



A [Tropical Birding](#) CUSTOM tour

## AUSTRALIA'S TOP END: Photo Tour

14<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016



The amazing **Gouldian Finch** is one of the Top End's most highly prized birds (Laurie Ross)

**Tour Leaders: Laurie Ross, Lisle Gwynn, and Iain Campbell**

### INTRODUCTION

*This customized tour was put together for people who were interested finding, and photographing some of the specialty birds of **Australia's Top End, the northern section of the Northern Territory**. This weeklong tour started and ended in the northern city of **Darwin**, a great birding and photo locale in its own right. After photographing one of the Top End's star birds – **Rainbow Pitta** – we headed south, making stops at **Victoria River** to photograph the beautiful **Purple-crowned Fairywren**; and spending time around **Timber Creek** and*

*Top Springs* that allowed us to photograph some of the rarest species in the Top End, the Technicolor **Gouldian Finch**, and hard to find **Gray Falcon**, among others. Some of our last birding, before returning to **Darwin**, following a stop at **Pine Creek** to admire and shoot their stunning **Hooded Parrots**, was within world famous **Kakadu National Park**. The famous **Yellow Water Cruise** in Kakadu was undertaken both in the afternoon and morning, allowing us to photograph an array of waterbirds, like **Azure Kingfisher**, **Pied Heron** and **Comb-crested Jacanas**, in addition to some enormous bathing **Saltwater Crocodiles**. The tour ended back in **Darwin**, from where the group moved on to Eastern Australia for another photo tour following this one...



The odd **Comb-crested Jacana** was photographed in Kakadu National Park (Laurie Ross)

## TOUR SUMMARY

DAY ONE (14<sup>th</sup> August): **DARWIN**

After afternoon introductions following arrival, we jumped right into the business of photographing some birds; at 4pm we set off to one of the hot spots in **Darwin: East Point**. Arriving at East Point we soon picked up **ORANGE-FOOTED SCRUB-FOWL**, **STRAW-NECKED** and **AUSTRALIAN WHITE IBISES**, **MASKED LAPWING**, **BAR-SHOULDERED DOVE**, **PEACEFUL DOVE**, **LEMON-BELLIED FLYCATCHER**, **RED-COLLARED LORIKEET**, **SHINNING FLYCATCHER**, **SACRED KINGFISHER** and a very raucous **LITTLE FRIARBIRD** within the first ten minutes. We then checked out the **Monsoon Forest walk**, and soon picked up **SPANGLED DRONGO**, **GRAY WHISTLER**, **GREEN-BACKED GERYGONE** and both **ARAFURA** and

**NORTHERN FANTAILS.** Our main target though, was **RAINBOW PITTA** that wasn't playing ball, giving only a distant glimpse. We drove out to the rocks at the end of the point to photograph Darwin's famous sunset and had a few bonus birds while we were there like **TORRESIAN KINGFISHER, RAINBOW BEE-EATER, PACIFIC REEF EGRET, GREAT CRESTED TERN** and **SILVER GULL.** After an amazing sunset we dropped off the cameras and headed to My Friends Kitchen Vietnamese Restaurant for dinner, and rounded off a successful afternoon with a delicious dinner.



Darwin proved again to be the most reliable place to see the impressive **Rufous Owl** (Laurie Ross)

#### DAY TWO (15<sup>th</sup> August): **DARWIN to VICTORIA RIVER**

A nice easy morning was on the cards, as we decided to head back out to **East Point** to try and get better views/photos of the **RAINBOW PITTA**; the single glimpse the afternoon before just wasn't good enough. We parked the car and were greeted by huge numbers of **AGILE WALLABIES**, which scattered into the forest as soon as they spotted us. Crossing the grassy area we headed into the monsoon forest, and followed the trail and picked up some of the species we had seen the previous day, like **ORANGE-FOOTED SCRUB-FOWL, SPANGLED DRONGO, GRAY WHISTLER, SPANGLED DRONGO, GREEN-BACKED and LARGE-BILLED GERYGONES, and ARAFURA & NORTHERN FANTAILS.** Coming back out into the open on the edge of the forest we had a rush of birds including **WHITE-GAPED, WHITE-THROATED, RUFIOUS BANDED and BROWN HONEYEATERS, RED-HEADED and DUSKY MYZOMELAS, PIED IMPERIAL-PIGEON, AUSTRALASIAN FIGBIRD, RED-WINGED PARROTS, VARIED and WHITE-WINGED TRILLERS, and FOREST KINGFISHER.** Heading back into the monsoon forest we quickly got onto a **RAINBOW PITTA** that was happy to pose for a couple of photos, and even had a bonus **RAINBOW PITTA** in the open at the end of the trail too. After a very successful early morning it was now time to head back into **Darwin** for breakfast, but we made a couple of pit stops to photograph some local roosting nightbirds: **TAWNY FROGMOUTHS** and a big target for the trip, **RUFIOUS OWL** which was perched perfectly for photos. By that time, everyone was

rightly hungry, so we headed to one of Darwin's best cafes Alley Cats where we enjoyed an amazing big breakfast and delicious coffee, perfect fuel for our upcoming big drive to **Victoria River**. The trip to Victoria River got us **BLACK KITE, WHISTLING KITE, BROWN GOSHAWK, CATTLE EGRET, INTERMEDIATE EGRET and PACIFIC HERON**. A quick stop at **Pine Creek** produced **BLUE-FACED HONEYEATER, HOODED PARROTS** and a very curious **GREAT BOWERBIRD**. As it was the middle of the day, we didn't get photos. However, as we were coming back to stay in the area at the end of the tour, we continued on. Reaching our destination, we dropped our bags and went in search of our main target in the area, the stunning **PURPLE-CROWNED FAIRY-WREN**. These tiny little birds can sometimes be difficult but after a bit of searching we had great views of a male. Other birds seen during the search were **LITTLE CORELLAS, GALAHS, SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOOS and NANKEEN KESTREL**. Dinner at the roadhouse was great, and after a well-deserved beer, we headed back to the rooms for an early night.



This **Rainbow Pitta** was photographed in Darwin (Iain Campbell)

#### DAY THREE (16<sup>th</sup> August): **VICTORIA RIVER to TIMBER CREEK**

We packed up early, and headed west towards **Timber Creek** and a remnant waterhole that can be fantastic for photography. Reaching the area around 6.30am, we patiently waited for the rush of *finches*. While waiting we were entertained by other avian locals, like **WILLIE WAGTAIL, PAPERBARK FLYCATCHER, LITTLE and SILVER-CROWNED FRIARBIRDS, BLACK-FACED WOOD SWALLOW, WHITE-THROATED and WHITE-GAPED HONEYEATERS, JACKY WINTER, COCKATIEL, and VARIED LORIKEET**. In no time, we had our first groups of finches arrive, and we had positioned ourselves perfectly, **MASKED, LONG-TAILED,**

**CRIMSON and DOUBLE-BARRED FINCHES** were first, followed later by large groups of **PICTORELLA MANNIKINS**. Finally, our main target arrived, the famous **GOULDIAN FINCH**, a large group of which contained a healthy mix of juveniles and both black and red-faced adults. The mass of activity was interrupted a couple of times by a **BROWN FALCON** and **AUSTRALIAN HOBBY** who were on the hunt for breakfast. After an amazing morning, we decided to head off to breakfast at *Timber Creek*, and we couldn't check into our accommodation yet, so we went out in search of more birds too. We headed up to a lookout behind town, where we picked up **STRIATED PARDALOTE, WEEBILL, BLACK-TAILED TREECREEPER, SPOTTED HARRIER and a BROWN FALCON**. We arrived back for lunch, and then headed out again to see what we could find around the back of the roadhouse, where a river and a patch of monsoon forest are located. To our surprise, there was a massive **FRESHWATER CROCODILE** that was sunning itself on the back lawn. Above our heads we had a massive colony of **BLACK and RED-HEADED FLYING FOXES**, and just over the river we found a pair of the usually difficult to see **BUFF-SIDED ROBINS**. For the middle of the day, this was amazing! After finally checking in, we decided to relax and meet a couple of hours later, but this was quickly interrupted when one of the guests spotted a **BARN OWL** sleeping in the open, within a tree at the front of the roadhouse. The afternoon was spent at another local waterhole, where it was a bit quiet, but we still managed to see **MASKED and LONG-TAILED FINCHES, CRESTED PIGEON, BAR-SHOULDERED DOVE, LITTLE CORELLA** and a pair of **RED-BROWED PARDALOTE**.



**Buff-sided Robin** is a scarce and local specialty that was found nesting in Timber Creek (Laurie Ross)

DAY FOUR (17<sup>th</sup> August): **TIMBER CREEK to TOP SPRINGS**

Our first spot for the morning was the long grass surrounding the *Timber Creek airfield*, where our main bird target for the morning was the very elusive **YELLOW-RUMPED MANNIKIN**. Arriving at the car park, we quickly had an **AUSTRALIAN BUSTARD** take flight, and it didn't take long to find a small group of finches feeding in the grass, which included **CHESTNUT-BREASTED MANNIKIN**, and **ZEBRA, MASKED and LONG-TAILED FINCHES**. Then our main target dropped in, **YELLOW-RUMPED MANNIKIN**, which brought our total finch count to *nine*!



**Zebra Finch** headed up a long list of finches found around Timber Creek (Iain Campbell)

We also had **GOLDEN-HEADED CISTICOLA, RED-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO**, and **BLACK-FACED and WHITE-BREASTED WOODSWALLOWS** flying high above us. After the airfield, we visited another area where we picked up a family of **RED-BACKED FAIRY-WRENS** and **BROWN GOSHAWK**. With a big drive ahead of us, we headed back to *Timber Creek* for breakfast, and then back in the car to a new area called *Top Springs*. The drive was done in the middle of the day, so as not to miss too much, but we still managed a few **WEDGE-TAILED EAGLES, BLACK-BREASTED BUZZARDS** and **BLACK and WHISTLING KITES** on the journey. A stop at a farm dam (a regular stop for birders in this area) along the way, produced **BROWN GOSHAWK, BROWN FALCON, PLUMED and WANDERING WHISTLING DUCKS, BROLGA, INTERMEDIATE & GREAT EGRETS, PACIFIC HERON, MAGPIE GOOSE, RADJAH SHELDUCK, AUSTRALASIAN GREBE,**

**AUSTRALASIAN DARTER, LITTLE-PIED and LITTLE BLACK CORMORANTS, AUSTRALIAN PELICAN, RAINBOW BEE-EATER, BLACK-FACED and WHITE-BELLIED CUCKOO-SHRIKES, RUFOUS WHISTLER** and we also heard **WHITE-THROATED GERYGONE**. Arriving at our roadhouse in *Top Springs*, we checked into our accommodation but soon got right back into the car to head out in search of a couple of special local birds. First stop was a little creek crossing where we found, **CHESTNUT-BREASTED MANNIKIN, DOUBLE-BARRED, ZEBRA and CRIMSON FINCHES, BROWN and WHITE-GAPED HONEYEATERS, VARIED LORIKEET and BROWN QUAIL**. Second stop, was a *pandanus*-lined creek where we found a pair of very photogenic **PURPLE-CROWNED FAIRY-WRENS**, which are usually very hard to photograph so when they started prancing around only a few yards away from our cameras, it was very exciting indeed. We carried on further down the road, towards a spot for the extremely rare **GRAY FALCON**, and along the way spotted a beautiful **BLACK-HEADED PYTHON** crossing the road. We also had a great views of **AUSTRALIAN BUSTARD** and **AUSTRALIAN PRATINCOLE**. Arriving 30 minutes before the sunset we were treated to a male **GRAY FALCON** cruising in and landing on his nighttime perch, a great way to finish an already awesome day.



The beautiful **Purple-crowned Fairywren** is a Top End specialty that performed well (Iain Campbell)



We were lucky to photograph one of Australia's most difficult birds, **Gray Falcon** near Top Springs  
(Laurie Ross)

DAY FIVE (18<sup>th</sup> August): **TOP SPRINGS to PINE CREEK**

We decided to return to the little creek crossing again, which was only a short drive from the roadhouse. The area had plenty of birdlife again, including **CHESTNUT-BREASTED MANNIKIN, DOUBLE-BARRED, ZEBRA and CRIMSON FINCHES, BROWN and WHITE-GAPED HONEYEATERS, VARIED LORIKEET, BROWN QUAIL, PAPERBARK FLYCATCHER, AZURE KINGFISHER and BLACK BITTERN** that flushed as we arrived. Other highlights included a group of **RED-WINGED PARROTS** that were feeding at eye-level, and a pair of nesting **BLACK-CHINNED HONEYEATERS**. We headed back to the roadhouse for breakfast before packing up, and leaving for our next destination, **Pine Creek**. The long drive took about four hours, which we undertook in the middle of the day, timing it perfectly for an afternoon photography session at **Pine Creek**. Our accommodation in **Pine Creek** was really nice and we had an hour or so to check emails before heading off in search of our main target, the striking endemic **HOODED PARROT**. We found a flowering tree where we had **BANDED and BROWN HONEYEATERS, RED-COLLARED LORIKEETS**, and a male **LEADEN FLYCATCHER**. After this brief stop, we did a loop around the town looking for the *parrots*. Not having much luck at the usual spots, we decided to head back to the hotel, where we noticed a dripping sprinkler, which can act as a magnet for birds in these super dry conditions. So, we set up near the sprinkler and waited patiently. While waiting we had **GRAY-CROWNED BABBLERS** and **BLUE-FACED HONEYEATERS** feeding



around us, and then, finally, patience paid off, when we had 50+ **HOODED PARROTS** in the area too. Some of the parrot horde also dropped down beside us providing great photo opps.



**Hooded Parrot** has a tiny range, and is best found around the tiny town of *Pine Creek*. Sprinklers in this arid town brought this gorgeous male in close to us (Iain Campbell)

DAY SIX (19<sup>th</sup> August): **PINE CREEK to KAKADU NATIONAL PARK**

After photographing the **HOODED PARROTS** the previous afternoon, we decided to head south to an area where **GOULDIAN FINCHES** sometimes come down to drink. We arrived at our first water hole and waited impatiently, but found it to be rather inactive, and so quickly moved on to another nearby waterhole. As soon as we arrived, we could hear *finches* flying all over the place, and this move definitely paid off; we had **COCKATIEL, LONG-TAILED, MASKED, DOUBLE-BARRED, and CRIMSON FINCHES**, and our premier target, **GOULDIAN FINCH**, all coming down to drink for both amazing views and photos. Other birds in the area included **LITTLE-BRONZE CUCKOO, GALAH, BROAD-BILLED FLYCATCHER** and **WHITE-WINGED TRILLER**. We headed back to our accommodation in Pine Creek and enjoyed a delicious breakfast and the first good coffee in four days! After breakfast, we packed the car and headed northeast to our next stop: **Cooinda Lodge in Kakadu National Park**. A quick stop at a picnic area got us **SILVER-BACKED BUTCHERBIRD**, and a lunch stop at **Mary River Roadhouse** got us a nice **NORTHERN ROSELLA** flying over.

We also visited a fantastic **GREAT BOWERBIRD** bower, which was positioned right out in the open. Arriving at the famous **Cooinda Lodge in Kakadu**, we had great views of **PHEASANT COUCAL** around the car park, and **BLUE-FACED HONEYEATER** and **GREAT BOWERBIRD**. That afternoon we had our first **Yellow Waters Boat Cruise** that is one of Australia's best wildlife boat cruises, and can be fantastic for photos, and also to see the famous **SALTWATER CROCODILES**. This two-hour cruise added some great birds, like **MAGPIE GOOSE, CATTLE, LITTLE, INTERMEDIATE and GREAT EGRETS, PIED HERON, NANKEEN NIGHT-HERON, PLUMED and WANDERING WHISTLING DUCKS, and WHISTLING and BLACK KITES**; we also had a few very impressive **WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLES, STRAW-NECKED, AUSTRALIAN WHITE & GLOSSY IBISES, BLACK-NECKED STORK, RADJAH SHELDUCK, GREEN PYGMY-GOOSE, AUSTRALIAN DARTER, ROYAL SPOONBILL, BROLGA, MASKED LAPWING, WHISKERED TERN, RED-WINGED PARROT, AZURE KINGFISHER, RAINBOW BEE-EATER, COMB-CRESTED JACANA and SACRED KINGFISHER**. We also had great views of the local **SALTWATER CROCODILES** that inhabit the waterway, these crocodiles are the largest reptile in the world, and can reach 8.6m (28 Feet) in length.



Kakadu provided us with good opportunities to photograph *kingfishers*, like this **Sacred Kingfisher** (Iain Campbell)



The Yellow Waters Cruise in Kakadu was great for photographing an array of waterbirds, like this **Azure Kingfisher** (Laurie Ross)

DAY SEVEN (20<sup>th</sup> August): **KAKADU NATIONAL PARK**

We enjoyed our second **Yellow Waters Boat Cruise** during the morning, which is many people's favorite time to go, as the *kingfishers* are usually out hunting, and *crocodiles* often sunbathe in the open, on the banks. Neither of these disappointed, with fantastic views of three **AZURE KINGFISHERS** and some huge **SALTWATER CROCODILES** putting on a show for the photographers. We also had great views of **BROLGA** and **BLUE-WINGED KOOKABURRA** and a young family of **COMB-CRESTED JACANAS**. We headed back to the lodge and enjoyed breakfast with the local **GREAT BOWERBIRDS**, **BLUE-FACED HONEYEATERS** and a very bold **PIED HERON** before packing the car for the final time, and slowly making our way back to **Darwin** to catch a flight to our next destination; **Cairns**. We had a final stopover at the **Adelaide River Crossing** to pickup **BLACK-TAILED WHISTLER**, and after a bit of work had great views of both male and female. We also had views of a **MANGROVE GREY-FANTAIL**, which was a great way to finish off an amazing week.

**SEE THE NEXT PAGES FOR MORE PHOTOS FROM THE TOUR...**



Red-winged Parrots are “trash birds” in the Top End. This Barn Owl was found by participant Tony (Laurie Ross)





Red-headed and black-headed **Gouldian Finches** were both photographed (Iain Campbell)  
A **Golden-backed Honeyeater** poses near Top Springs (Laurie Ross)





The Top End is packed with interesting finches: **Picrorella Manakin** (above),  
and **Double-barred Finch** (below-both Iain Campbell)

