

At The Sanctuary – May, 2019

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May brought sufficient rain to keep the sanctuary's flora looking green and attractive, but unfortunately, it also meant the mosquitoes appreciated it too. At least, that was until the last few days of the month when a couple of cold mornings brought their numbers down.

Red-browed Finches were occupying the grasses along the roadside as well as the garden and vegetation on the upper side of the walk to the Melaleuca Forest. Most of the birds kept under cover, just quietly squeaking to maintain contact with the others of the flock. White-browed Scrubwrens hid in the garden Lomandras, again making just enough noise to continue communication with the family group.

Australasian Figbirds flourished. They usually are evident when fruit are abundant, but their food source was not evident. Brown Honeyeaters, Shining Bronze-Cuckoos, Brown Thornbills and Golden Whistlers provided the music.



Australasian Figbirds – male on left and female on right

Butterflies displayed their colourful and rhythmical flight, more than had been apparent in recent months. The Brown Ringlets had returned along with Large Grass-Yellow, Small Grass-Yellow, both Scarlet and Black Jezebels, Common Crow, Swamp and Blue Tigers, Lesser Wanderer, Varied Eggfly, Glasswing and more.



Different views of the Varied Eggfly

It was peaceful in the transitional area between the Rainforest and the Melaleuca Forest. Some of the vegetation which did not survive the very dry hot period and was brought down by death or strong winds had settled onto the forest floor and become part of the normal life-cycle of nature. Nature knew about recycling and re-use long before modern humans tried to lessen our impact on the earth. The dead twigs, leaves, branches and vines had become refuges and food larders for many creatures, especially the tiny ones. The woody refuse was being consumed by unsighted termites, borers, weevils, other beetles and their larvae, and even insects such as hornets, wasps and ants. Meanwhile, everything was being attacked by microorganisms including bacteria and fungi

filaments, making the nutrition available for the surrounding plants. Silent and unobtrusive, but so important.



Scarlet Bracket Fungi on a fallen tree trunk

Fallen flowers on the boardwalk revealed the blossoming of the Estuary Mistletoes high in the Melaleuca canopy, and they could also be found amongst the casuarinas and mangroves further along the walk. The finer flowers of the Variable Mistletoe accompanied them in all three forests, bringing the Brown and Lewin's Honeyeaters for the beautiful nectar. Their prolific singing indicated their appreciation.



Estuary Mistletoe in flower – an important resource for our birds

In the region past the Casuarina Forest where the Mangrove Ferns grow in more exposed areas, some pieces of the fern had separated from the parent plants and drifted on the tide to commence new clumps a few metres away. Although looking robust and very green in the early stages, these

clumps may not prosper in the long term without shelter. In nature's way, they have grasped an opportunity for new life, but in its harsh reality, nature may yet snatch that life away when conditions become less favourable.



New plants of Mangrove Fern separated from the parent clump

River Mangroves have completed their current fruiting season and broadcast their capsules to the vagaries of the tides. They have been the most successful species in the sanctuary over the last decade, extending their coverage to new sites whilst losing very little of their previous cover. The Grey Mangroves have continued their unusual fruit production. After poor flowering earlier in the year, a surprising number of fruit resulted. However many fruit were not retained on the trees until maturity and have dropped anywhere in size from about 5 mm upwards. While this was occurring, some fruit grew quickly and matured to an almost normal size. It is typical that many seedlings commence life in close proximity but do not survive to maturity due to overcrowding, lack of sunlight, and lack of nutrients, so a small recruitment of seedlings for a single year should not have a deleterious effect on plant population. However, fauna which utilize the fallen fruit as food will have been missing out and deprived of the quality and quantity of this resource.



Some Grey Mangrove fruit are still tiny while others are well on their way to maturity

On a day which was cool and undecided about being cloudy or sunny, a surprising number and variety of crabs were feeding on the muddy surface. A few of the colony of Three-spined Mangrove Crabs which occupies the burrows under the Orange Mangroves beside the longer loop walk were warily scouting to assess safety. Employing binoculars to view from a short distance did not disturb them. The whole bank of the waterway from upstream of the Bird Hide to where it enters the river was well populated by several crab species, dominated of course by the Orange-clawed Fiddler Crabs. Not a single Pacific Blue-clawed Sentinel Crab was spotted, though they are more often in profusion in winter.



A Scarlet Three-spined Mangrove Crab scouting near its burrow. Notice the upright entrance of the burrow, different from most crabs which have an entrance flat on the surface of the mud.



This Semaphore Crab was doing a bit of tidying up inside his burrow.

It is wonderful to know that although we may not see our nocturnal animals, they are still resident. George is assiduous in setting and monitoring the motion-activated camera and recording species identified. Besides the nocturnal creatures, some of our more secretive birds become stars! Recent results have included the Long-nosed Bandicoot, Short-eared Brushtail Possum, Short-beaked Echidna, Yellow-footed Antechinus, plus Noisy Pitta and Emerald Dove, two birds which are quite shy and not often seen at the sanctuary. The vulnerable Water Mouse has been videoed moving mud to perform maintenance, taking leaves into the nesting chamber, and even eating crustaceans. It is quite a noisy eater for such a small fellow!



A Long-nosed Bandicoot on its nightly foraging. Photo: George Cowie



A Short-eared Brushtail Possum. It is far less numerous than the Common Brushtail Possum.
Photo: George Cowie

For so many reasons, this sanctuary is worth preserving – for its beauty, for its peaceful atmosphere, for its value to the river and its resources, for the diverse creatures which call it home, and for the range of vegetation which the various forests protect.