

A BIRD’S EYE VIEW

With Kakadu National Park home to one-third of Australia’s bird species, the sky really is the limit when it comes to birdwatching there.

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It’s at 2 o’clock,” says our guide, Luke Paterson. “Watch the large boulder to the right of the main cliff face. Yes, there. It just popped its head up.”

As Paterson scrambles to set up the scope, the excitement level of my fellow birdwatchers reaches fever pitch. “This moment is worth my whole trip up here,” says Patrick from Melbourne. Adjusting my camera lens, I scan the area, desperate to share the joy. I see nothing.

“Here, check it out through the scope,” says Paterson. Squinting into the eyepiece, speckled brown feathers and a bobbing head emerge. “Wow,” I say, not wanting to appear underwhelmed. “Is it a pigeon?”

Well, at least my rookie question is half right. The chestnut-quilled rock pigeon is one of six endemic bird species in the Northern Territory’s Top End.

It’s 7.30am and we’ve already blitzed a rare sighting. Just a glimpse, but enough to pull out my species checklist and place a satisfying tick in a box. One tick, another 289 to go.

Kakadu National Park is about one-third the size of Tasmania, yet home to one-third of Australia’s total bird species. And in his 20 years in the park, Paterson has spotted 96 per cent of them.

I’ve joined one of Paterson’s NT Bird Specialists birdwatching day tours as part of Kakadu Bird Week, a festival held each September and October with tours, cruises, lectures, workshops, games and activities to celebrate all things avian.

“Bird Week started back in 2011 and, in the past few years, it has really started to gather momentum,” Paterson says. “Many people come from the UK and US, where birding is huge, but it’s great to see more Aussies getting involved.”

On a world scale, birding is big business. According to a report by the EU’s Centre for the Promotion of

TOP TIPS
Let there be light

The soft light of golden hour (the hour after sunrise and hour before sunset) is best. It’s also when birds are most active.

The eyes have it

Focus on the eye and everything else follows. Position yourself so the bird is front lit, to capture light in the eye.

Fast shooting

A bird in flight is one of the hardest things to photograph. You need a high shutter speed, at least 1/1000. Match the speed with the lowest ISO possible (preferably 100) and an F-stop of 5.6-8.0. Make sure your camera is set on continuous focus.

Follow the action

Study the bird’s behaviour to help predict its movement. Stay still, avoid wearing bright colours, hide behind something and, above all, be patient.

Tell a story

Fill the frame or leave just enough space to show the bird in its habitat. Either way, try to capture something that expresses the bird’s life, e.g. feeding, season, habitat.

Smartphone hack

A smartphone can’t compete with a long lens, but if you position it to snap a picture through a scope, you’ll have the next best thing.



Imports, since 2015, birdwatching has overtaken fishing as the most popular hobby in the UK.

And the latest figures from the US Fish and Wildlife Service reveal there are about 45 million designated birdwatchers in the US – nearly 15 per cent of the population.

A SOARING HOBBY

BirdLife Australia, the nation’s largest bird-conservation organisation, is seeing huge increases in the number of people involved in birdwatching. Initiating the Aussie Backyard Bird Count in 2014, the seven-day challenge is fast becoming the largest citizen science project in the country. The 2019 results saw 88,270 people (including many school groups) count 3.4 million birds. “One of the beautiful things about birding is anyone can do it,” says Paterson.

After riding the high of spotting an endemic bird, we leave the red escarpments of sandstone country and head to a monsoon forest in the East Alligator River area.

“Part of being a good birder is knowing where to look,” says Paterson. Overhead, noisy corellas gather in the canopy like a group of teenagers let out of school early. Flashes of red streak through the sauna-like air as black cockatoos swoop and the avian orchestra crescendos in a happy mix of trills and whistles. But amid the cacophony, Paterson hears the high-pitched call of a small but big-tick item on the species list. “If you sit and just watch and listen, the bird world is full of surprises.”

Obscured by thick foliage, the only clue a little kingfisher owns the angel song is a patch of iridescent blue. Keeping our distance, we peer through

the leaves as the smallest of the kingfisher family hops from twig to twig. “There must be another one around here somewhere, I can tell by the call,” Paterson explains.

Blue is the theme for another bird we spot in the same area – the blue-winged kookaburra. Cousin of the beloved laughing kookaburra, this bird, for all its eye-catching appearance, has one major difference – it can’t laugh. A series of hoarse barks and screeches replace the usual cackle as if Mother Nature momentarily forgot her kookaburra recipe.

WATER IS LIFE

Later that afternoon, we take the Bird Week sunset cruise on Kakadu’s famed Yellow Water Billabong. Floating along the mirrored water in an open-air boat is a total immersion in the celebration of birdlife. Crocodiles vie for attention, buffaloes graze along the water’s edge and brumbies gallop in the distant greenery, but it’s the birds who take centre stage.

The sheer numbers are staggering and each species has its own attention-grabbing characteristics. Masses of whistling ducks gather along the muddy banks, brolgas, jabirus and egrets stand majestically in the shallows, pelicans glide beside the boat and overhead large flocks of magpie geese fly in mathematical perfection. My tally of ticks accumulates as we marvel at the

“PART OF BEING A GOOD BIRDER IS KNOWING WHERE TO LOOK.”

LUKE PATERSON

LEARN THE LINGO

Twitchers, tally hunters, bird nerds, birders, bird watchers, birdos, avitourism – call it what you will. But is there a difference in terminology? Well, yes and no.

Twitchers will travel to the ends of the Earth to tick off a ‘lifer’ (a species on a designated life list). Whereas, birders tend to linger longer and learn more about the habitat of each bird. Avitourism is one of the world’s fastest-growing environmentally friendly tourism initiatives, however, backyard bird watching can be equally as satisfying. The main aim is to get out into nature and discover creatures that do something humans long to do – fly.



Clockwise from top left: Morning light over the Kakadu wetlands; Spotting birdlife from the road; A Jesus bird chick; Two brolgas, which are among Australia’s largest flying birds.

Australian darters crouched over rocks hanging their wings out to dry and even spot an azure kingfisher perched on an overhanging branch. Dressed in its Sunday best – an overcoat of vivid blue covers a body of bright orange – the bird, unperturbed by the sudden influx of admirers, willingly poses for photos.

And if that’s not enough, I have another ‘ooh aah’ moment. I’ve never heard of a Jesus bird (aka the comb-crested jacana). But once seen, it’s never forgotten. Backlit and picking its way across a series of lotus leaves, the jacana literally looks like it’s walking on water.

Thrilled to spot such an unusual bird, we’re suddenly in for another treat. “Look, there are chicks,” says someone close to the front of the boat.

Peering into the leaves, I catch a glimpse of the bird gathering up a clutch of four chicks and tucking them under its wings. “This is one of the few species where the male does everything. He incubates the eggs and then looks after the chicks alone,” says Paterson.

Satisfied the danger has passed, the male releases the chicks and their long toes grasp the edges of the leaves as they pick their way across the lilies in search of food.

By the end of the week, my final species tally is a respectable 78. Not quite in Paterson’s league, but I’ve transitioned from a bird lover to a fledgling birder. ntbirdspecialists.com.au

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Giant birds once roamed Madagascar, NZ and Australia. However, a fossilised femur found in the northern hemisphere indicates much larger birds lived alongside humans in Europe. mindfood.com/half-tonne-birds