



Bird Watching

in the Gulf Savannah



Gulf Savannah
Tropical North Queensland
Adventurous by nature

Tips and Hot Spots

savannahway.com.au



Australia's Adventure Drive

Bird Watching Tips



White-bellied Sea Eagle

Birding the Savannah Way across northern Queensland provides wonderful opportunities to see species not easily found elsewhere and spectacular birding sights as well. Flocks of parrots, cranes and water birds fill not only the view but one's imagination. Time spent bird watching will give you new insights into the landscape and encourage you to explore special spots you may otherwise have passed by.

This booklet is to assist those new to bird watching or new to the area to increase the pleasure they take from our feathered friends. The information included here covers a variety of habitats and their birds. Over 300 birds are listed here, as this area not only encompasses a variety of habitats, it represents the northern, eastern and western limits for some species.

All you need to get started is a pair of binoculars and a bird field guide!

Selecting binoculars

You may be able to ask birdwatchers and friends if you can look through their binoculars to try out a few before going to a store to make your selection. Try 8x40 binoculars (the first number is the magnification and the second is the diameter of the objective lens). Fixed focus and magnifications above 10x are not recommended. Whatever you choose they should feel good in your hands.

Using binoculars

Set binoculars to your eyes by first moving the two barrels in and out until both eyes see as close to a single disk of view as possible - those peanut shapes are just for the movies! Closing your right eye, focus with the main adjustment so the view is clear. Then with just the right eye adjust the dioptre, usually on the right eye piece, until that too is clear. Check both eyes see well. You should not need to change the dioptre adjustment again but use only the central wheel.

Keep your eyes on the target as you bring the binoculars to your eyes. If you are having trouble pointing the

Bird Watching Tips

binoculars at the target, try practising with just your hands. Keep your eyes on the target as you raise and lower 'pretend binoculars' to your eyes and look through your hands. Then practise with the binoculars.



Bird Field Guides

Browse bookshops and online for your preferred book, ebook or app. Popular choices include:

Simpson and Day: Field Guide to the Birds of Australia

Michael Morcombe: Field Guide to Australian Birds

Graham Pizzey: A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia

Slater: The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds

Jo Wieneke & Ian Montgomery: Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland

Don't forget to look through the information pages of your field guide for interesting background details on bird families, nests and bird watching tips.

Identifying an unknown bird

When confronted with a bird you do not recognise think to yourself:

Where are you?

(What part of the country and in what sort of habitat?)

How does the bird go about its activity?

(If just sitting, how does it sit?)

What does it most look like?

(Do you know a similar bird or one of similar size?)

Only lastly what colour patterns does it have? (Develop a technique to examine the bird systematically, bill, forehead, eye ..., use a note book and make an annotated drawing.) If it is still there and you have a camera, take a number of pictures showing the bird from various angles.

Raptors give people particular difficulty and many species are to be seen along the Savannah Way. The general shape, length and shape of tail, presence of 'fingers' in the wings, and behaviour help with identification. Be careful about wing shape as this can change between soaring on an updraft and gliding flight where the bird is losing altitude. Are the wings held flat, bowed or swept up? A raptor flying high with upswept wings is likely to be an eagle but if it is low over the trees check for Square-tailed Kite or if just over the grass it might be a harrier. If the bird is sitting, how long is the tail compared to the wings? How tall does the bird stand and are the legs feathered or bare?

The Comb-crested Jacana is also known as the Lotusbird, Lilytrotter or Jesus Bird ("walking on water"). The male incubates four eggs on a nest on lotus lilies or other vegetation. The leaves of the lotus lily have an uneven surface and repel water.



Comb-crested Jacanas

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Further information: info@savannahway.com.au

Cover images - TOP: Brolga, LEFT TO RIGHT: Lemon-bellied Flycatcher, Double-barred Finch, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Apostlebird



Australia's Adventure Drive

Bird Watching Hot Spots

Mareeba Wetlands is home to Pygmy Geese, Ducks, Grebes, Brolga and many more species.

Mount Hypipamee National Park is a special upland habitat featuring the Golden Bower Bird, Fernwren and Mountain Thornbill. Ask at Tablelands Visitor Information Centres for more tips on Bird watching in this region of diverse and rewarding bird watching.

Towns such as **Georgetown** often have green gardens and standing water, so they can be good places to start bird watching. The racecourse in Georgetown hosts many bird species. Call at local information centres to find the latest information and to share what you have seen.

Undara is rightly famous for its wildlife as well as the lava tubes. Explore different habitats on bushwalks and enjoy the chortling Magpies around the resort and daring Kookaburras at breakfast. www.undara.com.au

Ask birdo's Pam and Pete at **Mount Surprise Gems** about bird sightings at current water and food sources. www.thegemden.com.au

Cumberland Chimney's Dam, 20km west of Georgetown, is a wonderful spot to see Grebes, Comb Crested Jacana and many other species, particularly at dawn and dusk.

Flat Creek Station offers bird watching tours and breeds Gouldian Finches. Camp or Station Stay and visit the dam and other habitats to see Black-throated Finch, Green Pygmy-Goose, Cotton Pygmy-Goose and the Pink-eared Duck. www.flatcreekstation.com.au

Cobbold Gorge provides a close up of Darters drying their wings and a rich variety of species around the dam and gorge. www.cobboldgorge.com.au

Gilberton has a range of habitats and over 100 birds on its bird list.

The bird hide at **Lake Belmore**, only 4 km from the town of **Croydon**, and the town historical walk have many interesting birds.

Between **Normanton** and **Karumba** the road is a birding hot spot. The grassed plains and pans are interrupted by shrubs and trees where the soil is deeper. Look for Zitting Cisticola on the plains.

The mangroves of the **Norman River** and the Gulf contain the specialists of that habitat like the Great Billed Heron, Arafura Fantail, Red-headed Honeyeater and Yellow White-eye. Waders roost there on high tides. Mangroves can be accessed from the shore but the expert **Ferryman Cruise at Karumba** can get you into them safely. www.ferryman.net.au

Burketown is situated near the mangroves and salt pans but also has access to streams and grassy plains. A bore drain just west of the town has created a small wetland which draws interesting birds.

Boodjamulla National Park (Lawn Hill Gorge) is home to the wonderful Purple-crowned Fairywren and Sandstone Shrike-thrush. Look for the Fairywren in pandanus thickets along the streams and the Shrike-thrush on the cliffs and gorges. Look for Black Bittern in the reed beds. **Adel's Grove** can provide up to date information. www.adelsgrove.com.au

For those lucky enough to visit one of the gulf islands or fish offshore the suite of seabirds increases again. www.sweers.com.au



White Faced Heron



Red-tailed Black Cockatoo



Australian Bustard



Cattle Egret (breeding)



Tawny Frogmouth



Great Bowerbird



Galah



Whistling Kite

Habitats and Habits

Most birds like to drink in the morning or evening so dawn and dusk are great times to set up by a **billabong or creek**. Finches, doves and other seed eaters must drink regularly so are best found at water. No fewer than 13 species plus 10 subspecies of seedeaters are restricted to Australia's savannahs.

Many **wetlands** dry out annually which drives seasonal change for the birds and other wildlife. When full, they are extremely productive. The dropping water levels grant access to another suite of birds which can feed in the mud and shallow water. Many seeds and animals are eaten but some will survive to repopulate the wetland next year. The eggs of some species are so small they can be blown in the wind. Crabs, yabbies and frogs burrow in the soft mud where some encase themselves in a protective layer until the wet. The rich organic layer



Little Egret



Brown Quail



Emu

Egrets and other heron species use four main hunting techniques – standing and waiting; slow stalk, active pursuit and hovering and plunging. The Little Egret will shade water with its wing to reduce glare and show its yellow sole to attract small fish into the shade.

Emus can reach 70kmh and cruise at 45kmh and cover great distances looking for food and rain. Males incubate the dark green eggs for 56 days uninterrupted and raise the young for around 18 months.

formed from the deaths of last year fuels the population explosion of this one. When approaching a wetland, stop before you break the tree line as there may well be birds close to you which if alarmed can scare off others farther out. Give these birds time to move off before stepping out slowly from cover.

When bird watching in **forests** it is often easiest to view the canopy from outside the forest or along roads but don't forget to check out the ground layer for secretive species like stone-curlew and quail.

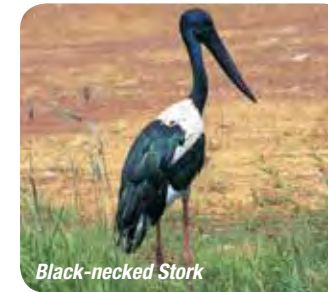
Mangroves provide a wealth of birding opportunities but take care as crocodiles also live here. A boat trip to the mangroves is a wonderful way to view some special birds. At some locations there are sand dunes behind the mangroves which allow close approach.

Bird List

This bird list is arranged in taxonomic order, similar to your field guide. It does not include all rare and vagrant birds sighted along the Queensland section of the Savannah Way.

Emu
Australian Brush-turkey
Orange-footed Scrubfowl
Brown Quail
Magpie Goose
Plumed Whistling-Duck
Wandering Whistling-Duck
Black Swan
Radjah Shelduck
Australian Wood Duck
Pink-eared Duck
Cotton Pygmy-goose
Green Pygmy-goose
Grey Teal
Pacific Black Duck
Hardhead
Australasian Grebe
Rock Dove
Emerald Dove
Common Bronzewing
Flock Bronzewing
Crested Pigeon
Spinifex Pigeon
Squatter Pigeon
Diamond Dove
Peaceful Dove
Bar-shouldered Dove
Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove
Pied Imperial-Pigeon
Tawny Frogmouth
White-throated Nightjar
Spotted Nightjar
Large-tailed Nightjar
Australian Owlet-Nightjar
White-throated Needletail
Fork-tailed Swift

- Lesser Frigatebird
- Great Frigatebird
- Australasian Gannet
- Masked Booby
- Brown Booby
- Australasian Darter
- Little Pied Cormorant
- Great Cormorant
- Little Black Cormorant
- Pied Cormorant
- Australian Pelican
- Black-necked Stork



Black-necked Stork

- Australian Little Bittern
- Black Bittern
- White-necked Heron
- Eastern Great Egret
- Intermediate Egret
- Great-billed Heron
- Cattle Egret
- Striated Heron
- Pied Heron
- White-faced Heron
- Little Egret
- Eastern Reef Egret
- Nankeen Night-Heron
- Glossy Ibis
- Australian White Ibis

Straw-necked Ibis
Royal Spoonbill
Yellow-billed Spoonbill
Eastern Osprey
Black-shouldered Kite
Black-breasted Buzzard
Pacific Baza
White-bellied Sea-Eagle
Whistling Kite
Brahminy Kite
Black Kite
Brown Goshawk
Collared Sparrowhawk
Grey Goshawk
Spotted Harrier
Swamp Harrier
Red Goshawk
Wedge-tailed Eagle
Little Eagle
Nankeen Kestrel
Brown Falcon
Australian Hobby
Grey Falcon
Black Falcon
Peregrine Falcon
Sarus Crane
Brolga
Purple Swampphen
Buff-banded Rail
Spotted Crake
White-browed Crake
Pale-vented Bush-hen
Black-tailed Native-hen
Dusky Moorhen
Eurasian Coot
Australian Bustard



Brolgas at Gulf Savannah Waterhole

Bird List

Bush Stone-curlew



Beach Stone-curlew
Australian Pied Oystercatcher
Sooty Oystercatcher
Black-winged Stilt
Red-necked Avocet
Pacific Golden Plover
Grey Plover
Red-capped Plover
Lesser Sand Plover
Greater Sand Plover
Oriental Plover
Black-fronted Dotterel
Red-kneed Dotterel
Masked Lapwing
Comb-crested Jacana
Latham's Snipe
Swinhoe's Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Little Curlew
Whimbrel
Eastern Curlew
Terek Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Grey-tailed Tattler
Common Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Ruddy Turnstone
Asian Dowitcher
Great Knot

Red Knot
Sanderling
Red-necked Stint
Long-toed Stint
Pectoral Sandpiper
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
Broad-billed Sandpiper
Red-backed Button-quail
Buff-breasted Button-quail
Painted Button-quail
Red-chested Button-quail
Little Button-quail
Oriental Pratincole
Australian Pratincole
Common Noddy
Bridled Tern
Sooty Tern
Little Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Whiskered Tern
Roseate Tern
Black-naped Tern
Common Tern
Lesser Crested Tern
Crested Tern
Silver Gull
Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo
Galah
Little Corella
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Cockatiel
Rainbow Lorikeet
Scaly-breasted Lorikeet
Varied Lorikeet
Red-winged Parrot
Pale-headed Rosella
Northern Rosella

Australian Ringneck
Budgerigar
Pheasant Coucal
Eastern Koel
Channel-billed Cuckoo
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo
Black-eared Cuckoo
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo
Little Bronze-Cuckoo
Pallid Cuckoo
Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo
Fan-tailed Cuckoo
Brush Cuckoo
Oriental Cuckoo
Barking Owl
Southern Boobook
Eastern Barn Owl
Azure Kingfisher
Laughing Kookaburra
Blue-winged Kookaburra
Forest Kingfisher
Red-backed Kingfisher
Sacred Kingfisher
Collared Kingfisher
Rainbow Bee-eater



Dollarbird
Brown Treecreeper
Black-tailed Treecreeper
Great Bowerbird
Purple-crowned Fairy-wren

Bird List

Red-backed Fairy-wren
Variegated Fairy-wren
Carpentarian Grasswren
Weebill
Mangrove Gerygone
Western Gerygone
White-throated Gerygone
Yellow-rumped Thornbill
Red-browed Pardalote
Striated Pardalote
Pied Honeyeater
Lewin's Honeyeater
Singing Honeyeater
White-gaped Honeyeater
Yellow Honeyeater
Grey-headed Honeyeater
Grey-fronted Honeyeater
Yellow-fronted Honeyeater
White-plumed Honeyeater
Noisy Miner
Yellow-throated Miner
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater
Bar-breasted Honeyeater
Rufous-banded Honeyeater
Rufous-throated Honeyeater
Crimson Chat
Black Honeyeater
Red-headed Honeyeater
Scarlet Honeyeater
Banded Honeyeater
Brown Honeyeater
Black-chinned Honeyeater
White-throated Honeyeater
Blue-faced Honeyeater
Silver-crowned Friarbird
Noisy Friarbird
Little Friarbird
Painted Honeyeater
Grey-crowned Babbler

Varied Sittella
Ground Cuckoo-shrike
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike
White-winged Triller
Varied Triller
Mangrove Golden Whistler
Rufous Whistler
White-breasted Whistler
Little Shrike-thrush
Sandstone Shrike-thrush
Grey Shrike-thrush
Australasian Figbird
Yellow Oriole
Olive-backed Oriole
White-breasted Woodswallow
Masked Woodswallow
White-browed Woodswallow
Black-faced Woodswallow
Little Woodswallow
Grey Butcherbird
Pied Butcherbird
Australian Magpie
Pied Currawong
Spangled Drongo
Rufous Fantail
Arafura Fantail
Grey Fantail
Mangrove Grey Fantail
Northern Fantail
Willie Wagtail
Australian Raven
Torresian Crow
Broad-billed Flycatcher
Leaden Flycatcher
Restless Flycatcher
Magpie-lark
Apostlebird
Jacky Winter

Lemon-bellied Flycatcher
Hooded Robin
Mangrove Robin
Buff-sided Robin
Horsfield's Bushlark
Zitting Cisticola
Golden-headed Cisticola
Australian Reed-Warbler
Tawny Grassbird
Little Grassbird
Rufous Songlark
Brown Songlark
Yellow White-eye Silvereye
Welcome Swallow
Fairy Martin
Tree Martin
Mistletoebird
Zebra Finch



Double-barred Finch
Long-tailed Finch
Black-throated Finch
Masked Finch
Crimson Finch
Star Finch
Red-browed Finch
Gouldian Finch
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin
Pictorella
Mannikin
House Sparrow
Australasian Pipit

Some cranes spend the whole year in the gulf country but in the wet season **Sarus Cranes** and **Brolga** breed in their thousands in the wetlands between Normanton and Karumba. During the dry they can be found in small numbers. In the evening you may be lucky enough to see them dance which reinforces their pair bond.

Remember – **Brolga** have a **black beard** and **Sarus** a **scarlet neck** and **crise shanks**. Please report crane sightings at <http://birdlifenq.org/crane/clipbbs/clipbbs.cgi>

The **Sandstone Shrike-thrush** is neither a shrike nor a thrush but has one of the most beautiful, flute-like calls of the bird world. It is to be found only in rough sandstone country and nearly always on the ground. It will fly across gullies.

The **White-breasted Whistler** and **Mangrove Golden Whistler** are found in the mangroves along with **Arafura Fantail**, **Mangrove Robin** and **Yellow White-eye**. One shy skulker of the mangroves is the **Great-billed Heron**. In the swampy grasslands, look for **Zitting Cisticola**.



Gouldian Finch

The beautiful finches of the Gulf Savannah tell a story of its history. The Gulf divides populations of **Masked Finch** and **Crimson Finch**, with subspecies on the east coast of the gulf having more white than their western relatives. **Long-tailed Finches** have not established east of this old divide. The **Gouldian Finch** has suffered from an introduced air sac mite and, like the other hollow nesting species changed fire regimes have meant fewer breeding trees. The southern race of the **Black-throated Finch** is endangered by this process. Changed fire regimes have also had an impact on seed eaters. There has always been little seed in the early wet but now that many people burn in the late dry, this period of scarceness is longer and can be critical to survival.

Red-headed Honeyeaters are a bird of the northern mangroves and just make it into this region. While they utilise a variety of habitats they are best found in the mangroves of Karumba. The scarlet head and rump of the males catches the eye as these active little birds feed on insects and nectar.



Double-barred Finch

In the wild colouration of Gouldian Finches varies. About 70-80% are black crowned, 20-30% red crowned and a few ochre-yellow.



Black-throated Finch

Cranes and **waders** spend the summer in the gulf country in large numbers but for each there is a different reason. Cranes come to breed but for most of the waders on the shores and wetlands it is time to avoid the harsh northern winter and gain weight before the long flight back to northern Asia where they breed. Some of these birds are very small and have to stop two or three times on their way home.



Flock of Budgerigars

Nomads of the arid parts of Australia like the **Budgerigar** often turn up in places like the Gulf Savannahs when there are droughts in their normal range or after particularly good breeding years when birds are dispersing.

Migrating birds often fly more than 500 kilometres in one go but Bar-tailed Godwits can fly from Alaska to New Zealand, 11 000 km! Some birds overshoot their wintering grounds in Asia and storms can blow birds a long way off course. Please report unusual sightings as per the contacts list."

EVENTS

Atherton Tablelands Crane Count on the first Saturday of September and visitors are welcome to participate. Contact <http://birdlifenq.org>.

Tablelands Crane Week activities are centred on Malanda in the September school holidays www.craneweek.org

Flat Creek Station Gouldian Finch Count late September www.flatcreekstation.com.au

HANDY RESOURCES

The Savannah Way www.savannahway.com.au

BirdLife Northern Queensland <http://birdlifenq.org>

Savannah Guides www.savannah-guides.com.au

CONTACTS FOR SIGHTINGS

Crane and Brolga sightings <http://birdlifenq.org/crane/clipbbs/clipbbs.cgi>

Unusual Bird sightings <http://ebird.org/content/australia/>
Gouldian Finch sightings Del Richards 4094 1199

BIRD WATCHING TOURS

Flat Creek Station www.flatcreekstation.com.au

The Ferryman www.ferryman.net.au

Alan's Wildlife Tours www.alanswildlifetours.com.au

Birdwatching Tropical Australia www.birdwatchingtropicalaustralia.com.au

Bird Guides <http://birdingtnq.com.au/>



Hardheads

The Gulf Savannah is a great place to go bird watching!

There are spectacular species, breeding groups of thousands, seasonal changes to follow and plenty of different bird habitats to explore.

Grab a pair of binoculars and a Field Guide and get a deeper insight into the fascinating landscapes of the Gulf Savannah.

Wedge-tailed Eagles are the largest eagles in Australia with a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres, and can live for 40 years. They are often slow to fly from roadkill so approach carefully and sound your horn.

Wedge-tailed Eagle



Forest Kingfisher



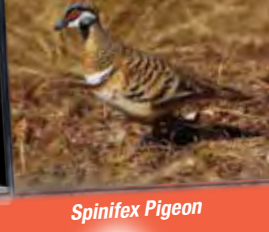
Pacific Black Duck



Blue-winged Kookaburra



Tawny Frogmouth chick



Spinifex Pigeon

For more information on places to visit and things to do in the Gulf Savannah, see:
www.savannahway.com.au



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