

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

Monthly Newsletter

February 2007

I am currently on the *Spirit of Tasmania* on my way back to the mainland after a spectacular month touring Tasmania. On my way over, I put together a target list of birds and amazingly I saw all but two of them, and I should be able to get both of them back on the mainland in the upcoming months. I was also able to photograph a large proportion of those birds, including 10 of the 12 bird species endemic to Tasmania. Furthermore, I was able to get on the water for two different pelagic trips which were quite productive in their own right. All in all, February exceeded all expectations.

I arrived in Tasmania on the morning of February 2nd and hit the ground running. I immediately headed to the Hobart region where I focused on photographing some of the Tasmanian endemic species. Within the first few days I was able to photograph several of these birds including the endangered Forty-spotted Pardalote. One of the other highlights of that week was photographing Little Penguins on the Tasman Peninsula. Spending an hour photographing penguins around their burrows in a forest was quite a surreal experience.

On February 7th, I joined three other birders for a trip out to the Continental Shelf in an attempt to see some seabirds. While we didn't have much sun, we had a fairly calm day and saw some good birds, though nothing out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, upon returning to shore, I realized I had my camera set on the wrong settings and most of the day's images didn't come out. Despite my frustration and disappointment, it still was a great day. In reality, in the six months I have been traveling this year, I have been very fortunate with very few technical difficulties.

After the trip, I headed out to do a bit of touring around the state. I didn't have a real firm plan in mind but since rain was forecast for the next few days on the east coast, I headed west. Over the next few days, I made my way to Strahan via Lake St. Clair and ended up having a few quiet relaxing days on the west coast. I had planned to spend the time searching for the Ground Parrot, but I decided it was time for a break and enjoyed a couple nice days hanging out along the coast.

On the drive from Lake St. Clair to Strahan, I passed through part of the World Heritage listed wilderness area of western Tasmania. This area is spectacularly beautiful with rugged mountains, glacial lakes, and pristine landscapes. This drive turned out to be quite inspirational and after departing the Strahan, I headed to the Cradle Mountain region which is on the northern edge of this wilderness. For the next few days I worked hard at photographing the landscape in the area and thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent walking through the mountains.

After leaving Cradle Mountain, I visited Liffey Falls. This turned out to be the surprise of the month. I knew nothing about the place except that it was in a convenient place on the map, apparently had a waterfall, and had a campsite. Since I had been photographing landscapes for a few days, I figured I would photograph the waterfall before heading back to the Hobart area. To my surprise, the next morning, I was surrounded by birds. I spent the morning photographing Olive Whistlers, Bassian Thrushes, Dusky Robins, and possibly the most difficult of the Tasmanian endemics to see, the Scrubtit. By the time I got down to the falls, they were almost a letdown after an extremely productive morning.

I then made my way back to Hobart and prepared for my trip to Melaleuca in the southwest corner of the state. This was a bit of a splurge for me and something that I would not normally do, but then again, that's what this year is about so off I went. Melaleuca consists of a small tin mine, air strip, and a few bushwalkers' huts in the southwest corner of the state in the middle of Southwest National Park, part of the World Heritage Area. The only way in and out is either via plane or one of two trails both requiring five or more days of heavy backpacking each way. Most visitors to the area are bushwalkers that are either hiking in and flying out or the opposite. However, a small proportion visits

the area every year in order to see the highly endangered Orange-bellied Parrot on their breeding grounds.

This small parrot breeds in this small remote area each year and then migrates to Victoria for the winter. The population is tiny with less than 200 individuals in the wild and since I won't be in Victoria during the winter, this was going to be my only chance to see these birds. So I scheduled a flight in and out and flew into the area on Saturday, February 17, 2007. Over the next four days I spent my mornings wandering the surrounding bush and my evenings photographing the parrots as they came in to feed at an observation platform manned by volunteers. The birds were magnificent and I was able to photograph several individuals, both adults and juveniles, banded and unbanded. To top it off, the Orange-bellied Parrot was my 500th bird species that I have seen since arriving in Sydney last year. To make a great trip even better, I added several other species to the list including the Ground Parrot I had missed in Strahan and Lewin's Rail that I had missed in several locations on the east coast.

This trip not only produced some great birds but further inspired me to return to the region in the future to spend some significant time exploring and photographing the landscape of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It is truly spectacular from Cradle Mountain in the north to the Arthur Ranges in the south and I have only seen small pieces of it. I definitely plan to return in the hopefully not too distant future and do some bushwalking through this region. If anyone has the opportunity to visit this wilderness, I highly recommend it.

When I returned to Hobart, I met a friend from back home who was coming to visit and to bird for a few days with me. It was great to see a familiar face and we hit the ground running. Over the next few days I did my best to show him as many Australian birds as I could and therefore left the camera behind for most of the time. We did quite well and managed to see a lot of birds in only a few days.

On Saturday, February 24th, we had another chance to get off shore for a pelagic trip and we readily accepted. This was Sean's first pelagic trip so he was eager and I was just as eager to get back on the water and make up for the wrong camera settings from my trip earlier in the month. It turned out to be a magnificent day for birding and quite a miserable one for photography, but that didn't prevent me from still leaving with some good shots. The day was heavily overcast nearly the entire day, and winds kept the seas up. When we weren't getting splashed by heavy seas we were getting soaked by rain.

There were a lot of birds around, but the highlight was one specific petrel that as of this writing hasn't been completely identified. When it was seen on the boat, the bird was identified as a Kerguelen Petrel, not a rare bird in itself, but one that is rarely seen in this area. However, over the next few days, the identification was questioned by the two most experienced birders on the boat. It is now being suggested that the bird may have been a dark morph Soft-plumaged Petrel, a true rarity. If this can be confirmed, this would be the first Australian record for the dark morph which breeds on Marion Island in the South Atlantic. Since the conditions were so bad, I was the only person crazy enough to have a camera out during the day and I did manage to get a few photos of the bird. I emailed them off for further opinions this evening so hopefully I will know more in the upcoming days. In any case, it was quite an exciting sighting and a fitting way to end my time in Tasmania.

As I mentioned earlier, I am now on my way back to the mainland where I will be catching a flight to Sydney where I will be birding for a few days with my friend from back home. When Sean leaves, my parents will be arriving and I will be spending the next few weeks traveling with them and showing them a few parts of Australia. For the most part, the trip will be more touristy, but I do hope to pick up a few new birds in a few areas. When they leave, I will be head west to once again start my loop around this country. I have a huge amount of the country and a lot of birds left to see and only five months to see it. It should be a great month and I will talk to you again at the end of it.

Website Announcements

Once again, I have updated everything on the site. The weblogs should be updated through the present as well as a full update of the galleries. I should also mention that I will be taking a break from my weblog as I will be traveling with my parents until March 18th. I will resume my regular updates on or around March 19th. In the meantime, check out the galleries, and enjoy the new photos.

The Photos



Orange-bellied Parrot – Melaleuca, Southwest National Park, Tasmania

I spent most afternoons photographing the Orange-bellied Parrots at Melaleuca because in the morning the birds were backlit. Backlighting, typically makes for difficult conditions to photograph in, but when it is done well and it works, it really works. This juvenile was quite cooperative one morning and I really like the little bit of light that almost gives him a halo.



Shy Albatross – Pelagic Waters off Eaglehawk Neck, Tasmania

The plumage patterns on albatrosses are amazing because, especially around the face, they seem to work in gradients rather than hard edges. I love how the grey of the face slowly fades to white on this Shy Albatross.



White-faced Storm-Petrel – Pelagic Waters off Eaglehawk Neck, Tasmania

Storm-Petrels are extremely difficult birds to photograph as they have extremely erratic flight and fly low to the water so often disappear behind waves. The fact that they are small and typically don't come too close to the boat doesn't help either. I love this image but it is a pretty significant crop because the bird was farther away than I had hoped. This was taken on my first trip off Eaglehawk Neck and I hoped for better stuff the second trip but there were far fewer White-faced Storm-Petrels on the second trip.



Yellow Wattlebird – Peter Murrell Conservation Area, Kingston, Tasmania

The Yellow Wattlebird is the perfect example of where these birds get their name. The large yellow-orange wattles on the side of their face make this a very distinctive bird. The other wattlebirds of Australia have much smaller wattles and the Little Wattlebird doesn't even have them, or at least they aren't visible.



Beautiful Firetail – Melaleuca, Southwest National Park, Tasmania

This was my other target bird while visiting Melaleuca. I saw them every day but it wasn't until the last evening that I had a chance to photograph these well named finches. They really are stunning birds and you can't beat that warm late evening light.



Forty-spotted Pardalote – Peter Murrell Conservation Area, Kingston, Tasmania

The Forty-spotted Pardalote is endemic to the east coast of Tasmania and only numbers about 2000 birds. This endangered species is surprisingly easy to see if you know where to look. They nest in White Gums and birds tend to group together. The majority of the population is found on the barrier islands of Bruny and Maria but there is also a nice colony near Hobart at the Peter Murrell Conservation Area where this was taken.



Cradle Mountain – Cradle Mountain National Park, Tasmania



Cradle Mountain over Dove Lake – Cradle Mountain National Park, Tasmania

It is hard to visit the Cradle Mountain region and not spend some time photographing the magnificent landscapes. After a visit to the Wilderness Gallery, an art gallery specializing in wilderness photography, I was inspired to focus more on the landscape and had a few very enjoyable walks through the mountains.



Orange-bellied Parrot – Melaleuca, Southwest National Park, Tasmania

This stunning male Orange-bellied Parrot was one of the highlights of my time at Melaleuca. Most of the parrots are banded and while I have no problem photographing banded birds, if given the choice, I would prefer to photograph an unbanded bird. No particular reason except pure aesthetics. This was one of the few birds that came in to the blind that was indeed unbanded and I was excited to see that it was a spectacular male.

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

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