

At the Sanctuary – February, 2019

Robyn Howard

February was a month for seeing the sanctuary in some of its different dispositions. There were low tides when many hundreds of crabs were out feeding, the breeze was gentle and welcoming for birds and people alike, the vegetation had mostly retained its moisture and was looking good. But then there were times when the tidal surges came up into the Melaleuca forest and there was no exposed mud for creatures to find food; the wind thrashed every tree and shrub, breaking off leaves, twigs and small branches, even uprooting small trees, heavily rustling through leafier vegetation and whining through the casuarinas, causing most of the birds and insects to just hunker down hopefully to survive the onslaught.



Even the Eucalypts were bowing before the strong winds

At the end of the month, the Piccabeen Palms were laden with ripe red fruit. The frugivorous birds were squabbling to get a share, though there was ample to go around. The Australasian Figbirds were in the greatest numbers and most aggressive, but the small Lewin's Honeyeaters were experts at rushing in and grabbing a fruit at any opportunity. The biggest bird was the female Eastern Koel, but she was too timid to join the fray and left after taking a few fruit. She moved to a nearby Blue Lilly Pilly, sheltering amongst its leaves. A Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove assessed the situation, but was frightened off by the racket. Perhaps it returned later once the excitement was over.



This female Australasian Figbird waited her turn to take some fruit



A shy female Easter Koel hid in a nearby tree to avoid the noisy mob

The Small-leaved Tamarind at the entry to the garden fruited well. For most of the year, visitors do not notice the tree, but the dropped fruit are quite remarkable and always draw comments. There does not seem to be evidence of critters feeding on them. Only some of the Melaleucas flowered – less than half – but butterflies and honeyeaters enjoyed the nectar. The Pink Euodias which had flowered so wonderfully over summer have now produced bountiful fruit. They are still green but will eventually ripen to a dark brown enclosing black seeds.



The pollinators must have been very effective when the Pink Euodias flowered

When the weather was kinder, insects were active. Dragonflies zipping through the garden included the Graphic Flutterer and Yellow-striped Flutterer, grasshopper nymphs attacked grasses and Lomandras, Green Lacewings sat quietly waiting for evening, butterflies lolloped through the forests and gardens, lots of cicadas still called, including the Bottle Cicadas. They do not call during the daytime, so it was only at dusk that they were noticed, but with the din they create, they could not be ignored. Most numerous of the butterflies were Blue Triangle, Orchard Swallowtail, Lemon Migrant, Black Jezebel, Brown Ringlet, and Swamp Tiger.



A very attractive Grasshopper nymph and its mates chewed away on Lomandra in the garden



Several Yellow-striped Flutterers were sighted during the month

For the first time this summer at the sanctuary, Brush Cuckoos were heard calling back and forth to each other, and the Cicadabird was present again. They will both be due to leave us soon for the winter. Small birds were active in most areas. We have been missing the fairy-wrens and finches lately. Their usual haunts have perhaps been too dry for them but bush birds were still to be found – Eastern Yellow Robins, Brown and Mangrove Gerygones, Brown Thornbills, Mistletoebirds, Silvereyes, Spectacled Monarchs, Grey and Rufous Fantails, Rainbow Bee-eaters, White-browed and Large-billed Scrubwrens, as well as Brown, Scarlet, and White-throated Honeyeaters. At the transition between the rainforest and Melaleuca Forest, a group of Golden Whistlers were chasing through the mid-canopy. It was like activity which occurs in breeding season. There was just one female and four or five males. It appeared that one male claimed the female as his mate and continually endeavoured to keep all other males at bay. Since they do not form life-long relationships but just pair for the breeding season, it was difficult behaviour to understand. The female perched unmoving, but the male kept proudly calling whenever he was not chasing the others away. It went on for more than ten minutes, and probably longer.



The female Golden Whistler ignored all the fuss going on around her.



Not a great photo – he wouldn't sit still. This is the male who wanted to rule the roost

In January, when the highest tide should have occurred, the water was much, much lower than expected. In February, with the long-distance effects of Cyclone Oma, the high tides were considerably higher than normal. The inflow was so strong that small plants quivered and bent to the water's will. In the quieter backwaters, it was interesting to watch the fish just cruising around as usual – many small schools of mullet, some whiting, small bream, and many bait fish. One female ground spider, with an eggsac on her back, launched from a small shrub near the ballroom, frenetically flailing all eight legs to reach the safety of a pole before becoming lunch for a hungry fish. She made it to safety, not having broken the surface tension of the water even in her panic.

Near the ballroom, birds were still active, some trying to feed and some singing. The Mangrove Gerygones warbled, the Striated Heron flew and called, the male Shining Flycatcher was singing, and a Sacred Kingfisher had caught a snack which he thwacked on a branch before swallowing it whole. White-throated Needletails were not noted earlier in the summer but circled around for fifteen minutes or more.



Sacred Kingfisher. After eating, time to check out the visitor