

# Why Australia? It’s for the Birds!



## Outdoors

By Bruce Ackerman

Susan Werner and I recently went on a bird-watching trip to Australia. It was great! But why Australia? First, because it is on my Bucket List to visit every continent. I have now been to six of the seven.

Second, Australia is very rich in unique kinds of birds and mammals. One of my goals was to see many kinds of birds that I had never seen before.

We were in Australia 18 days, from Aug. 24 to Sept. 11. We went on a guided birding trip for 15 days, with the Tropical Birding tour company. We especially liked that the company arranged all of the travel, lodging, and restaurant meals.

We stayed in nice hotels and ate at fun local restaurants. Our tour included three other bird-watchers from Nevada and Texas, and two from Australia.

Australia seems like about as far away as you can possibly go from Colorado. Tasmania is 8600 miles from Montrose, Colorado. It takes a long time to get there. We were glad to be able to stay a while once we got there.

It is an ancient continent geologically. Because it has been separated from other continents for more than 50 million years, the birds and mammals have evolved to be very different than in other parts of the world.

Because Australia is south of the Equator, the seasons are the opposite of ours, so it was Spring when we were there in August and September. It is a good time to find birds calling and displaying on their breeding grounds.

It is also a large continent, the same size as our lower 48 states. We intentionally went to three different parts, where we could see the most species of birds in a fairly short time during their spring. It was like going from Florida to Virginia to Maine in March.

Susan made all the arrangements, for which I am very grateful. That is not my strength. We drove from Montrose to Denver, then flew to Los Angeles to Melbourne, Australia, then to Cairns, all on Quanta Airlines. The leg from Los Angeles to Melbourne, 14



New Holland honeyeater. (Bruce Ackerman/Special to the MDP)

hours, was really long.

We started our tour in Cairns, in the northeast corner, in Queensland. Later we flew south to Brisbane on the east coast, and then to Hobart, far in the southeast, on the island of Tasmania.

From Cairns to Tasmania is farther than Miami, Florida to Maine, about 1800 miles, as the crow flies, and a similar sort of climate difference.

Cairns is in the northeast and is warm year-round like south Florida. It is a beautiful tropical city with many parks, lakes, gardens, flowering trees, and a long stretch of beach where we could see many kinds of shorebirds.

I was particularly interested that some of these shorebirds migrate from Australia north to Siberia or Alaska to breed in the northern summer. They fly back across the Pacific Ocean to winter in Australia.

These birds include the Far Eastern curlew, bar-tailed Godwit, grey-tailed tattler, rufous-necked Stint, and Terek sandpiper.

In Cairns we also saw hundreds of spectacled fruit bats, a very large fruit bat that flies in the evening from their favorite fruit trees to their nesting roosts in the city. We travelled around this area in northern Queensland for eight busy days.

We went to warm sunny beaches, rainforests, farmlands, mountains, and lakes. We took a boat ride along the Daintree River, through deep rainforest, and saw lots of water birds and one large saltwater crocodile.

One favorite bird here was the golden bowerbird, which builds a structure of sticks in the forest, then decorates it with pieces of lichens. If you move a piece of lichen out of position, and step away, he will fly back and move the lichen right back to its correct position.

We took a commercial boat trip out to the Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef in the world. We snorkeled on the reef and the colorful reef fish lived up to all we have heard about it. We also stopped at a small sandy island where seabirds nest.

Here the humans are required to stay within a small roped-off area. The undisturbed seabirds were just starting their breeding season, like brown noddies and bridled terns. They build their simple nests just in the sand. Heading back to port, we saw bottlenosed dolphins and two humpback whales breaching.

I was also very interested in the mammals we could



Superb fairy wren. (Bruce Ackerman/Special to the MDP)

see. While we were travelling around this area, we saw six species of kangaroos, from tiny to large.

At the Granite Gorge Wildlife Park, the Mareeba Rock-Wallabies would come right up to us. In Yungaburra, we saw duck-billed platypuses swimming in Peterson Creek. We were thrilled to see this strangest-of-all mammal.

From Brisbane, we drove into the hills and spent three nights at O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat, a well-known lodge by Lamington National Park. We walked on many trails through the rainforest.

This lodge has feeding stations for the birds. If you held up a bowl of bird seed, bright red king parrots and crimson rosella parrots would land on you to get some seed. Albert’s lyrebird was another of my favorite birds. It is large like a turkey and holds its tail feathers up over its head and does a loud display dance in the forest.

Even better for me was that we found this bird on our own without the guide. Another favorite bird, the superb fairy-wren lives up to its name, a tiny, bright blue sprite.

One of the features is the Tree Top Walk, a foot bridge that is 50 feet above the ground, allowing you to walk high through the forest. We had a lot of fun exploring this reserve in the Green Mountains.

Tasmania is an island at the very southeast end of Australia, and quite chilly, like Maine. We flew to Hobart, which is a busy port city, then took a ferry to the smaller Bruny Island. Because it is colder, we saw a whole different group of birds and mammals.

One of my favorites was the New Holland honeyeater, a very stripy bird. The honeyeaters are a large group of birds which specialize in eating nectar and flowers and are found only in Australia.

New Holland was one of the original names of Australia, from the 1600’s. We enjoyed seeing the southernmost lighthouse above huge rocky cliffs, tall forests, and sandy beaches.

We really enjoyed our birding trip to Australia. By the end of our trip, we had seen 260 species of birds and 23 kinds of mammals, the most unique being 15 species of parrots and 27 species of honeyeaters.

I would recommend the tropical birding company to any avid birders. They lead guided trips to many parts of the globe. I took 4000 photos and I am still going through them. I can’t wait to go on my next trip.

*Bruce Ackerman is a retired wildlife biologist. He is currently the president of the Black Canyon Audubon Society and teaches Environmental Science at CMU Montrose. He leads free bird-watching trips each month in the Montrose area for the Audubon Society. Bruce has been interested in bird migration for many years. He can be reached at BruceAckermanAud@aol.com.*

*The Black Canyon Audubon Society has monthly lectures about birds and nature and birding destinations near us. Often the trips are about birds that migrate through our area. Lectures are free and everyone is welcome to attend. (https://www.black-canyonaudubon.org/)*



Susan Werner feeding Australian king parrots at O’Reilly’s Rainforest Retreat. (Bruce Ackerman/Special to the MDP)

# Missing persons, a Halloween mystery



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Everybody loves a good mystery from time to time, unless of course, you are the center of the mystery. In that case, all bets are off.

I grew up watching the mystery series on television, hoping to solve the crime before Peter Falk as Detective Columbo, but since those mysteries were written by Hollywood, my success rate was in the gutter.

My wife has always loved the reality crime shows. Unsolved Mysteries, CSI, COPS, and a handful of others will keep her entertained for hours. Since I spent so many years as an investigator involved in the real-life version of mystery solving, my tolerance level for those shows is in the single digits. It is probably better if I watch Adam-12.

The tragic story of Gabby Petito kept everyone glued to the media as the case unwound. Conspiracy theories

swept everywhere, including a notion about cannibals in the National Parks.

The discovery of her body in Grand Teton National Park put the cannibal story to bed but opened many others. Just prior to the Petito case, a pair of newlyweds camping near Arches National Park went missing. They were later found, shot to death.

We look at National Parks as a place where we can go camping, fishing, hiking, and spend some time seeing the wild side of our nation. Who would have ever thought these same parks could be a place that death, particularly homicide, is disproportionately common, compared to lands outside of the park?

For our purposes here, homicide will include murder caused by another human or an animal.

In a 2019 statement, National Park Service spokesman Jeremy Barnum said there is an average of six deaths per week within the National Park System. That is approximately 312 deaths a year, or one death per million visitors.

There are more ways for people to board the last train west in the parks than you might ever imagine. The most common way people die is by drowning. Other common ways folks perish

include traffic accidents, falls, poisoning, and natural causes.

Recently, there has been an upswing in people killed by wild animal encounters, especially with bison. It seems bison have taken up where grizzly bears left off in “ignorant tourist removal.”

Some of the other means by which people paid the full price include boiled alive in hot springs. Several of those people either tried swimming, fell in accidentally, or were pushed. There was another person killed who was decapitated by an unlatched gate.

Yellowstone National Park is known for springs, geysers, mud pots and steam vents, with temperatures topping 205 degrees {span} Fahrenheit{span}. Hundreds of people have been burned, drown, or scalded to death in these geothermal features.

On top of the accidents, there are also the congenital idiots who visit the parks, and they are not limited to the selfie taking tourist wanting a close-up with a bison. Take the case of 37-year-old Aaron Merritt, from Maine, who pleaded guilty for making a mad dash across the thermal areas to Old Faithful in July of 2021 while wearing only a raccoon hat

and waving an American flag.

The judge thought so much of his stunt he fined him 200 bucks, gave him 15 days in jail, and banned him permanently from future visits to the park.

North Cascades National Park in Washington registered the highest death rate of all the parks. It is by far the deadliest park with 65.2 deaths for every million visitors, being 65 times higher than the park system average.

Aside from all the deaths with known causes, the park service has also reported hundreds of fatalities with unknown or undetermined causes, as well as missing persons whose bodies were never found.

What most people don’t know, is the park system has their own branch to investigate serious crimes, called the Investigative Services Branch, or ISB. This branch nicknamed “The FBI of the National Parks” focuses on serious crimes that occur within the boundaries of the national parks.

The ISB has 33 agents operating out of four field offices and are responsible for 85 million acres of park lands in 423 separate properties.

According to the 2019 annual report, the ISB investigated 674 cases that year,

with 59 percent of them being crimes against persons. The Pacific field office conducted 13 homicide or manslaughter investigations and 12 cases of “undetermined cause of death.”

If you still doubt the mystery of all those deaths in the parks, consider the long list of cold cases involving missing persons in the National Parks. There are so many, that the National Park Service, in conjunction with ISB, maintain a cold case line.

On their website, https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1563/cold-cases.htm, you can review several dozen cold cases, report a missing person, and even give additional information about a cold case through an online tip form.

It makes very interesting reading and sometimes, these cases are solved with outside tips.

It is true that most of the deaths in the parks are from tourists taking unnecessary risks, like trying to pet a baby grizzly bear or getting a close-up picture with a bison, not to mention inexperienced people in the great outdoors.

Remember that the park service manages over 80% of its land as wilderness, leaving plenty of places for unprepared people to get in trouble quickly.

National Park murders and mysterious disappearances have garnered a semi-cult following of late. There have been scores of books, television documentaries, and magazine articles written about them, trying to uncover the truth about these unsolved mysteries.

There is no centralized database for all these cases, and many go unreported. Some entities estimate the real number of cases could be in the thousands.

It seemed like an interesting topic for a near-Halloween column. I wonder if I can get my wife to investigate some of these cases since she loves a good mystery so much. I know that I don’t want to volunteer her services, lest I become a future cold case missing person.

*Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.*

