



BIRDING AUSTRALIA: NORTHERN TERRITORY – ALICE SPRINGS BIRDING TRIP REPORT

05 – 11 OCTOBER 2023

By Andrew Walker



Spinifex Pigeon gave incredible prolonged and close views while we were birding in Alice Springs – what a stunner!

Overview

This Alice Springs birding tour started in Alice Springs on the 6th of October 2023 and ended back there on the 11th of October 2023. This short bird tour focused on birding around Alice Springs but ventured further afield to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park; this area is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its natural and cultural values. We visited the spectacular Uluru (formerly known as Ayers Rock) as well as Erldunda, the geographical center of Australia!

We recorded 90 bird species on this Alice Springs bird tour, and all species were seen. Plenty of specials of the "red center" were found, including **Spinifex Pigeon**, **Diamond Dove**, **Spinifexbird**, **Rufous Grasswren**, **Dusky Grasswren**, **Banded Whiteface**, **Southern Whiteface**, **Crested Bellbird**, **Western Bowerbird**, **Black-breasted Buzzard**, **Wedge-tailed Eagle**, **Red-backed Kingfisher**, **Rainbow Bee-eater**, **Grey-headed Honeyeater**, **Pied Honeyeater**, **Crimson Chat**, **White-backed Swallow**, **Chiming Wedgebill**, **Cinnamon Quail-thrush**, **Hooded Robin**, **Little Crow**, **Australian Raven**, **Purple-backed Fairywren**, **Splendid Fairywren**, **White-winged Fairywren**, **Red-browed Pardalote**, and **Australian Zebra Finch**.

It was a big parrot year, with loads of **Budgerigars** seen, which was an incredible sight wherever we went. We also saw **Mulga Parrot**, **Australian Ringneck**, **Red-tailed Black Cockatoo**, **Pink Cockatoo** (formerly Major Mitchell's Cockatoo), **Galah**, **Little Corella**, and **Cockatiel**, but best of all (and a massive surprise), a small flock of the rare, localized, and nomadic **Princess Parrot**.

Our dawn and dusk visits to Uluru were another huge highlight of the tour, seeing this world-famous landmark in the changing light of the sun rising and setting will live long in the memory.



*Part of a flock of over 3,000 **Budgerigars** that we enjoyed watching ahead of sunset at Uluru.*

Detailed Report

Day 1, 6th October 2023. Arrival in Alice Springs

We arrived in Alice Springs in the late afternoon and had a group welcome meal in the evening, discussing the plans for the coming week of birding in the arid Alice Springs and Uluru (Ayers Rock) areas.

Day 2, 7th October 2023. Birding the Alice Springs area

For our first birding in Alice Springs, we visited the Alice Springs Desert Park, and it was a great introduction to a suite of birds found in the arid center of Australia. Before leaving the hotel, right outside our rooms, we had **Little Crow**, **Pied Butcherbird**, **Galah**, and **Yellow-throated Miner**. As we made our way to the park, we added **Australian Magpie**, **Magpie-lark**, and **Australian Ringneck**.

On arrival at the Alice Springs Desert Park, we found **Black Kite**, **Whistling Kite**, **Singing Honeyeater**, **Grey-headed Honeyeater**, **Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater**, **White-plumed Honeyeater**, **Brown Honeyeater**, **Rufous Whistler**, **Black-faced Cuckooshrike**, **Purple-backed Fairywren**, and **Splendid Fairywren**, all before we reached the car park!



Splendid Fairywren is a gorgeous bird and we saw plenty during the Alice Springs bird tour.

We spent the morning walking around the trail system in the park. At first it was quite quiet, but a flock of **Australian Zebra Finches** soon spiced things up, as did a flock of **Crested Pigeons** and a couple of **Peaceful Doves**. Unfortunately, several flocks of **Budgerigars** sped across the site but

didn't land in view. A **Nankeen Kestrel** and **Wedge-tailed Eagle** were noted above a nearby ridgeline, and then we hit an area that was very busy with birds. An area of low vegetation gave us our first **Diamond Doves** and then the star attraction, **Spinifex Pigeon**. It was playing hide-and-seek for a while, but then came out into a better position and gave us some absolutely incredible views. Prolonged and very close, see the cover image! While we were waiting for the pigeon to show better, we noted several other species, including **Crested Bellbird**, **Grey Shrikethrush**, **White-browed Babbler**, **Hooded Robin**, more **Australian Zebra Finches**, and several of the honeyeater species already mentioned.

As we continued on our walk, we found **Western Bowerbird**, **Grey-crowned Babbler**, **Brown Goshawk**, **Collared Sparrowhawk**, **Brown Falcon**, **Australian Ringneck**, lots of **Splendid Fairywrens**, **Mistletoebird**, and **Fairy Martin**. It was a thoroughly enjoyable morning, and we also appreciated seeing the different habitats and landscapes that really added to the experience, with so many beautiful wildflowers and butterflies on show too.



Crested Bellbird gave some great views. It was more interested in finding food for its young, rather than worrying about us watching it.

After a break for lunch during the middle of the day, we took a walk at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station Historical Reserve, where we found our main target, **Red-browed Pardalote**, as well as the closely related **Striated Pardalote**. Both pardalotes showed well, which was appreciated. Walking around the grounds, we picked up some nesting **Rainbow Bee-eaters**, which showed nicely, and we also noted **Australian Magpie**, **Pied Butcherbird**, **Little Crow**, **Yellow-throated Miner**, **White-plumed Honeyeater**, **Black-faced Woodswallow**, **Weebill**, **Crested Pigeon**, and **Spotted Dove**. We also found a **Black-tailed Monitor** sunning itself on a rock.



Australian Ringneck was a common, but rather attractive sight around parks and gardens in Alice Springs. This subspecies is also sometimes known as the "Port Lincoln Parrot".

Day 3, 8th October 2023. Birding the Alice Springs area

We spent the morning birding in some arid open areas to the southeast of Alice Springs, where we found lots of new and exciting species.

As we drove along the dry and dusty dirt road, we made several stops in different vegetation types, and during these various stops, we found lots of target birds, including **Budgerigar** (great perched views rather than the flyover views had the previous day), **Mulga Parrot**, **Australian Ringneck**, **Red-tailed Black Cockatoo**, **Banded Whiteface**, **Southern Whiteface**, **Cinnamon Quail-thrush**, **White-backed Swallow**, **Red-backed Kingfisher**, **Brown Songlark**, **Rufous Songlark**, **Australian Pipit**, **White-winged Fairywren**, **Splendid Fairywren**, **Inland Thornbill**, **Chestnut-rumped Thornbill**, **Grey Butcherbird**, **Crested Bellbird**, **Hooded Robin**, **Australian Zebra Finch**, **Little Buttonquail**, **Black-shouldered Kite**, **Wedge-tailed Eagle**, **Brown Falcon**, and **Nankeen Kestrel**.

After a break for lunch and a siesta during the hottest part of the day, we ventured back out along the same road that we'd explored during the morning but called in at some different spots. Here, we found two family groups of **Purple-backed Fairywrens**, the males giving some excellent views. Other species seen here included **Red-backed Kingfisher**, **Western Bowerbird**, **Black-faced Cuckooshrike**, and **Black-faced Woodswallow**. A brief stop at a small waterbody resulted in us finding a pair of **Common Bronzewings** coming in for a drink at dusk, with a pair of gorgeous **Mulga Parrots** nearby. On the drive back into Alice Springs, we saw **Red Kangaroo** and **Common Wallaroo**, and earlier we saw a **Central Bearded Dragon**.



*A pair of **Banded Whiteface** were seeking some shelter in a bush where they showed nicely.*



*A stunning male **White-winged Fairywren** gave us some excellent views.*

Day 4, 9th October 2023. Alice Springs to Erldunda

We spent the early morning birding along a dirt road southeast of Alice Springs, and after carefully walking our way through a stand of spinifex (a very sharp *Triodia* grass), we found ourselves

watching the tough and secretive **Spinifexbird**, one of the main targets of the trip. **Spinifexbird** is a warbler-like bird that is part of the Grassbirds and allies family (Locustellidae). It took some pinning down, but once we got it, we had some good views. While looking for the **Spinifexbird**, we also saw **Budgerigar**, **White-winged Fairywren**, **Little Buttonquail**, **Brown Songlark**, **Australian Zebra Finch**, **Black-faced Woodswallow**, and **Crimson Chat**.



*A grassbird of the desert! **Spinifexbird** was at home in a dense stand of impenetrable spinifex. Luckily, it eventually came out into view, allowing us all to get great views of this top tour target.*

We moved locations and found some rocky outcrops to look over. Once we were in the correct habitat, it didn't take too long to find our main target from the site, **Dusky Grasswren**. We found two family groups, though the first group was getting some hassle from a **Willie Wagtail** and, as such, were a bit skittish. A second family group showed a little better. While in this area, we also saw **Purple-backed Fairywren**, **Australian Zebra Finch**, **Red-backed Kingfisher**, **Rainbow Bee-eater**, **Brown Falcon**, and **Nankeen Kestrel**.

After enjoying lunch in the Olive Pink Botanic Garden in Alice Springs, we commenced our journey south to Erldunda, our overnight stop as we ultimately made our way to Uluru (Ayers Rock). We made a couple of stops along the way. The first stop, at a waterhole, gave us sightings of **White-necked Heron**, **Black-fronted Dotterel**, **Masked Lapwing**, **Maned Duck**, **Grey Teal**, **Red-backed Kingfisher**, **Little Corella**, **Australian Hobby**, and multiple honeyeaters we had become very familiar with over recent days. An ice cream stop resulted in a sighting of **Pink Cockatoo** (formerly, and until very recently, known as Major Mitchell's Cockatoo) and an uncovered water source on a station (farm) a little further along the road provided sightings of **Budgerigar**, **Galah**, **Little Corella**, **Australian Ringneck**, **Fairy Martin**, **White-winged**

Triller, White-plumed Honeyeater, Yellow-throated Miner, and Australian Raven. After sunset, a **Whiskered Tern** was noted flying around the hotel car park.



A Dusky Grasswren showed rather nicely.



Purple-backed Fairywren was one of three species of fairywrens seen on this Alice Springs birding tour.

Day 5, 10th October 2023. Erldunda to Uluru (Ayers Rock)

We did some early morning birding near Erldunda, where we found our main target, **Chiming Wedgebill**, and also found a flock of over 40 **Crimson Chats**. It was a great start to the day, and we enjoyed watching family groups of **White-winged Fairywren**, **Purple-backed Fairywren**, and **Splendid Fairywren**. Other species noted included **Cinnamon Quail-thrush**, **Southern Whiteface**, **Singing Honeyeater**, **White-backed Swallow**, **Mulga Parrot**, **Brown Falcon**, and **Nankeen Kestrel**.

After checking out of our accommodation, we made our journey west to Yulara, our base for the night, to explore the nearby Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. We spent the afternoon watching a flock of over 3,000 **Budgerigars** swirling around in a stunning murmuration in front of Uluru (Ayers Rock) as they moved between feeding and resting areas. We also stayed to watch the sunset at Uluru, a really impressive sight.



Our group watched Uluru change colors during the late afternoon.

Day 6, 11th October 2023. Uluru (Ayers Rock) to Alice Springs

We made an early morning visit to Uluru (Ayers Rock) to watch the sunrise, and wow, what a sight it was, possibly more beautiful even than the previous night's sunset! There were fewer birds around during the dawn period, mainly just a few **Singing Honeyeaters**, a **Nankeen Kestrel**, and a small flock of **Budgerigars**, but we were really here for the view, and it was very impressive.

We moved locations and started birding along a pretty sand dune system. We found several new birds, such as **Masked Woodswallow**, **Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo**, **White-fronted Honeyeater**, and **Pied Honeyeater**. After a fair bit of searching, we located the rare and localized **Rufous Grasswren**, which showed well and proved to be a tour highlight. We also had excellent views of

thousands of **Budgerigars** flying over the dunes, some of them landing close by. **Crimson Chats** were breeding and showing very well too, the males looking glorious in the early morning sunlight.



*The top prize in the sand dunes near Uluru was this localized **Rufous Grasswren**, which showed well.*



*There were thousands of **Budgerigars** flying around, with birds occasionally landing close to us.*

While wandering around the dune system looking for the **Rufous Grasswrens**, we were having a constant stream of **Budgerigars** flying over, some right over our head and within arm's reach! A few small flocks of **Cockatiels** were also noted flying over too, but then the surprise of the tour happened. We were alerted to an unusual parrot call and looked up to see a small flock (five birds) of the rare, nomadic, and seldom-seen **Princess Parrot** flying through – a remarkable sight.



*It was a bumper season for **Crimson Chats** breeding in the sand dune systems around Uluru, and they gave great views.*

After our morning birding, we left the Uluru area and commenced the journey back to Alice Springs, where we arrived in the middle of the afternoon. The journey was uneventful, and we noted **Black-breasted Buzzard**, **Wedge-tailed Eagle**, and other common roadside raptors along the way.

We had a final group dinner together and chatted about the many highlights we had over the previous week of birding the Alice Springs and Uluru area (and longer because everyone on this tour had also joined our Top End bird tour that ran prior to this tour). Some of the top highlights from this trip were **Spinifexbird**, **Rufous Grasswren**, **Budgerigar**, **Spinifex Pigeon**, **Crimson Chat**, **Purple-backed Fairywren**, and **Princess Parrot**.

Bird List – Following IOC (13.2)

All species were seen. The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: VU = Vulnerable.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
Maned Duck	<i>Chenonetta jubata</i>
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx basalis</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>
Common Bronzewing	<i>Phaps chalcoptera</i>
Crested Pigeon	<i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i>
Spinifex Pigeon	<i>Geophaps plumifera</i>
Diamond Dove	<i>Geopelia cuneata</i>
Peaceful Dove	<i>Geopelia placida</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Australasian Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus novaehollandiae</i>
Buttonquail (Turnicidae)	
Little Buttonquail	<i>Turnix velox</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Masked Lapwing	<i>Vanellus miles</i>
Black-fronted Dotterel	<i>Elseya melanops</i>
Gulls, Terns, Skimmers (Laridae)	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
White-necked Heron	<i>Ardea pacifica</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus axillaris</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Black-breasted Buzzard	<i>Hamirostra melanosternon</i>
Little Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus morphnoides</i>
Wedge-tailed Eagle	<i>Aquila audax</i>
Brown Goshawk	<i>Accipiter fasciatus</i>
Collared Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter cirrocephalus</i>
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Whistling Kite	<i>Haliastur sphenurus</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Red-backed Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus pyrrhopygius</i>
Bee-eaters (Meropidae)	
Rainbow Bee-eater	<i>Merops ornatus</i>
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Nankeen Kestrel	<i>Falco cenchroides</i>
Australian Hobby	<i>Falco longipennis</i>
Brown Falcon	<i>Falco berigora</i>
Cockatoos (Cacatuidae)	
Cockatiel	<i>Nymphicus hollandicus</i>
Red-tailed Black Cockatoo	<i>Calyptorhynchus banksii</i>
Galah	<i>Eolophus roseicapilla</i>
Pink Cockatoo	<i>Cacatua leadbeateri</i>
Little Corella	<i>Cacatua sanguinea</i>
Old World Parrots (Psittaculidae)	
Princess Parrot	<i>Polytelis alexandrae</i>
Mulga Parrot	<i>Psephotellus varius</i>
Australian Ringneck	<i>Barnardius zonarius</i>
Budgerigar	<i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i>
Bowerbirds (Ptilonorhynchidae)	
Western Bowerbird	<i>Chlamydera guttata</i>
Australasian Wrens (Maluridae)	
Purple-backed Fairywren	<i>Malurus assimilis</i>
Splendid Fairywren	<i>Malurus splendens</i>
White-winged Fairywren	<i>Malurus leucopterus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Rufous Grasswren	<i>Amytornis whitei</i>
Dusky Grasswren	<i>Amytornis purnelli</i>
Honeyeaters (Meliphagidae)	
Crimson Chat	<i>Epthianura tricolor</i>
Pied Honeyeater	<i>Certhionyx variegatus</i>
Brown Honeyeater	<i>Lichmera indistincta</i>
White-fronted Honeyeater	<i>Purnella albifrons</i>
Singing Honeyeater	<i>Gavicalis virescens</i>
Grey-headed Honeyeater	<i>Ptilotula keartlandi</i>
White-plumed Honeyeater	<i>Ptilotula penicillata</i>
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	<i>Acanthagenys rufogularis</i>
Yellow-throated Miner	<i>Manorina flavigula</i>
Pardalotes (Pardalotidae)	
Red-browed Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus rubricatus</i>
Striated Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus striatus</i>
Australasian Warblers (Acanthizidae)	
Weebill	<i>Smicrornis brevirostris</i>
Western Gerygone	<i>Gerygone fusca</i>
Inland Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza apicalis</i>
Chestnut-rumped Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza uropygialis</i>
Southern Whiteface - VU	<i>Aphelocephala leucopsis</i>
Banded Whiteface	<i>Aphelocephala nigrincta</i>
Australasian Babblers (Pomatostomidae)	
Grey-crowned Babbler	<i>Pomatostomus temporalis</i>
White-browed Babbler	<i>Pomatostomus superciliosus</i>
Whipbirds (Psophodidae)	
Chiming Wedgebill	<i>Psophodes occidentalis</i>
Jewel-babblers, Quail-thrushes (Cinclosomatidae)	
Cinnamon Quail-thrush	<i>Cinclosoma cinnamomeum</i>
Woodswallows, Butcherbirds & Allies (Artamidae)	
Masked Woodswallow	<i>Artamus personatus</i>
White-browed Woodswallow	<i>Artamus superciliosus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Black-faced Woodswallow	<i>Artamus cinereus</i>
Little Woodswallow	<i>Artamus minor</i>
Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>
Grey Butcherbird	<i>Cracticus torquatus</i>
Pied Butcherbird	<i>Cracticus nigrogularis</i>
Cuckooshrikes (Campephagidae)	
Black-faced Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina novaehollandiae</i>
White-winged Triller	<i>Lalage tricolor</i>
Australo-Papuan Bellbirds (Oreoicidae)	
Crested Bellbird	<i>Oreoica gutturalis</i>
Whistlers & Allies (Pachycephalidae)	
Rufous Whistler	<i>Pachycephala rufiventris</i>
Grey Shrikethrush	<i>Colluricincla harmonica</i>
Fantails (Rhipiduridae)	
Willie Wagtail	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>
Monarchs (Monarchidae)	
Magpie-lark	<i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Torresian Crow	<i>Corvus orru</i>
Little Crow	<i>Corvus bennetti</i>
Australian Raven	<i>Corvus coronoides</i>
Australasian Robins (Petroicidae)	
Hooded Robin	<i>Melanodryas cucullata</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
White-backed Swallow	<i>Cheramoeca leucosterna</i>
Fairy Martin	<i>Petrochelidon ariel</i>
Grassbirds & Allies (Locustellidae)	
Spinifexbird	<i>Poodytes carteri</i>
Brown Songlark	<i>Cincloramphus cruralis</i>
Rufous Songlark	<i>Cincloramphus mathewsi</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Flowerpeckers (Dicaeidae)	
Mistletoebird	<i>Dicaeum hirundinaceum</i>
Waxbills, Munias & Allies (Estrildidae)	
Australian Zebra Finch	<i>Taeniopygia castanotis</i>
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Australian Pipit	<i>Anthus australis</i>

Total seen	90
Total heard only	0
Total recorded	90

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Kangaroos, Wallabies, and Allies (Macropodidae)	
Common Wallaroo	<i>Osphranter robustus</i>
Red Kangaroo	<i>Osphranter rufus</i>
Black-flanked Rock Wallaby	<i>Petrogale lateralis</i>
Camelids (Camelidae)	
Dromedary Camel	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>
Canids (Canidae)	
Feral Dog (Dingo) (H)	<i>Canis familiaris dingo</i>
Hares and Rabbits (Leporidae)	
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Total	6

Reptile List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Monitor Lizards (Varanidae)	
Black-tailed Monitor	<i>Varanus tristis</i>
Perentie	<i>Varanus giganteus</i>
Dragons (Agamidae)	
Central Bearded Dragon	<i>Pogona vitticeps</i>
Long-snouted Lashail	<i>Lophognathus longirostris</i>
Skinks (Scincidae)	
Lively Ctenotus	<i>Ctenotus alacer</i>
Elapid Snakes (Elapidae)	
Yellow-faced Whipsnake	<i>Demansia psammophis</i>
Total	6