

At the Sanctuary – August, 2017

Robyn Howard

This was not a typical August at the Maroochy Wetlands Sanctuary, surely as a result of the strange seasons earlier in the year.

The drive along Sports Road provided very few birds, just Eastern Yellow Robin and Willie Wagtail. The fairy-wrens and finches have been absent lately. Once I arrived at the carpark, it was completely different. I could have spent a half hour “birding” in that area – Rainbow Bee-eaters, Brown Honeyeaters, Lewin’s Honeyeaters, Striated Pardalotes, Grey Fantails, Varied Trillers, Pied Butcherbirds, Brown Thornbills and more.

It was disappointing that there were few blossoms on the Hoveas beside the entry track. Most years they are stunning. Because of the dry summer, plants produced few buds, so only one or two plants displayed just a small number of beautiful mauve flowers. The higher area of the sanctuary was quite dry with many plants wilting, though there had been recent inundation and ground water was evident in the Melaleuca forest. Spore on the Mangrove Ferns was mature and ready to be dispersed on the winds. Evidence of feeding activity of both Long-nosed and Northern Brown Bandicoots was apparent on the forest floor. Further along in the Casuarina forest, the “runways” of the Swamp Rats proved their night-time presence. These runways are under vegetation or casuarina needles on the ground but I had not noticed them for some time.

August is normally the peak breeding season for birds at the sanctuary. When we took a group on a guided walk early in the month, the birds were making calls to attract mates or maintain territories, but later in the month, breeding season calls were not really evident. Because of the strange weather patterns earlier in the year, breeding had continued from May through July, but by August, the dryness and lack of foods in the form of insects (which are essential to feed young) made it less conducive to breeding. Several species were still raising young from previous months.

As I arrived at the area where mangroves predominate, I found one of our special species, the Shining Flycatcher. The female (which was the one I found) is white underneath, has a blue-black head, and the back, wings and tail are a rich rufous, such a gorgeous sight as she flits about low in the foliage and around exposed roots chasing insects. I found her a second time on my return, but she decided to hide under the boardwalk.

Other birds in the mangrove areas included Royal Spoonbill, Sacred Kingfisher, Azure Kingfisher, Rufous Fantail, Mangrove Gerygones, Eastern Great Egret, Mistletoebird, and the Grey Shrike-thrush. Its calls are some of the most melodic, and fortunately it sang and sang while I was at the crab viewing platform. I looked and looked, and eventually spotted it by finding the right place to search between Grey Mangroves and view it perched in a casuarina in the background. Like many of our sweetest songsters, it does not have the brightest and most colourful plumage. I guess if you have the magnificent song to attract the females, what do feathers matter. (That is human thinking, not bird instinct!)

Crabs were sparse early in the month, but more plentiful after some higher tides later on. However, there was a prevalence of juveniles and small adults, with fewer of the colourful species on the surface.

The Pacific Blue-clawed Sentinels were back in good numbers, especially in the wetter areas under the Orange Mangroves.

The River Mangroves are still in bud, but it will be a month or more before they are in full flower. The flowers are white and laden with nectar and pollen and are attractive to tiny honeyeaters and several insect species.



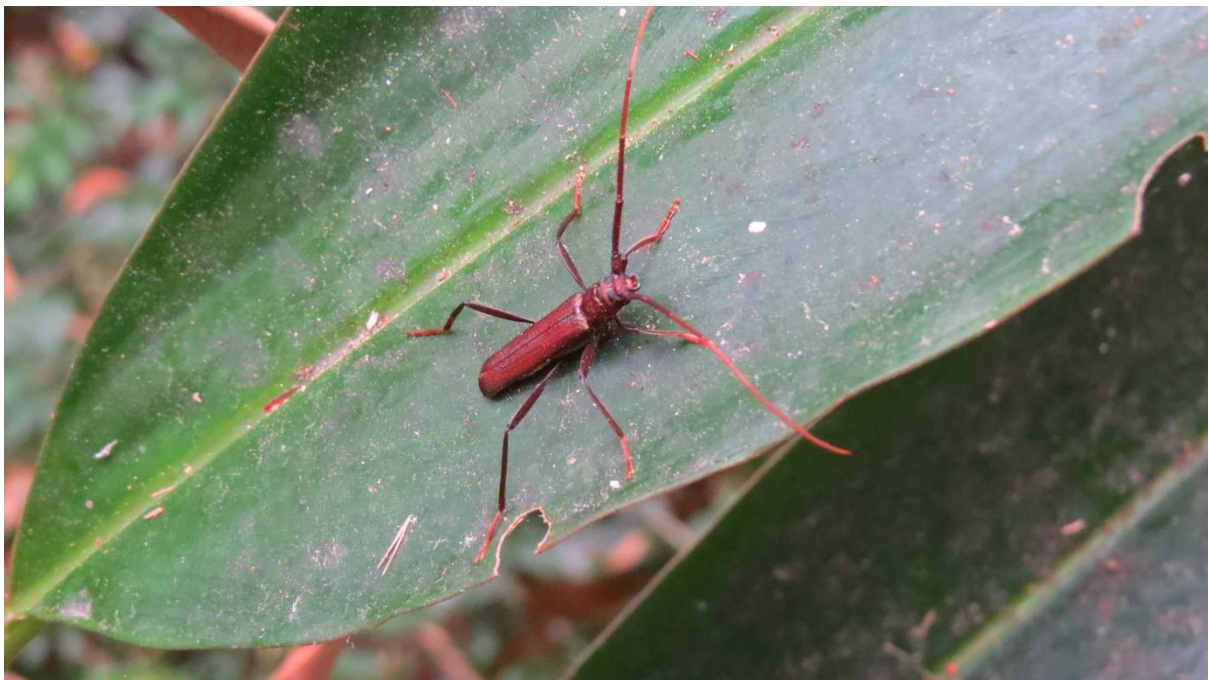
Mature spore on Mangrove Fern



Conical hole dug by a Long-nosed Bandicoot. It uses its front feet to dig the moist soil, then delves with its long snout to find insects, worms, and fleshy rhizomes or roots.



Eastern Yellow Robin on its cleverly camouflaged nest



An unidentified Longicorn Beetle on a ginger plant. Notice the length of its antennae, much longer than its body.



Pacific Blue-clawed Sentinel (female) is again in good numbers



Found at last near the crab viewing platform. The male Grey Shrike-thrush which charmed with his glorious songs.