

At the Sanctuary – February, 2017

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As I drove to the sanctuary, I noticed a dragon sitting up beside the road catching the late afternoon rays. It was not the anticipated Eastern Water Dragon but the Eastern Bearded Dragon, one seen far less frequently than in past times. The beautiful Rainbow Bee-eaters, Silvereyes and Grey Fantails were in the car-park to greet me. A Fawn-footed Melomys frequents an area near the beginning of the garden track and as she often does, she dashed across in front of me and hid very successfully.

After several weeks of little sound and activity from the Brown Honeyeaters, they were once again in full song and flitting through the vegetation, competing with Lewin's Honeyeaters and Grey Shrike-thrushes for sound levels. Bar-shouldered Doves were common. A couple of them even as I left the garden, then a group of five flew out from under the boardwalk at the entry to the Melaleuca forest, with another eight in the Melaleuca forest itself. They took quite a while to find perches and settle down to make sure I kept going so they could return and feed again. I disturbed another two groups of six in the Casuarina forest, making a total of 27 birds, plus a couple heard near the river bank. I always hear their gentle "wookoo wookoo" calls, but have never seen so many on one walk.

The hypocotyls of the Orange Mangrove have matured and are gradually dropping. Around their roots, there were dozens of Estuarine Slugs, well camouflaged on the mud. The fruits of the River Mangrove are abundant and ready to release new life. The Stilt-rooted and Grey Mangroves are both in blossom, with the flowering of the Grey Mangrove being somewhat patchy.

On the far bank opposite the crab viewing platform, a male Sunburst Fiddler Crab decided it was an occasion for house-keeping. Each time he disappeared down his burrow, he would shortly emerge right side first, with a ball of very wet mud contained in the basket formed by his left set of legs, carry it a short distance below the entrance and spread it downhill, and then repeat the procedure over and over. The activity was not appreciated by the male Orange-clawed Fiddler Crab which owned the burrow on the downhill side. Five or six times he cleared the fresh mud from the entrance to his burrow, then just gave up and went off elsewhere to feed. (If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again..... Then give up. No need to make a fool of yourself!)

The variety of crabs was wonderful. The tide was quite low towards evening, so there were a couple of groups of Giant Sentinel Crabs which have a special requirement for very soft mud which they find at the bottom of channels and are therefore not often seen. All the usual species were plentiful – Maroon Mangrove Crab, Red-fingered Marsh Crab, Purple and Cream Shore Crab, Scarlet Three-spined Mangrove Crab, Broad-fronted Mangrove Crab, Furry-clawed Crab, and Semaphore Crab – but a couple of infrequent visitors showed up. A few Mud Crabs, only about 70 mm in size, and a Green Swimmer Crab roughly the same size were swimming along the water's edge. The Mud Crabs are present only in the early stages of their life cycle and move out to sea long before they are mature, but the Green Swimmer was around full size. A couple of Haswell's Shore Crabs emerged gingerly, one of them in the hollow of a fallen long-dead Grey Mangrove trunk where the sun's rays highlighted its colours.

Prior to sunset, I disturbed two Long-nosed Bandicoots in well-separated clumps of Mangrove Fern – a surprise to find them active so early. There were other creatures quietly moving amongst the fronds

and I guess some were birds but I wondered if there were also Swamp Rats as they utilise them for food and protection. Even around sunset, there were a number of avian species still feeding and moving about – Azure Kingfisher, Olive-backed Oriole, Australasian Figbirds, Eastern Whipbirds, Grey Shrike-thrush, Spectacled Monarch, - and sharing the birdbath were a Grey Fantail and a couple of Lewin’s Honeyeaters. Most other species already had their heads under their wings sleeping.

The Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary can have quite a different character in different seasons and at different times of the day. I often select my timing by the tide as I enjoy noting the fish which swim above the mudflats and seeing the crabs appearing as the water recedes.

It was a new experience in the early evening. Discovering the changes of the lengthening shadows, the softening of the light, pink clouds creeping from the horizon, listening to the diurnal birds as they cease their calls one by one drifting into a fleeting silence, hearing the night-birds taking over with their contact calls, the insects commencing their stridulations, watching the silent silhouettes of Flying-foxes as they seek their sustenance, the nocturnal birds venturing forth to find their food, the rustling of unseen creatures in leaf-litter, the scents of some flowers carried on the evening breeze, the magnificent quietude of the solitude. It is magic to be part of this transformation.



Eastern Bearded Dragon



Fruit of the River Mangrove



Flowers of the Stilt-Rooted Mangrove



Sunburst Fiddler Crab



Haswell's Shore Crab in fallen Grey Mangrove log



The beautiful Rainbow Bee-eater