



# ARNHEMLAND BARRAMUNDI NATURE LODGE

## LATE WET SEASON BIRD SURVEY

Following the success of the inaugural Arnhem Land Barramundi Lodge Bird Week, Dr Richard Noske of Charles Darwin University was commissioned to carry out 3-monthly bird surveys to gain an understanding of the seasonal variation in bird species diversity and abundance over the year. This research aims to show whether the status and movement patterns of woodland and open (eucalypt) forest birds in the Maningrida region, but especially within 25 km radius of the Barramundi Lodge, parallel known patterns in the Darwin region.

The first survey in October 2008 resulted in the sensational discovery of 3 or 4 pairs of **Northern Shrike-tits** (an endangered subspecies), of which at least one pair were nesting, in the extensive seasonally inundated Broad-leaved Paperbark woodlands along the Oenpelli Road, between 19 and 29 km from the Lodge. This appears to be the second known breeding locality for this enigmatic bird, the only other being a small population (also 3-4 pairs) near Katherine which is the subject of an intensive study by the Parks & Wildlife Commission of NT. That population is on the old Arnhem Road east of Katherine – well inland. The October survey also yielded three species new to the 1-degree cell including Maningrida and the Lodge, and missed during the Bird Week: the **Hooded Robin** (an uncommon species in the Top End, and declining in southern Australia), **White-winged (Varied) Sittella** and Silver-backed (Grey) Butcherbird.

Following the exciting discovery of **Gouldian Finches** (a threatened species) during Bird Week, these gaudy birds were still present at the same waterholes and floodplain edges in October, though apparently in smaller numbers. As expected, however, they were nowhere to be found during the early wet (January 2009) survey, presumably because so much of their dry season habitat (paperbark woodland) was flooded by up to 30 cm of water. This flooding must force the birds to move up the elevation gradient to the sandstone uplands or, more likely, further inland in Arnhem Land. There they presumably depend on perennial grass seeds for their survival (the late wet is a tough 'lean' period for this species), prior to breeding in the late wet-early dry season. During the recently completed late wet (early May) survey, a small number of Gouldians was seen at sites where there had been large numbers during the Bird Week last year, indicating that some are already returning to feed on the spear-grass and other annuals in the low-lying coastal plains.

Interestingly the diversity and abundance of birds was low in January, compared to October, and there was little sign of the breeding apparent in October. This decrease is partly related to the flooding mentioned above, which must drive ground-dwelling species and most granivores out of the region, but it may also relate to lower insect abundance and nectar availability due to the paucity of blossoming plants. By May, however, this situation seems to have already reversed, and species richness and abundance was higher at all woodland sites. This May survey also unexpectedly produced a pair of **Hooded Parrots** on the main road, close to the Lodge. Although this beautiful NT-endemic bird (one of the four species unique to the NT) had been reported in the Maningrida region previously, there were no confirmed detailed records for the area until now. This region might be the only one in the NT where this species (and the Gouldian) approach the coast, since the centre of their restricted range is around Katherine, and whilst the termite mounds in which these parrots dig their nest tunnels are present, they are unlikely to nest much further north than Mainoru.

Many migratory species had returned by May, and although the destination of most species during the intervening wet season remains a mystery, some undoubtedly had flown as far away as southeast Australia to breed. Flocks of Magpie-larks walking in open areas, Straw-necked and Glossy Ibis in flooded drainage lines, and groups of White-breasted Woodswallows wheeling overhead, all reflect the start of the dry season. Spotted Nightjars were spotted at three sites during 1 hour of road spotlighting one evening. The highly mobile Varied Lorikeet (almost absent in January) was feeding on flowers of three species of eucalypts starting to flower (*Corymbia polycarpa* and *Eucalyptus miniata*) or close to the end of their flowering season (*C. bleeseri*). In the now dry paperbark woodlands, where the paperbarks had apparently finished flowering 1-2 months earlier, honeyeaters such as the highly mobile Banded Honeyeater (absent in January) were fighting over one of the few sources of nectar available – the mistletoe *Amyema bifurcata* growing on bloodwoods (*C. latifolia*).

Raptors are back. Black-breasted Buzzard and Spotted Harrier and large numbers of presumably migratory Brown Goshawks were recorded during the May survey. Another exciting sighting was of a distant soaring raptor that was possibly a **Red Goshawk** at the Ramingining turnoff, 12 km from the Lodge. The search is still on for a reliable local site for this rare species as hopes are high following the sightings last year in the vicinity of one of the crater lakes, as well as near a nest (later abandoned) close to the Lodge.

Sadly, the elusive Northern Shrike-tit was as elusive in May as it was in January, although a few calls were heard at one of the sites where these birds were seen in October. Hooded Robins were (apart from one individual) also very quiet, although the Varied Sittella and Grey Butcherbird were vocal, and relatively easy to locate. Recent or active breeding was evident for several species: Red-backed Fairy-wren, White-throated Honeyeater, Brown Honeyeater, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher and White- Varied Sittella were feeding fledglings at one or more sites, while a nest of Masked Finches was found containing eggs. Breeding records for most birds of the Top End are very few, and these data all help to piece together the picture on seasonal responses by birds to the extreme climate seasonality of the Top End.

All is set for a wonderful 2009 Bird Week!