Unfortunately, with my lens, handholding is possible only during specific situations.



Sooty Oystercatcher – Moffit Beach, Sunshine Coast, Queensland

This was taken the same evening as the heron above. I think my favorite part about this image is the blue background that was created by the breaking waves behind the bird. The blue really makes that redo-orange beak and eye stand out.



Superb Fairywren – Brushy Mountain Campground, Werrkimbe National Park, New South Wales

Normally I don't like to have the background be completely black in an image as it really takes it out of context of the environment. With this image though, I think that the strong contrast of the lighting makes it feel more like a studio portrait or something.



Red-capped Plover – The Entrance, New South Wales



Bar-tailed Godwit – The Entrance, New South Wales

One morning I happened to drive through the small town of The Entrance in between Newcastle and Sydney. Here, the river cuts through a narrow pass in the beach and opens up into a broader bay inland. There were several sandbars just to the side of the channel and a flock of waders caught my eye. I returned in the evening and was able to wade out to the sandbar to photograph several species of sandpiper and plover as well as Little Terns which are featured below.



Little Tern – The Entrance, New South Wales

One of my favorite images that I have taken in the past few years is of a pair of Least Terns of North America performing a courtship ritual. The Little Tern of Australia looks amazingly similar and to be honest, I am not sure what the difference actually is between the two species. Regardless of the difference, once I saw the Little Tern I wanted to photograph one. Unfortunately, I didn't witness any courtship rituals but I was able to photograph this adult as it rested on the sandbar between feeding trips.



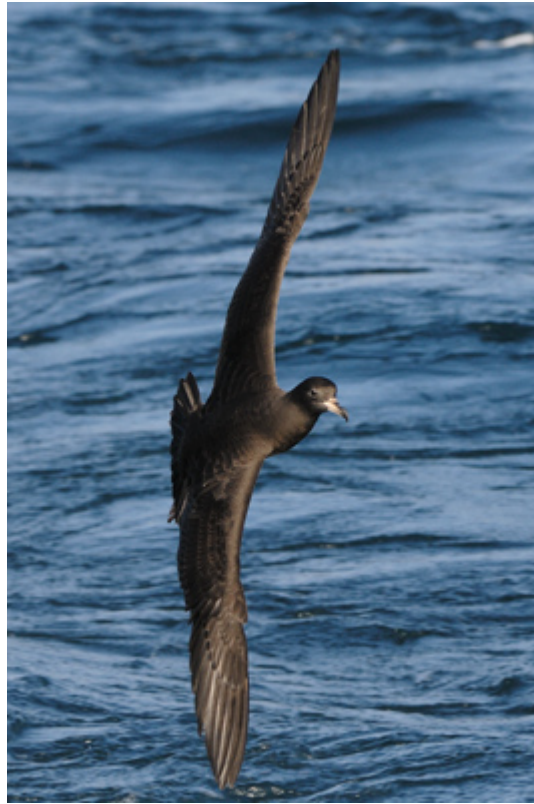
Golden-headed Cisticola – Pitt Town Lagoon, Pitt Town, New South Wales

I first saw a Golden-headed Cisticola back in August and I really had no idea what it was until I got home and was able to compare photos with the various field guides. When I was out at Pitt Town Lagoon last month trying to photograph crakes, I turned around and saw this bird sitting up on a reed singing. The bird was directly between me and the sun so normally I wouldn't try to photograph it but the backlighting really lit up the gold plumage and illustrates where the name came from. With a bit of flash I was able to make this image and am really pleased with how it has turned out.



Powerful Owl – Chatswood, Sydney, New South Wales

Owls are a very popular bird yet they can also be very difficult to find and even harder to photograph. Photograph at night is difficult for the obvious reasons and then they are often hard to find during the day and are roosting in dense foliage. Luckily, a local Sydney birder and photographer had a family of Powerful Owls roosting in the park behind his house so I was able to find these birds without too much effort. This particular bird is a young one and still has a lot of the white fluffy down on his head.



Flesh-footed Shearwater – Pacific Ocean off Wollongong, New South Wales

Towards the end of the month, I once again when out on a pelagic trip to the waters off of Wollongong. Unlike in August when albatrosses were the dominant bird, shearwaters were by far the most numerous this trip. This particular bird is a Flesh-footed Shearwater and is one of the less common birds so I was very pleased to not only get an image of the bird but one with a rather dynamic pose.



Byron Bay Lighthouse – Byron Bay, New South Wales

I often get complaints from my friends and family that all I ever photograph is birds and they want to see where I am and what I am doing, etc. This image is included for them. It is the lighthouse at Byron Bay, the most eastern point of Australia. Since I put the effort in to going all the way to the tip of Cape York, I couldn't pass up the chance to simply drive up to eastern most point, especially when it has scenes like this.

Until next month be sure to check out the website as it has just been fully updated!

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