



Going back in time

Birdwatching is a diverse and enriching activity. Take in the sights, sounds and scenery of your natural surrounds and immerse yourself in the magic of discovery.

Words CHARLES HUNTER

I am in the ancient World Heritage-listed rainforest of Nightcap National Park near Nimbin in the Byron Bay Hinterland of north-eastern NSW.

It's 5am and I've just crossed shallow Rocky Creek. I dry my feet and put my shoes back on and start walking up Gibbergunyah Range Road. The air becomes thick with moisture and the temperature drops. It's still dark but the rainforest is already awake and its sounds are simply mesmerising. It's very noisy. A red-legged pademelon (*thylogale stigmatica*) jumps across my path and startles me. My heart starts racing and I pause for a moment and take a deep breath. The sounds are coming from every direction.

Microbats whiz past above my head; not long now until they sleep. A family of the endemic Australian logrunners (*orhonyx temminckii*) appear to scream at me for disturbing them as they forage on the forest floor, madly sweeping and scratching with their feet. Dawn light starts to appear and I can see a motionless carpet python (*morelia spilota mcdowelli*). Curled up with its eyes closed, not interested in me, just waiting for a patch of sun to appear and warm its cold blood.

As daylight breaks, I'm sure I've gone back in time. I am surrounded by giant trees towering above me. I take a quick drink from a crystal-clear creek and listen to a group of wompoo fruit doves (*ptilinopus magnificus*) calling above me. In the distance, I hear the

rasping call of the paradise riflebird (*ptiloris paradiseus*), one of Australia's four species of bird-of-paradise. I see a green catbird (*ailuroedus crassirostris*). He's calling like a crying child, staking his territory and warning other birds they could be his breakfast.

Nightcap National Park

Nightcap is part of the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia and contains part of the remaining Big Scrub, which was the largest tract of lowland subtropical rainforest in the southern hemisphere. European settlers began clearing the forest in the 1880s and, sadly, by 1900 less than 1 per cent of the Big Scrub remained. Now, scattered pockets are all that exist of this glorious forest that once stretched from Byron Bay to Lismore and beyond.

Birdwatching is a much-loved hobby of mine. In pursuit of it I've spent a lot of time in rainforests all over the world, including Columbia, Myanmar, Sulawesi, Vietnam and Malaysia, and also in Australia from the monsoon forests in the Northern Territory to the lowland tropical rainforests of Cape York. The subtropical rainforest in Nightcap National Park, however, is definitely one of my favourites. So much so that I've been coming here twice a year for the past 20 years.

When Australia split off from the supercontinent Gondwana more than 40 million years ago, it was covered in rainforest.

To help prove this, in 2002 tree kangaroo remains were discovered in caves on the Nullarbor Plain, which is now mostly desert. As the Australian continent drifted north, the climate became dryer and only pockets of rainforest remained.

It has taken Europeans just 200 years to clear three-quarters of the remaining Australian rainforests. This includes much of the Daintree rainforest in Far North Queensland, which, at 110 million years, is said to be the oldest continuous rainforest in the world.

At Nightcap National Park as late as August 1979, the government wanted to continue extensive logging at Terania Creek. Thankfully, a group of 300 protesters created a blockade and the nearby Protestors Falls is named after them. The protest, Australia's first environmental blockade, succeeded in saving 81 square kilometres of pristine natural forest from destruction. Nightcap National Park is an ancient, magical place. One of peace and serenity.

Birdwatching

It wasn't just the forest the protesters saved; they also safeguarded the habitat of more than 40 species of mammals, 27 reptiles, 23 frogs, over 140 bird species and more than 650 known plant species, including the recently discovered Nightcap Oak (*eidothea hardeniana*).

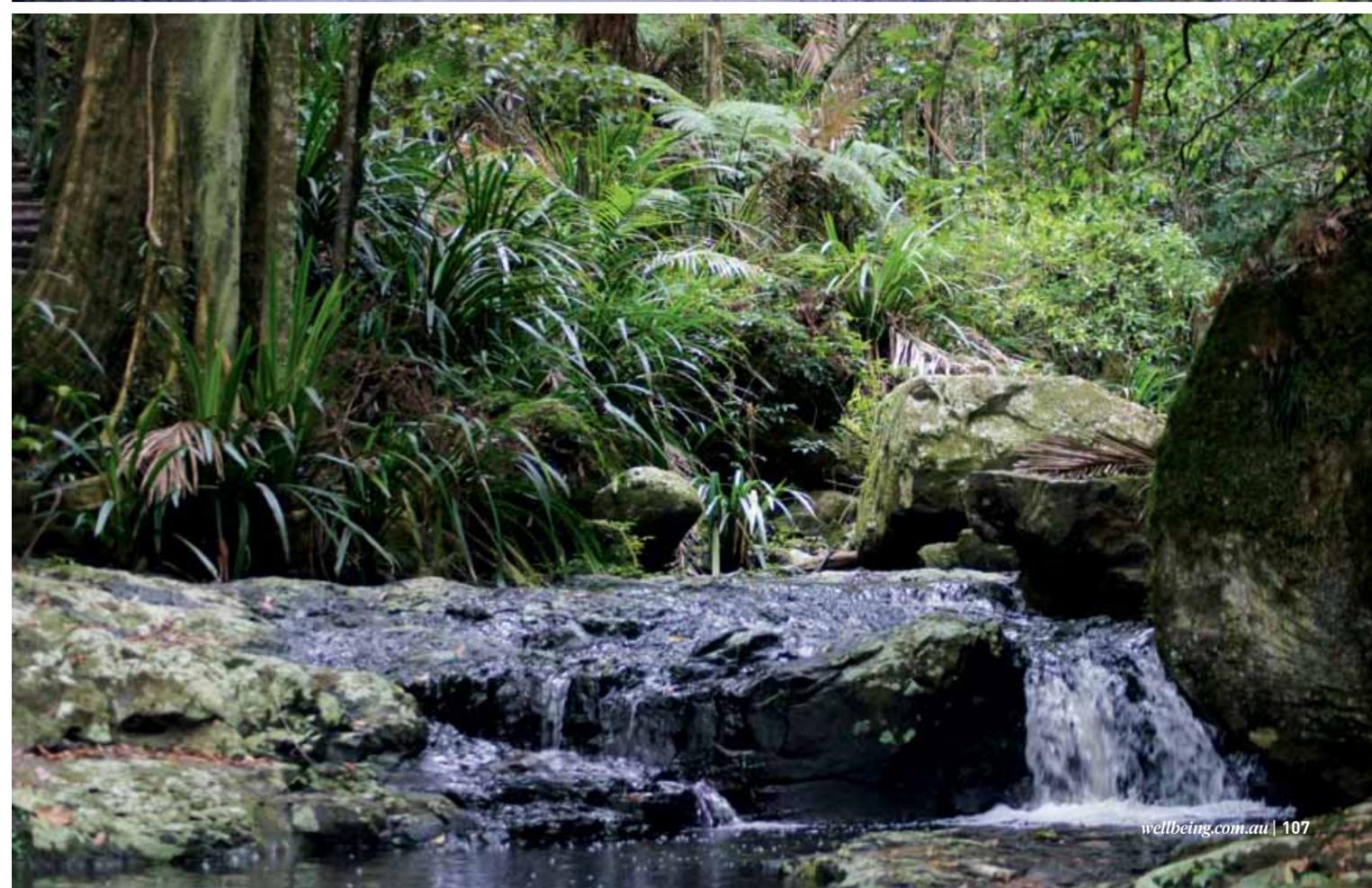
I've witnessed an incredible diversity of birdlife over the past 20 years in my travels as a twitcher, but the rich forests of Nightcap are one of the best viewing grounds.

Birdwatching is a great excuse to get outside and connect with nature. For me, birdwatching is an adventure, an exploration and a discovery. Birdwatching also does wonders for your mind because being in nature is calming and reduces stress. Just seeing birds improves your mental health and can also be exhilarating (especially when you have spent many years looking for particular birds, like I have!).

In fact, I have travelled to many places across the world and Australia solely to look at birds. Everywhere you travel to, there are different birds to be found, and many can be seen in the most amazing locations; places you wouldn't normally think about visiting.

Nightcap at a glance

- Became a national park in 1983.
- Is the site of Australia's first environmental blockade.
- Has the highest rainfall in NSW with rain exceeding 2500mm per annum.
- Given World Heritage status in 1989.
- The Wadjabul people lived at Nightcap Range for at least 4000 years.



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Some locations that spring to mind are Iron Range in Cape York, Two Peoples Bay in Western Australia, Taman Negara in Malaysia and Tangkoko in Sulawesi.

Whether you are birdwatching in your local park or on a bush track away from the sounds of your town or city, birdwatching can also be great physical exercise. I just can't imagine a life without birds.

To try birdwatching for yourself, all you need is a field guide that you can download to your smartphone, such as The Morecombe & Stewart Guide to Birds of Australia. Start by identifying birds in your local area on your morning walk or in your local park. When you go on holidays, identify new birds not found in your local area. When you start to get serious, perhaps buy yourself some binoculars.

Here are a few of my favourite birds found in Nightcap National Park, along with notes on when and where to look for them and what to listen for. I have been lucky enough to see them all, not without some hard work along the way. The rare marbled frogmouth, for example, took me dozens of 3am starts and more than 10 years of searching to find! Birdwatching teaches you patience.



Photo: Jim Bendon CC

Wompoo fruit dove *(ptilinopus magnificus)*

Wompoo fruit dove is a beautiful large fruit-eating dove that can be seen high in the rainforest canopy. It has a grey head with a deep-purple chest, vivid green wings and yellow belly.

Range: Found primarily in the rainforest along eastern Australia from south of Sydney to Cape York Peninsula and also New Guinea. Call: A distinctive "wallock-a-woo".

Best time to see: Early morning, listen for their call which is the best way to find them high in the canopy.

Tip: Look up if you see lots of fallen fruit.



Photo: Summerdrought CC

Noisy pitta (*pitta versicolor*)

The noisy pitta has a black head and a chestnut crown. Its wings are deep green with an iridescent blue stripe, complemented by a mustard yellow belly and red vent. It spends most of its time on the ground.

Range: Found in rainforests along the east coast of Australia from Illawarra in the south to Cape York Peninsula.

Call: A friendly whistle that sounds like "walk-to-work".

Best time to see: They can be seen feeding on the ground and calling at any time of day.

Tip: If you hear their call close by, stand still as they will often come towards you for an easy view.



Photo: Francesco Veronosi CC

Paradise riflebird *(ptiloris paradiseus)*

One of Australia's four species of bird-of-paradise, the paradise riflebird has a curved beak and is about 30cm in size. The male is striking black in colour with a stunning iridescent blue-green chest patch and tail.

Range: Found in the rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland.

Call: A very loud, harsh "yaaaaaas, yaaaaaas".

Best time to see: Riflebirds can be active and call any time during the day.

Tip: The wings of the male make a distinctive rustling sound.



Photo: Baupies8 CC

Marbled frogmouth *(podargus ocellatus)*

The marbled frogmouth is a small frogmouth, much smaller than its more common relative the tawny frogmouth (*podargus strigoides*). It's a grey to brown bird that has a marbled breast and belly.

Range: There are two subspecies (ssp.) found in Australia. The plumed frogmouth (ssp. *plumiferus*) in northern NSW and southern Queensland. The second (ssp. *marmoratus*) is found in Cape York Peninsula as well as New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Call: A loud bubbling, gobbling call ending with a loud bill clap. It also has a soft and



Photo: Dominic Sherny CC

Australian logrunner *(prthonyx temminckii)*

The logrunner has a unique foraging on the forest floor as it searches for insects. It has black wings, a brown tail and its head and back are a scalloped, reddish colour. The throat, breast and abdomen feathers are white.

Range: Found along the east coast of Australia from near Canberra to north of Brisbane.

Call: A very loud "kweek-kweek-kweek-kweek".

Best time to see: They start calling loudly before dawn, which is the best time to see them.

Tip: Often seen in groups, the females are identified by their orange-rufous throat.



Photo: M.c.c. 1999

Azure kingfisher (*ceyx azureus*)

An azure kingfisher is a stunning azure-coloured kingfisher with a rufous buff and very long beak.

Range: Found along streams and rivers in the north and east of Australia and Tasmania. Also found in New Guinea and some Indonesian islands.

Call: A high-pitched squeak or shrill.

Best time to see: They are active throughout the day and can be seen darting between perches and diving into the water for small fish and yabbies.

Tip: They are regularly seen as you cross Rocky Creek.



Photo: Gail Bryant

Albert's lyrebird (*menura alberti*)

Related to the more common superb lyrebird, albert's lyrebird is found only in subtropical rainforests. It's a ground-dwelling bird that forages on the forest floor using its strong legs to scratch away leaf litter and soil.

Range: Endemic to Australia, it has a restricted range in subtropical rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland.

Call: A powerful voice and also incredible mimicry of other birds and noises of the forest.

Best time to see: They are about during the day but can be very timid.

Tip: Often seen at the base of Protesters Falls or in the picnic grounds at Terania Creek near the car park.

Superb fruit dove (*ptilinopus superbus*)

Superb fruit dove is a small fruit dove. The male is stunningly multi-coloured and the female is a gorgeous green. The male has



Photo: russellstreet CC

a striking purple crown and its body is orange, yellow, black and golden green.

Range: In Australia it's found along the coast as far south as the Victorian/SA border and occasionally in Tasmania. The bird is also found in PNG and parts of South-east Asia.

Call: A fast-paced "whoop, whoop whoop" or "coo-coo-coo-coo".

Best time to see: They tend to feed high in the canopy during the day, so can be hard to see unless you know the call.

Tip: They can sometimes be seen resting high in tall dead trees.

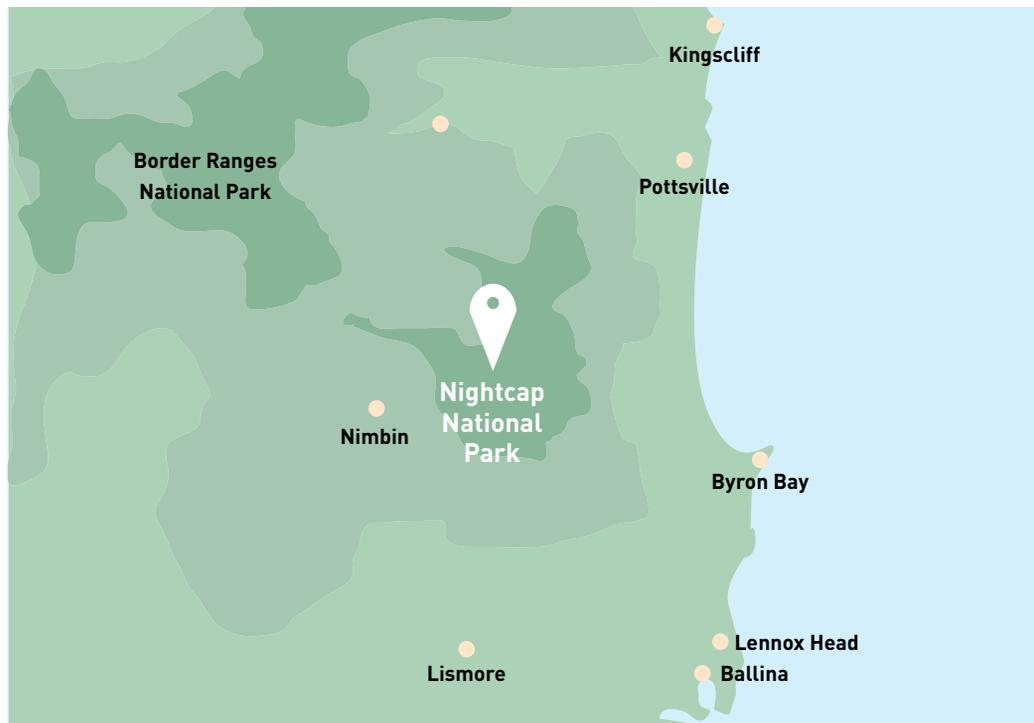
It's estimated that up to 100 plants depend on the seed dispersal of the prehistoric Southern cassowary which is found in Far North Queensland.

The ecological roles of birds

There are more than 11,000 species of birds in the world and they play a crucial part in the balance of nature. Alarmingly, a recent study* conducted by Birdlife International indicates one in eight bird species are threatened by global extinction. The biggest threats to birds are agricultural expansion and logging.

In Australia we have cleared almost 50 per cent of our original forest cover in just 200 years and continue to be one of the top 10 worst land clearers in the world.

Apart from being inspiring, birds also provide many unique services that humans directly benefit from, such as natural insect control. They also play an important role as pollinators and seed dispersers. It's estimated that up to 100 plants depend on the seed dispersal of the prehistoric Southern cassowary which is found in Far North Queensland. This amazing flightless bird, which is also found in Papua New Guinea and grows to almost two metres tall, is continually threatened by agricultural expansion and logging. It's estimated there are only 2000 remaining. 🐦



Charles Hunter is an avid bird watcher, conservationist and freelance writer. He travels extensively across Australia and South-East Asia in his pursuit of watching birds. His most recent focus is on the Indonesian Spice Islands where he is working with a group of global conservationists developing a model for flora and fauna conservation for islands. When he's not bird watching, Charles works as a consultant in the workplace wellness and e-commerce industries. Charles is based in Bronte, Australia, and can be contacted at charles@tribeconcepts.com.au.