

White-eared Masked finch

Another bird that I always wanted to see in the wild was White-eared Masks and I was fortunate enough to see a few of them.

Often in your aviaries your perspective of things are very different to the way they actually are in the wild. There we found the White-eared Masks nest at the bottom of the magnetic termite mound on the ground in the grass. That is where they'll nest, on the ground; and we saw chicks in the nest. They are just a pretty little bird. The normal Masks have brown where the white is on the face patches.

We saw them on the way to Artemis Station on the side of a billabong. We saw them a few times with Double-bars and also we found them with Parsons and Stars as well. They are spectacular birds to see but hard birds to photograph.



Artemis Cattle Station and Golden-shouldered parrots

For those of you that haven't seen one before, the photograph on the right is a male Golden-shouldered parrot. The hens are a lot less attractive, they don't carry as much red on the abdomen, they don't have the gold on the wings and they don't have black on the head. They are a much duller looking bird than the male. Where we saw these was at a place called Artemis Station.

We stayed on Artemis Station which is owned by [Sue Shephard and her husband Tom](#). They have been running the station for three generations and since about 1970 Sue has taken on the role of looking after the Golden-shouldered parrots up there. There are about four to five stations up there now that have these parrots breeding on them and that is it for their habitat.



The following photo is typical Golden-shouldered country and typical of Cape York.



You get a mixture of the bulbous mound and the magnetic mound. You can see the Melaleuca trees and you can see how there's a nice flat area. They like these flat areas.

The photo on the right is Sue Shephard, she runs the cattle station which is about 50 kilometres by 50 kilometres.

When we were looking for the Golden-shoulders up there Sue was saying that for every square kilometre there would be one pair of Golden-shouldered parrots – if you're lucky – because they are very territorial around their area in which they breed. Sue has been doing a lot of work with some scientists up there, monitoring their breeding habitats and checking chicks in the nest and things like that.



At the time that I was there in May, one of her good friends and also one of my favourite famous artists, [William T Cooper](#), died. William had come over to the cattle station and stayed there and painted all the different birds and habitats. I was doing a little bit of painting while I was up there.

The photo on the right was taken by my friend Chris Thompson. It is a bit hard to see from the photo but up in the right-hand corner you can see the cock bird and fledging from the nest is a young chick. It was like a miracle day to be there and see this.

The Golden-shouldered parrots breed in conical termite mounds like the mound in the photo.

There are three different kinds of termite mounds. These are the –



- the conical termite mounds which are a long cylindrical mound that grows to about two metres high;
- the magnetic termite mounds which face north/south which is long and thin; and
- the big ones we call the bouldous that are like giant boulders.

The photo on the left (below) is a typical magnetic mound. They have been known to nest in them but not very often they usually nest in the conical mounds. The photo on the right is another photo of typical Golden-shoulder country. You can see the boldous mound on the right and the magnetic mound on the left. Again, you can see the melaleuca trees and you can see there's a nice flat grassy area.



The Golden-shouldered parrots are very choosy about where they nest. It's got to be on the flat grass plain surrounded by a Melaleuca forest and if it's not in the right position you won't find them. We drove from Artemis Station which is in the middle of Cape York almost to the top which would have been about three hours. That would have been their breeding ground for hundreds of years but in the last say 20 years, there hasn't been one nest found in that area.

The photo on the right is a chick poking its head out. The parents burrow into these termite mounds and make their chamber inside. The hole that is in the side is probably the size of 50 cent piece. It's really, really, small. It can be as high as 30 centimetres off the ground to about 1.5 metres which is the highest hole that we found. So they nest very close to the ground; and when you see these conical mounds, they are not any bigger than about 45 centimetres in diameter. They are quite small and that is where their nesting chambers are found.



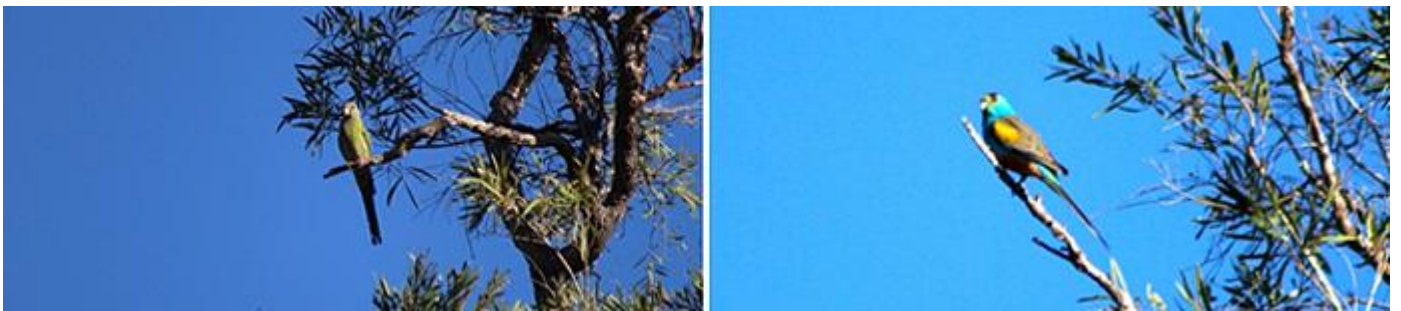
While we were there we had a goanna go past this exact nest which had the four chicks in it. We saw three of them fledge and there was one left. We thought we'll come back the next day to set up all our camera gear and we were going to watch it fledge. Then having seen this goanna literally sniffing in the hollow and then going down; we thought to ourselves, it's going to die; only to see that it must have fledged earlier in the morning.

The breeding time for the Golden-shouldered parrots is around May and what happens in May is that they will excavate a hole and a chamber and then the hen will sit there and lay her eggs and incubate them for about 20 days. After that they'll hatch them and up to a week later the parents will both leave the nest. They will leave the chicks there throughout the day and they will go off and find food.

The cock bird, would fly into a tree nearby, checkout if it's okay, if it's okay the cock bird will come down and sit on the mound first. He'll go into the hollow (the ground is here and the hollow is about there) and check it out and then the hen will follow him and they will fly out together. It all takes a couple of minutes and those four chicks are just sitting there alone all day; straight in, feed them and then a minute later they're gone, unbelievable.



That's the hen bird, a very plain looking bird in the tree (in the photo below on the left) and that's the cock bird (in the photo on the right). That green is such a vibrant green, it stands out a mile and whenever you hear it, it's got that same sort of sound that is similar to a red rump.



The food that they like to eat is the native fire grass, which is a sort of a red coloured grass that is their main food source and other grasses which they do eat. You will see them coming every few hours to feed the chicks and as they get older it is less and less until eventually the parents coerce them out of the nest and into the nearby Melaleuca habitat forest.



That's a typical nest site of the Golden-shouldered parrot. What you will notice is that the hollow stands out but when you have got 200 of these that you are looking at, they don't stand. Sue Shephard came with us on a quad bike (she's 70 – she's unbelievable), we're in a land cruiser dodging all the bushes and she said, "nah, nope, oh here's one..." and we couldn't see it! There's a nest site every square kilometre being spotted, so you're looking in really rough country. If you went up there without a guide you'd never see it.

The photo below is Sue Shephard looking for the Golden-shoulder nests and you can see that you can't just walk through that grass to find them; they are quite hard to see.



That's John showing us an active nest, so whenever you see one that's active, you'll find all the diggings where they've fallen out the nesting chamber and then at the end of the season the termites cover that nesting chamber up and cover up the hole. Some of those old termite mounds you could see three or four different chambers that they have covered up in the past. One of those conical mounds that are two metres high may be 400 or 500 years old.

The Golden-shouldered parrot has a symbiotic relationship with the larvae of a moth species (*Trisyntopa scatophaga*). When the Golden-shouldered hen lays her eggs, a moth will come in and also lay her eggs at the same time and what happens is that once her eggs hatch the moth's eggs have hatched as well. The moth larvae will eat all the poo and stuff inside the chamber and the Golden-shoulders don't eat the larvae. The grubs are fat like witchetty grubs, you'll see them in the nesting chambers, unbelievable; and then they fledge and then the moths come out and that's the end. It's quite incredible to see, because I thought, how can these grubs not kill the chicks or vice versa? I didn't get a photo of it, but you looked in the chambers with this little dentist mirror you could see what was inside the chamber. We could see the exit angle and all. It was quite incredible.



The photo below is the typical habitat of the White-eared Masks.



Just along the side of the road near Artemis station you get this area of flooding. What happens is that water would rise maybe five to seven metres and where all those nests are, it would be flooded. So once the Golden-shoulder chicks can fledge and leave on their own they fly up to the mountains surrounding the station. There's no grass that grows there in a flood and they can't get to the grass so they feed on the seeds that they find in between the rock crevices.

John has set up some feed stations on Artemis, there were about 10 of them and so if there are late fledging chicks they can come to those higher points, feed and then move out to the mountains. That is how they increase a few of the numbers of birds up there. I reckon that during the breeding season they might have two or three thousand birds and then the flooding season comes and they lose the lot.

They did some studies and set up infrared cameras on the nests to monitor predators and see how often they leave the nest. There are about 40 of these cameras around the station. You can see from the photos below how thin those conical mounds are.



You see hundreds of these mounds and you'd just walk past them and not know that there was a nest there. It is just spectacular scenery.

To see the chicks in the nest they use something like a radio antenna with a little mirror on the end. They go in there and say "*oh yeah! There's five chicks*". It took me five minutes to find the five chicks! They are not just in chambers just inside the mound, they are up and around and.... it's unbelievable to try and spot them and Sue spots them straight away. Some of them are close to the edge and some of them burrow right down.



While we were watching these Golden-shoulders all these other interesting birds would come up.

Among them we saw bee eaters and kingfishers. There were Blue-cheeked rosellas. Up north they carry the blue from the cheeks right the way down to the breast whereas the pale heads tend to be more yellow in terms of the red on the back. I took one photo of a Golden-shoulder parrot and Blue-cheeked rosellas feeding on the ground together but you can't really see them very well.

It was right on the sunset so it was a bit hard to get a shot.

Another thing we saw there were Brolgas and we saw them in this dry arid environment. Sometimes you'll see them nesting on the side of these bulbous mounds but not very often.

You have also got to remember that Artemis is a working cattle station and not just a conservation area. You can be filming all these birds and all of a sudden you get all these cattle roaming in.



One other thing that might be of interest to people is some of the studies that they do up there. On the property Sue has found areas where they nest and they've fenced them off in three different lots. One lot they've fenced it off with just star pickets around, so it's just to see what can happen, with cattle going through, wild pigs, whatever there is going through and she will monitor the nests. The next one along they have chicken wire around it so that foxes and rabbits and things can't go through and then the third one just has the wire through so some animals can get in but the cattle can't, but you know, the foxes and rabbits get in, so they are just seeing what happens to the actual habitat. It was quiet interesting.



Further reading:

\$12.6 million spent on saving endangered golden shouldered parrot (Brian Williams | The Courier-Mail | August 20, 2012 12:00AM). THE Queensland Government has bought three Cape York cattle stations for \$12.6 million, protecting 515,000ha of Aboriginal land and habitat for the endangered golden shouldered parrot. ([See full article...](#))

Violet Vale Station and Gouldian finches

We called in at a place called, [Lotusbird Lodge](#). There's a lady there (Sue) that runs it and she happened to be taking photos of Star finches when she saw a Gouldian and she thought, "*this is pretty cool – this is the habitat where Gouldians live*". So she breeds Gouldians in aviaries and she releases them into the wild to build up the wild populations.

These are pictures in her aviary.



There are about five big aviaries at the back that they breed the Gouldians in and they breed them in those PVC pipes. There is not much of a roof on the aviaries and once they have coloured up she puts them into a long flight at the front. There are feed stations in the front and they get used to feeding in the stations. There is a panel made out of bigger chicken wire so that the birds will hang around for a few months and they can fly in but the bigger butcher birds and things can't get in at them. So at least there is place for them to feed. The photo below on the left shows the flight area before they release them and the photo on the right shows the aviaries.



They don't have problems breeding them up there. This is on seed with some seeding grasses.



Eclectus parrot

The photo on the right is the Australian version of the [Eclectus parrot](#) ([*Eclectus roratus macgillivrayi*](#)). It's the largest version of the Eclectus parrot and closer to the size of a Sulphur-crested cockatoo – they are lot heavier too. It is found up in Iron Range National Park, the only place where they breed. Their habitat is only 60 kilometres long by maybe about 10 to 20 kilometres wide. It is really restrictive and when you look for their hollows (there's a number of well-known trees about); you realise how limited they are in the wild. There is probably about 150 nesting hollows; so if you are looking at breeding birds, you are looking at about 100 pairs if you are lucky with breeding birds. To see them in the wild is pretty spectacular. They are probably one of the birds that are the easiest to see in the wild because they are pretty noisy.

The Eclectus hen chooses the hollow and she will sit in the hollow for basically nine months. She'll get different cock birds coming along just feeding the hens that are in the hollows. They rarely venture out. They are very territorial and if you have Eckies at home, you'll notice that the hens are the bigger aggressors and very territorial when it comes to their nest boxes. It's exactly the same thing in the wild.



There are a couple of trees up there; one is the "Hilton". There are three nesting hollows in the one tree, two are occupied by Eckie hens and one is occupied by a Sulphur-crested cockatoo.

It's quite spectacular when you see dozens of Eckies land on the one tree. The hens will defend their nests violently.

We were seeing Eckies in flocks of about 12. The flocks are a mixture of young hens and cock birds, but if the young hens venture near these nesting hollows where there's a mature hen, they'll fight them to the death sometimes. John has been down there and looked at the bottom of these trees and found dead young hens. That's how aggressive they can be.

The photo on the right is one of the hens. You can see the amount of red compared to the New Guinea subspecies. They have a lot more red. The colours are just spectacular.



Also on the right are some of the Eckies that we saw. When you are filming you are about 150 metres away, so it's not that easy to do.

You can see the way they sit; they are a lot slenderer and longer than the subspecies.

Red-winged parrot (Crimson-wing)

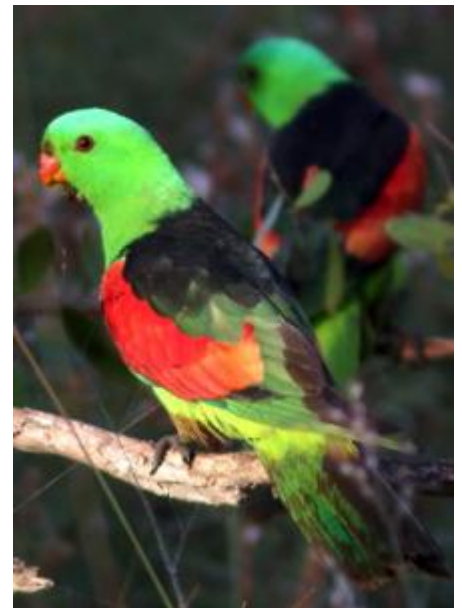
Up there in Cape York they have a Red-winged parrot, it is a subspecies. It's a little bit smaller and they don't carry as much black on the back. They are about 10cm smaller than the Red-wings you see in the south.

We were seeing them in flocks of about 10 to 15 birds. Quite spectacular.

It's in a very dry arid country, not what you would really expect.

Palm Cockatoos

We'd been up at Iron Range (which is up in the rainforest) for about three or four days and hadn't seen a Palm Cockatoo. Then we asked the local mechanic "do you happen to know where these are?". He replied "they're just outside the general store at about 7:00am in the morning..." and they were! It was bit early when we were there, they come a bit later in the season, probably more around August. The mother and father, the parents, unbelievable characters, they just stand out.



This is outside the General Store at Lockhart, these are in a native almond tree; and they were feeding on the almonds. You can see the crest of the other one in the background. They are just spectacular looking birds and so happy. If they are happy they have got that red sheen and if they are timid they cover it up with their feathers. We are probably 2 metres away from them here. Unbelievable.



The photo on the right is a typical nest of a Palm Cockatoo.

At the bottom of the tree you can see the termite nest and that will hollow out the trunk and it's got to be on a certain angle.

There's a lady, Christina, who has been studying the Palm Cockatoos for the last six years. We had a look at few sites but they weren't nesting when we were there. But the hollows are like this (about 10 inch diameter) and the way they get down is they walk in backwards and there is just enough room for them and to have one chick.

The trouble with a lot of this habitat is that it's in Gallery Forest which is next to the rainforest along sort of riverbeds and these trees don't last long because of the termites hollowing them out. Nesting places are pretty limited.



Further Reading:

Termites: "Northern the very look of northern savannas owes much to the mounds built by colonies of this insect. North Australian savannas have one of the most diverse range of termite mounds in the world: from Australia is a big country shaped by a small insect: the termite. In many places the enormous buttressed "cathedrals" of Spinifex termites, to the remarkably aligned "magnetic" mounds and miniature cities of columns built by various *Amitermes* species."

Micro Bats

The [Kutini-Payamu \(Iron Range\) National Park](#) was occupied by the Americans in World War II and they set up bunkers there and in one of the bunkers we saw these [micro bats](#).

In the middle of Iron Range they set off this massive bomb in the middle of the rainforest and to this day, nothing grows in this round circle there where they dropped the bomb.



Miscellaneous photos/comments/Iron Range

The photo below (left) is a little Orange-footed scrub fowl. They walk around the campsite. The photo on the right is a Lesser Frigate bird. You get lots of little sunbirds and so many species of butterflies... *that I take a photo of a photograph!*



The photo on the right is typical rainforest type of habitat.

This is part of Iron Range, you've got the rainforest and then you have got coastal areas, so there's a lot of coast.

It's quite spectacular.



We saw fruit bats (photo below left) along the Old Coen Road Walking Track – that's John Griffith on the right and Bruce Watts on the left (photo far right).



You might have seen photos of Eckies in the wild. In Australia there's a tree called the Smugglers Tree where a lot of film has been and taken over the years. That tree fell down about a year ago. A 50 metre rainforest tree takes hundreds, if not thousands of years to grow, so they don't come back very quickly again. The photo (below top left) is typical habitat where you will find Eckies and also crocodiles! The photo (below top right) shows one of our campsites. This was near the Archer River Roadhouse. You can see from the photos below how high it floods.





The photo (below) is the first hen we saw, this is what they call the Hilton for parrots. There was nothing in the tree and John goes "look at this" claps his hands loud, and she stuck her head out. The photo (below right) is a Rufous owl.



A Brown Pigeon (photo below left), the Metallic starling (below middle) and a forest king fisher (below right).



The photo (below left) is a Diamond Dove. We saw another Diamond Dove that had been attacked by a hawk and lost its tail (photo below middle) it was sitting there on the perch. Seeing them in the wild, they are so close, it's incredible. Their Brush turkeys are a little bit different to ours. Their wattle is a purple colour whereas ours is a yellow (photo below right).



These are the Galahs up there (photo below left). They are a different subspecies of Galahs. John is doing a paper on the Galahs up there.

The photos (below right) are the sulphur crested cockatoos up there – the Fitzroy Sulphur-crested – not as many feathers on the crest. They are a bit slenderer looking and a bit sicker looking to be honest. They are not as big and fat as the ones we get down south. They are a bit mangy actually.



There were lots of Rainbow lorikeets wherever we went. Even the Rainbow lorikeets are different to the birds further to the south along the coast; they've got different wing-barrings to the lorikeets we get here in Sydney.

This is us Bruce Watts left and me (Paul Solomon) right (photos below). This is our first meal at the Palmer River Roadhouse. That was just before the State of Origin.



This is the world famous burger place. We only had small burgers!



The photos (below) were taken at Portland Bay at the top of Iron Range.



There was about 20 houses – once you go through Lockhart it's all accessed by barge and then the only thing that you can buy there are ice creams from this man called Joe – he's a nudist. So when John went up there to get the ice creams he said *"Can you put your my clothes on first?"* and he said *"Just a minute"*. He had this big long beard and he put a T-shirt on.

There are a lot of coconut palms. It's very pretty but one thing that did disappoint me at Iron Range however, was the amount of litter on the beach.



The way that the Indonesian fishermen catch their fish is to use bleach. They dive into the bomboras onto rocky ledges and they'll put bleach into a hole and the fish will come up and they'll fish them out. You see thousands of these bleach bottles on the beach. A lot of coconuts as well.

Painting

I did a little bit of painting and the photos (below) are some of my paintings from the trip.

The painting (below left) is one of the paintings that I gave to Sue Shephard to thank her for staying at Artemis Station.





And this is our land cruiser, so this must be the end of the trip!



Questions

Comment

In relation to the Golden-shouldered parrots, I would have thought the fire would have been the worst.

Paul Solomon

That is the worst. What happened at the station next door to Artemis, there's not one Golden-shouldered parrot and you are talking like 100,000 of acres or something. It's called Olive Vale Station and what they were were doing was the new station owners were lighting fires at the wrong time of year and they practically burnt out whole habitats. The trouble with that is that the Melaleuca forests grow back quicker than grass, so you are getting big shady forest and Golden-shoulders don't like that. They like the flat open grasslands surrounded by the forests. So to repair it you would have to chop down all these Melaleucas to create flat land again.

So as I said for three hours we were driving on habitat where they used to breed but it's all gone because of the fires. With the Shephards, they have been managing it for three generations, they light it before spring so it doesn't go out of control, they light in certain areas and that recovers and regenerates.

Further Reading:

Pastoralists of Cape York Peninsula discuss fire with Kerry Shephard. "Kerry Shephard is a fourth generation pastoralist from Cape York Peninsula. She grew up on Artemis Station, where she learned to ride horses and muster cattle at the same time as learning to read and write through the School of the Air. Her first story, about mustering at 18 Mile was written when she was eight years old, and published by the School of the Air. Here Kerry talks to several other long-term pastoralists from the peninsula."

Question

The habitat for the Golden-shoulders, does that overlap with the Hooded?

Paul Solomon

No Hooded parrots are more Northern Territory and they'll nest like in a very small mound just off the ground; whereas these ones are tall conical mounds. But between the Hooded, the Golden-shoulder and Mulga, and the Paradise parrot, they're almost dissipated as joined together. You know, they probably originated from the same bird.

Graeme Phipps

No, what the studies show is that the Paradise Parrots are closely related to the Golden-shouldered parrots and the Hooded parrots are not related. You would think they would be but there not. The other thing is that, you know how people have reconstructed Paradise parrots with breeding the Golden-shoulder with Mulga and Mulga with Hooded, I've never heard of a fertile result of that ever. If anyone knows of, well let me know

That was fantastic Paul and obviously there's lots more that we could hear.

Paul Solomon

Well I could talk about it all day!

Graeme Phipps

Perhaps later on we might be able to see some of the videos that you have. Perhaps we could see some while we are having supper? Thank you mate.

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