

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

Monthly Newsletter

May 2007

May was a month of traveling covering long distances and seeing some gorgeous country, all with a new camera in my hand after last month's disaster. Unfortunately, I had to rush through a large part of Western Australia due to the time lost waiting for my replacement camera. I made the decision that I would gloss over the area between Perth and Broome, not spending near enough time in this gorgeous area, but that would allow me to spend more quality time later in my trip, particularly in the Kimberley and the Top End. Because of this, the first half of the month felt a bit rushed but once I arrived in Broome, things began to return to normal and I loved the time I spent in the Kimberley region.

The middle part of the Western Australian coast is very scenic and I must admit, I was quite disappointed that I had to glance over and skip a lot of the area. One of the most amazing things occurred on my drive north. One day I was driving along the red countryside when all of a sudden the landscape turned green. It was truly amazing. The red landscape was the same but it was now covered by a fresh growth of bright green grass. I hadn't realized how little bright green I have seen this year. Most native Australian plants are not the bright green of the deciduous trees of North America but are more of a grayish green. The long drought of the east hadn't helped either, but now this area was shockingly green. Apparently the area had experienced a cyclone this season dumping a lot of rain and the green growth was the result.

Shark Bay World Heritage Area with its stromatolites and massive seagrass beds and Exmouth with Whale Sharks, Manta Rays, and the Nigaloo Reef are just two of the many places of which I only got a very brief taste. I didn't get to dive the reef or with the sharks like I had originally planned. I didn't get to explore many of the spectacular gorges at Windjana Gorge. I didn't get to do a lot and while I was disappointed, that sacrifice made the rest of the month, and hopefully the rest of the year, much more enjoyable.

Once I arrived in Broome, things began to slow down once again. I spent several nights at the Broome Bird Observatory, world renown for its massive mudflats and huge numbers of shorebirds. Unfortunately, by the time I arrived, most of the shorebirds had already headed to Asia on migration, but I still managed to see several thousand Great and Red Knots, many in breeding plumage, as well as some of the other specialties in the area. Nights were spent talking with the staff and other guests at the observatory and I really enjoyed my time there.

After leaving the observatory, I started my Kimberley experience. The Kimberley is a remote region of Northwest Australia that is really rather hard to explain. The area is full of gorgeous gorges, many with beautiful waterfalls that were still flowing during my visit. The region is dominated by the two tropical seasons, the Wet and the Dry. I was arriving just at the beginning of the Dry. This was a bit of a risk because if the Wet was very wet or there were late rains, the roads may still be impassable. Fortunately though, my gamble proved to be a good one. We did have some late rains which closed many of the roads while I was there, but I still was able to get nearly everywhere I had planned to go. I had to skip one gorge due to a closed road but otherwise it was just fine. This rain and deep river crossings kept many other visitors away which meant I nearly had the area to myself.

For the rest of the month I explored the area from Derby to Wyndham along the famous/infamous Gibb River Road. I found the road to be in pretty good condition except for the western part that had been cut up very badly during the rain. Other than that, it was a freshly graded road that didn't pose any problems. Access in and out of the Mitchell Plateau was just fine as well except for a couple deep river crossings that I had no problems with. All in all, it was a fairly smooth trip as far as logistics go.

Bird wise it was pretty good as well. I managed to find the rather elusive Black Grasswren without too much trouble, though I only saw it once on the first day of three days of searching. I did manage to get a photo but the conditions weren't great and the rock it was perched on was heavily overexposed. After a lot of work in Photoshop, I managed to salvage the image somewhat. It isn't perfect but it is the best I got of a difficult bird. Other birds proved to be fairly easy to find as well including the White-quilled Rock-Pigeon and Sandstone Shrike-Thrush.

After leaving Gibb River Road, I headed south to Purnululu National Park, otherwise known as the Bungle Bungles. This incredibly scenic park was one of my favorite places I have been this year. I spent a very busy three days photographing the incredible beehives and gorges both from the ground and, a rare treat, from a helicopter. I recently got some of the panoramic film developed from that trip and I am quite thrilled with the images though I won't be able to scan them and get them on the website until later this year once I get home.

My last stop before entering the Northern Territory, and the month of June, was in Kununurra. This town is situated on the Ord River and is in the center of a large irrigated agricultural area. The area is supposed to be very attractive to a wide variety of finches but I struggled to find many and none of the rarer ones. A bit disappointed, I continued my journey east with one final night spent on the northern shores of Lake Argyle where I had a spectacular afternoon photographing honeyeaters and even a few finches.

I am finding it hard to believe I only have two months left but they will be two exciting months. Most of June will be spent exploring the Top End around Darwin and Kakadu before I head into the Center for the last stage of my travels. I look forward to seeing the world renowned Kakadu National Park and seeing what else I can discover in this amazing country.

Website Announcements

As usual, I have completed updated my galleries and weblogs. Hope you enjoy them and there will be more to come throughout June!

The Photos



Australian Kestrel – Cape Range National Park, Western Australia

I see kestrels nearly every day I am driving, but it wasn't until this month that I finally got a shot of this small falcon. Normally I would say that the bird's perch was too busy with all the bare sticks but for some reason I really like this image.



Black-chinned "Golden-backed" Honeyeater – Lake Argyle, Western Australia

The Golden-backed Honeyeater, once considered a full species, is now considered a subspecies of the Black-chinned Honeyeater. Good species or not, it is a beautiful bird and is one of my favorite honeyeaters. You can only see a bit of the gold on the shoulder here but the beautiful yellow spreads all the way along his back.



Black Grasswren – Little Merton Falls, Mitchell River National Park, Western Australia

The Black Grasswren is one of the most difficult grasswrens to see because it is not only hard to find but simply getting to its habitat can be quite difficult. It is a stunning bird and I was furious with myself for overexposing the bottom left corner of the image. A bit of Photoshop work paid off and while it isn't what I had hoped, I am pleased to have the image.



Bungle Bungle Beehives – Purnululu National Park, Western Australia

The Beehive domes of the Bungle Bungle Range are quite amazing. It is one thing to experience them from the ground where they tower up to about 250 meters but from the air you really get a feel for the expanse that these formations cover. I haven't treated myself to many things like this but I must admit that the half hour helicopter flight was well worth the expense.



Redthroat – Hamelin Pool, Shark Bay World Heritage Area, Western Australia

The Redthroat is a fairly drab and boring bird and one I have only seen on two occasions. That being said, I rather like this little guy with a beautiful song and the subtle reddish orange patch on his throat. The late evening sunlight, background, and throat patch make this image for me. Not to mention it is not a bird that is all that common.



Rufous Treecreeper – Dryandra Woodland, Western Australia

This image was taken the morning after I received my replacement camera. I had specifically targeted this bird as one I had not wanted to miss during my time in the southwest and dedicated the morning to it once I got the camera. This image didn't appeal to me that much at first but the spotlight effect and the dappled lighting are growing on my every time I look at the image.



Sacred Kingfisher – Crab Creek, Broome, Western Australia

Sacred Kingfishers can be found in a wide range of habitats. This bird was perched in the mangroves on the edge of Roebuck Bay near the Broome Bird Observatory. Who would have thought that I would ever have a background that complimented the buff and green of a Sacred Kingfisher?



Short-beaked Echidna – Dryandra Woodland, Western Australia

This echidna was my first subject after I received my new camera. After getting the camera, I headed off to Dryandra Woodland to photograph the Rufous Treecreeper but didn't have any luck that evening. Instead, I found this echidna which was quite determined to get somewhere so walked along without too much notice of me. Normally these animals are quite shy and go into a bit of a ball when disturbed making photographing them (or attacking them if you were a predator) quite difficult.



Star Finch – Parry Creek Road, Parry's Lagoons Nature Reserve, Western Australia

The Star Finch was one of the first finches I was able to photograph as I started into an area known for its diversity of finches. This male bird was part of a flock that was feeding on the tall grasses on the roadside verge one evening just outside the Parry Creek farm. It turned out to be the only Star Finch I could photograph so I was happy with the result.



Yellow Chat – Roebuck Plains, Broome, Western Australia

The Yellow Chat is one of those birds that seem to evade many people. There are several sites where they are seen but some years they can be there in large numbers and others they can be absent. Roebuck Plains near the Broome Bird Observatory seems to be one of the more reliable areas to find them but while I was there, it was still too wet to access the plains where the birds were normally found. While chasing down some waders that were going to roost near the edge of the plains, the warden of the observatory found a lone bird and let me know about it. That evening I was out wandering about the plains and found a pair in the area. I couldn't get close to the birds but still managed to get this image of the male that I quite like even though the bird is rather small in the frame.

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

Drew Fulton
Of Emus and Fairy-wrens: Photographing Australia's Endemic Birds
www.OfEmusAndFairyWrens.com
www.drewfulton.com
drew@OfEmusAndFairyWrens.com