



# Birdwatching

ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# Birding Northern Territory

IMAGINE THE SCENE...



Pied Cormorant & Pied Heron  
*Phalacrocorax varius* & *Ardea picata*

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**It's 6am on a Top End billabong and the sky is alive with birds: skeins of Magpie Geese winging through the dawn mist while Plumed Whistling-Ducks splash-land across your bows. You hardly know where to point your binoculars as a Little Kingfisher flashes by in one direction and a Black Bittern flaps away in the other. By breakfast you've already chalked up 50 species.**

Or, perhaps, a very different scene. Grey-headed Honeyeaters flit through the scrub as you tramp a dusty Red Centre trail. On the canyon floor, a shrinking pool draws a noisy gang of Major Mitchell's Cockatoos, soon joined by a pair of Spinifex Pigeons and a small flock of Painted Finches. The drinkers scatter as the shadow of a hunting Little Eagle sweeps along the canyon walls. It can be hard to believe

that the lush Top End and the arid Red Centre are both part of Northern Territory. Both offer completely different birding landscapes, with different challenges and very different birds. But wherever you venture, this spectacular slice of central Australia offers a world-class birding experience. And with some 434 species recorded, including numerous national rarities, the birds will come thick and fast.



Little Kingfisher  
*Alcedo pusilla*

# NT Birds : Six of the Best

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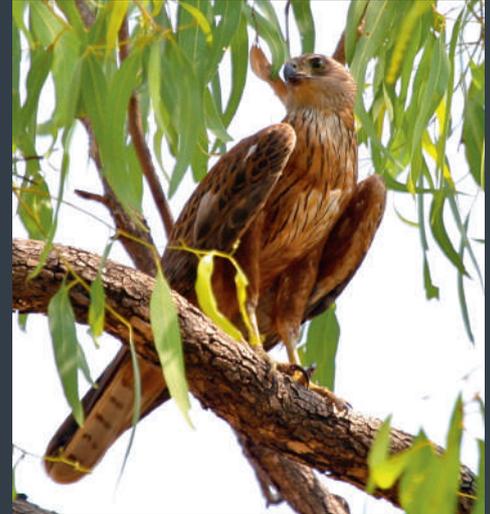
**RAINBOW PITTA**  
*PITTA IRIS*

This jewel of the Top End brings a dazzling splash of colour to the shadowy floor of a Top End monsoon forest. Be alert for a shrill whistle, and a telltale flash of sky-blue and scarlet among the leaf litter.



**GOULDIAN FINCH**  
*ERYTHRURA GOULDIAE*

Familiar as a cage bird but rare in the wild, this dazzling little songbird flocks to waterholes in northern regions of the territory, notably around Katherine.



**RED GOSHAWK**  
*ERYTHROTRIORCHIS RADIATUS*

Australia's rarest raptor hunts the northern savanna woodland, breeding at a handful of secret sites. Look out for its rufous form perched beneath the canopy or gliding through the branches in pursuit of prey.



Photo: Luke Paterson - NT Bird Specialists

**HOODED PARROT**  
***PSEPHOTUS DISSIMILIS***

This handsome turquoise parrot, with its flashing yellow shoulders, is endemic to Northern Territory, where it sometimes joins other parrot species at outback waterholes, notably around Pine Creek.



Photo: Helga Kieskamp

**RUFIOUS-CROWNED EMU-WREN**  
***STIPITURUS RUFICEPS***

This diminutive bird is confined to stony, spinifex habitats in the southern deserts. Look out for its blue face and wispy tail as it flits between tussocks.



Photo: Luke Paterson - NT Bird Specialists

**YELLOW CHAT**  
***EPTHIANURA GROCEA***

This vivid little bird - a relative of the honeyeaters - lives on saltbush plains in some of the harshest parts of the territory. Small flocks move with the rains.

# Northern Tropics Birding Experience

**The Top End, as the northernmost reaches of Northern Territory are known, offers a variety of tropical landscapes, from the tidal mangroves and monsoon rainforest of the coast to the seasonal wetlands, limestone escarpments and savannah woodland inland. Each has its own community of birds.**

The mangroves around Darwin are home to such specials as the skulking Chestnut Rail, while a walk through the nearby monsoon forest may produce Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove and - foraging among the leaf litter - the stunning Rainbow Pitta. In town itself, look out for Rufous Owl in the Botanic Gardens or, during the rains, Little Curlews on any flooded field.

Seasonally flooded wetlands draw huge flocks of Magpie Geese, and from bird hides you can scan for wildfowl and

waders, with Green Pygmy-Goose and Black-necked Stork among the highlights. A boat trip on the likes of Mary River or Yellow Water Billabong takes you deeper into this watery wilderness, with a chance of numerous heron, ibis and kingfisher species - not to mention some impressive Estuarine Crocodiles.

Further inland are the towering limestone escarpments of Kakadu and Arnhemland, where a walk in search of aboriginal rock art may turn up such local specials as Banded Fruit-Dove and Chestnut-quilled Rock-Pigeon. Peregrine Falcon and Black-breasted Buzzard are among the raptors overhead.

To the south lies the rugged wilderness of Nitmiluk National Park and Katherine Gorge, where the woodland and savannah holds Great Bowerbird, Australian Bustard and, if you're very lucky, Red Goshawk. Any water in this region can turn up something

special, from a flock of Gouldian Finches at a shrinking waterhole to a party of endemic Hooded Parrots at a lawn sprinkler.



# Northern Tropics Birding Destinations

**Darwin Botanic Gardens** Time to spare in Darwin? Then a stroll around this urban Eden makes a great introduction to Top End birds, from Orange-footed Scrubfowl to Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo. Look out for an elusive Rufous Owl.

**Nitmiluk National Park** The spectacular Katherine Gorge is the centrepiece of this highly scenic reserve, where Great Bowerbirds attend their bowers around the resort, and the bush is alive with such gems as Red-backed Kingfisher, Northern Rosella and honeyeaters of numerous species.

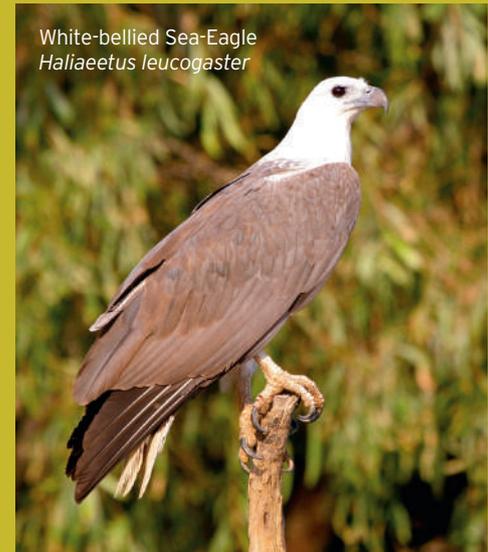
**Howard Springs Nature Park** Just 30km east of Darwin along the Stuart Highway, this pocket of rainforest is an excellent spot for Rainbow Pitta. Among other rainforest species along the trail, look out for Varied Triller and Blue-winged Kookaburra, and check the carpark for a roosting Tawny Frogmouth.

## **Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve**

This wetland reserve en route to Kakadu is packed with waterbirds, including crakes, ibis, egrets and Comb-crested Jacanas. Magpie Geese flock here in season, and a stroll through the surrounding forest may produce Rose-crowned Fruit-dove or Broad-billed Flycatcher.

**Kakadu National Park** This vast reserve is the jewel in the Top End crown and deserves several days' exploration. Cruise Yellow Water billabong for kingfishers and herons, including Black Bittern; scan Mamukala Wetlands for waterfowl and Little Curlew; hike up Nourlangie Rock for White-lined Honey-eater and Chestnut-quilled Rock-Pigeon; and keep your eyes peeled and ears pricked along the escarpment for the highly sought-after White-throated Grasswren.

**Mary River National Park** Yet another wetland bird paradise, with a rich variety of water birds, including White-bellied Sea Eagle and Black-necked Stork, plus a chance of Gouldian Finch and Grey Goshawk in the surrounding woodland.



White-bellied Sea-Eagle  
*Haliaeetus leucogaster*

# Southern Deserts Birding Experience

**The southern reaches of Northern Territory comprise some of Australia's most impressive, and most unforgiving, landscapes. Despite the harsh climate and terrain, however, these are home to a remarkable variety of wildlife - not least birds, of which some 250 species occur.**

At the heart of the so-called Red Centre are the towering sandstone rock formations of Uluru and nearby Kata Tjuta. Beneath these iconic landmarks, the likes of White-plumed Honeyeater, Crested Pigeon and Crested Bellbird frequent the desert scrub. Meanwhile raptors such as Little Eagle cruise overhead while ground species such as Little Buttonquail flit between patches of cover.

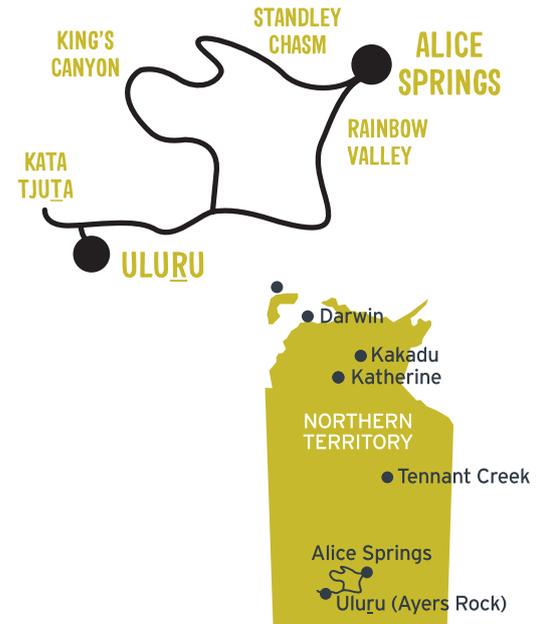
Alice Springs, gateway to the Red Centre, harbours some excellent birding sites - including the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens, where you might spy a Red-browed

Pardalote or watch a Western Bowerbird at its bower. And with water in such short supply, it's hardly surprising that the town sewage works should be a magnet for water birds, including Freckled Duck and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. At the Old Telegraph Station, just out of town, you may even glimpse a rare Grey Falcon.

Head into the rugged MacDonell Ranges, east and west of Alice Springs, and new habitats open up. Patches of spinifex provide perfect habitat for Spinifex Pigeon, Painted Finch, and Dusky Grasswren, while mulga woodland might turn up a Bourke's Parrot or Chestnut-rumped Thornbill. And above the sandstone escarpments and canyon walls, keep an eye out for raptors such as Australian Hobby and Black-breasted Buzzard.

This is a land full of seasonal surprises. The landscapes may be wild and the

distances daunting, but special birds - from nomadic parties of the rare Princess Parrot to wheeling flocks of Budgerigars - can turn up anywhere. Keep your eyes peeled.



# Southern Deserts Birding Destinations

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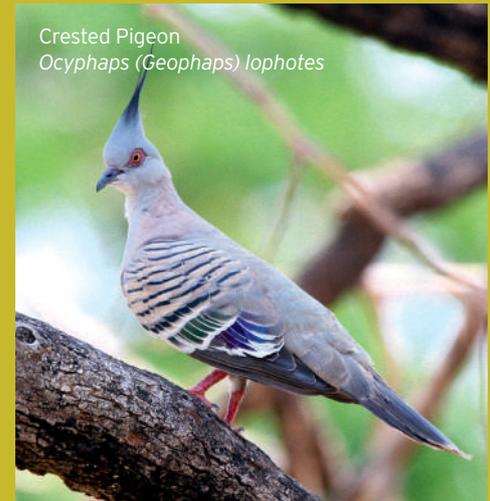
**Olive Pink Botanic Garden (Alice Springs)** Just a short stroll from town, this popular location on the banks of the Todd River has recorded more than 80 species. Highlights include the Western Bowerbird - ask at the café about an active bower - and, if you're lucky, the elusive Grey Honeyeater. Birds change with the seasons: in winter, listen out for Striated Pardalote and Rufous Whistler; in summer, watch for Rainbow Bee-eater and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater.

**King's Canyon** This spectacular site in Watarrka National Park, south of Alice Springs, offers short trails among its red sandstone formations. Explore the canyon rim in search of Spinifex Pigeon, Painted Finch and Dusky Grasswren, or simply stroll around the resort, where common species include Red-capped Robin and White-plumed Honeyeater

**Newhaven Sanctuary** This 262,000-hectare in the Tanami Desert, 363km northwest of Alice Springs, protects a remote wilderness of red dunes, clay pans and rocky escarpments. Home to such sought-after species as Dusky Grasswren, Grey Falcon and Black Honeyeater, it even boasts a 1996 record of the elusive Night Parrot, once believed extinct.

**Palm Valley** This unexpected oasis lies in Finke Gorge National Park, 140km west of Alice Springs. Nestled among the dramatic red sandstone of the Western MacDonnell ranges, it protects a remnant of prehistoric rainforest, harbouring such rare plants as the Red Cabbage Palm. Birds are everywhere: look out for Rainbow Bee-eater, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo and Crested Bellbird.

**Kunnoth Well** This small dam, 50km north of Alice Springs, is a top site for the elusive Grey Honeyeater. Other local specials include Banded Whiteface and Australian Bustard, while a sunset stakeout at the dam might produce Major Mitchell's Cockatoos and Bourke's Parrot coming down to slake their thirst.



Crested Pigeon  
*Ocyphaps (Geophaps) lophotes*

# Tips for Birding in the Northern Territory



Whistling Kite  
*Haliastur sphenurus*

**1. Learn your habitats:** from spinifex scrub to monsoon forest, each of NT's diverse environments harbours its own community of birds.

**2. In forests, stop and use your ears** to locate birds. If you find a mixed species feeding flock, stick with it, as many more birds may arrive.

**3. In tropical forest, spend time at the forest edge** or at breaks in the canopy, which tend to attract the richest variety of birds.

**4. At wetlands, always start by scanning the foreground** (starting with the nearest shoreline) then work your way back towards the horizon. This gives you the best chance of spotting anything before it flies.

**5. In arid and desert landscapes, visit waterholes** or creeks in the late afternoon; when many species come to drink.

**6. To see the birds well, always try to keep the NT's fierce sun behind you.** If planning a day's birding, aim to travel west in morning, south at midday and east in the afternoon.

**7. Learn the clock method** (eg 'Whistling Kite at 2 o'clock'), so that you can quickly share directions to the whereabouts of birds.

**8. Never underestimate NT's hostile climate and terrain.** When heading out birding, always take sunscreen, a hat, snacks and plenty of water. Tell someone where you are going, and stick to the plan.

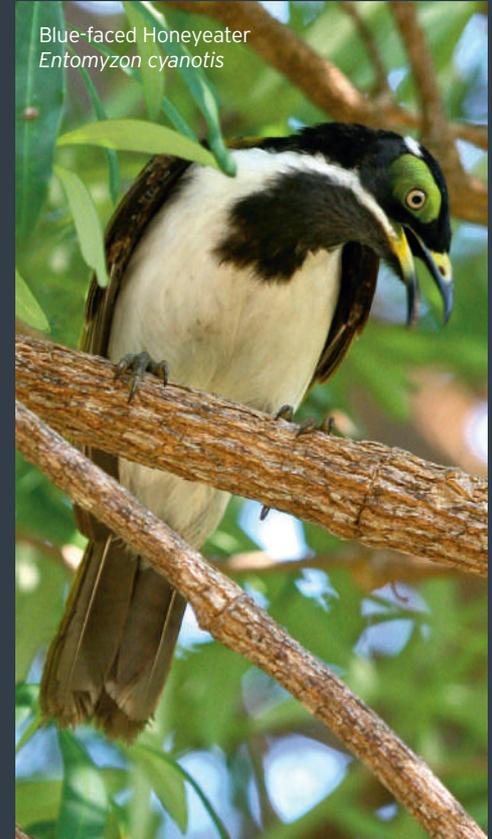
# Getting There

**Darwin International Airport is a major gateway to Australia for international flights and the closest point of entry from the UK. Singapore Airlines and Malaysia Airlines both fly into Darwin from the UK.**

The Northern Territory is also easily accessible from destinations all over Australia. Major domestic airlines (Qantas, Virgin, Jetstar and Tiger) operate flights from the capitals in the Eastern states, South Australia and Western Australia, with regional airlines (AirNorth) covering smaller destinations.

The legendary Ghan Railway runs between Darwin and Adelaide and covers 2,979km. The Ghan offers various levels of accommodation, from standard seating to luxury cabins and unsurpassed views of the breathtaking landscape. You can also take advantage of the excellent

network of highways and roads and head to the Northern Territory on a self-drive adventure. Or to allow someone else to do the hard work, why not contact one of our local expert birding guides to take you on a private birding tour? See our website for more details.



Blue-faced Honeyeater  
*Entomyzon cyanotis*

# Contact Us

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[australiasoutback.com/birdwatching](http://australiasoutback.com/birdwatching)

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THE NORTHERN TERRITORY #BIRDINGNT**

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**Cover Photo:** Yellow Chat *Epthianura crocea*  
Luke Paterson - NT Bird Specialists

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