

At the Sanctuary – 11th December, 2016

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Oh for several days of gentle soaking rain! I cannot recall any time when so much of the vegetation at the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary has been under so much stress or has already died. The Mangrove Fern is in very poor condition, though some plants are sending out new fronds and producing fresh spore. The Cotton Trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) in the Melaleuca Forest have dropped many of their leaves and high numbers of Red-shouldered Beetles are attacking the remainder. Even the ancient Grey Mangroves out towards the river are looking sick. Those trees have stood for probably 200 years, so I hope they survive and thrive.

The bird song was not ringing forth as usual, one of the reasons being the ending of the breeding season for most species. However, the cicadas are calling in all habitats – Brown Bunyips, White Drummers, Flourey Bakers, Clanger Cicadas, Paperbark Cicadas, and loudest and most visible were the Black Princes.

Wherever there were Scrambling Lilies (*Geitonoplesium cymosum*), they were in flower and bud, some already fruiting, and appearing to be in good health. Other vines such as the Supplejack and Mangrove Vine are quite variable, ranging from strong and healthy to almost dead, I guess depending on the situation of their root systems.

As I progressed along the boardwalk to the more open areas of mangroves, I disturbed a juvenile White-throated Nightjar. It flew absolutely silently and disappeared so swiftly that I was left almost wondering if I had really seen the bird. The juvenile bird is a slightly mottled brown, quite unlike the parents. This species has bred every year at the sanctuary since 2012 and perhaps before.

Near the crab viewing areas, I encountered some folk who had arrived by boat. They were fascinated by the Mudskippers and astounded at the numbers of Orange-clawed Fiddler Crabs. Lots of males in close proximity, but no fighting and little threatening behaviour. In one narrow band of muddy bank, I counted 56 males in about a metre – it was too difficult to include the females. All other species of crabs were well and truly outnumbered!

One of the birds which breeds at the sanctuary but is rarely encountered is the Shining Flycatcher. The male is dramatically jet-black, refracting a blue sheen in sunlight. The female is gorgeous – pure white below, rich rufous above – but I did not find her. I was fortunate enough to observe the male for about 10 minutes as he chased and caught insects in and around mangrove roots.

My last surprise was on returning to my vehicle. I could hear lots of high-pitched soft contact calls in the trees above me and found a flock of Chestnut-breasted Mannikins. It is unusual to find them in trees, but the riddle was soon solved. They were gathering in the trees, then flying out to seeding grasses in the field next door, then flying back to the trees. They obviously did not feel completely safe but were hungry enough to risk the flight to the open. These birds were once common on the Sunshine Coast in flocks of fifty or more, but now we see them occasionally, and generally no more than 10 birds together.

Although I was disturbed by the tough conditions, I felt privileged that I had again witnessed some of nature's wonders and conundrums.



Chestnut-breasted Mannikins feeding on grass seeds



Lots of Orange-clawed Fiddlers opposite the crab-viewing platform



Black Prince female, ready to select a mate



Scrambling Lily