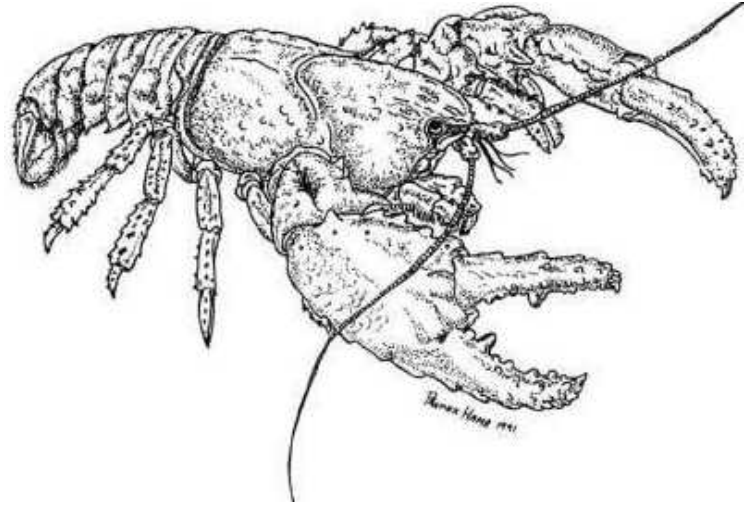


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Return to the Daintree World Heritage Area

by **Jim Nelson**



Daintree River Mouth

I last visited the Daintree World Heritage Area north of the Daintree River in 1990 when the road north of the ferry crossing to Cape Tribulation was a rutted mud track that could only be negotiated with a 4 wheel drive. Given the recent cold and wet Tasmanian winter (2009), by August my mind went back to that previous escape to a sublime winter climate and all its spectacular natural values. Reasonable flights were available, so Deb and I succumbed to the lure.

The ferry crossing the Daintree River was much the same as I remembered, only much busier, but the road to Cape Tribulation is now sealed, and as a result there is considerable traffic. I began to fear what might lie ahead. Along the road through the southern end there are many private blocks of land.

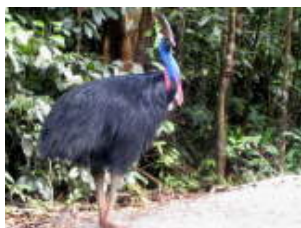
Property developers carved up these 'little pieces of paradise' during the 'Bjelke Peterson years' (the Queensland Premier at the time) before the area became a National Park. In Peterson's time the grand plan was to clear the forest near the coast to grow more sugar cane. Over 1000 rural residential blocks of land were created in the early 80's and sold off by entrepreneurs. Governments are now paying millions to buy back some of this land, and to put in minimal impact tourism infrastructure. Unfortunately, many of these blocks have largely been cleared, and a variety of activities now take place ranging from a tea plantation, to tourism ventures, various types of farming and a variety of 'lifestyle' activities, which seem to include free range dogs. Once you get past these, the glory of the Daintree's ancient tropical forest begins to emerge.

The Daintree tropical forest between the Daintree River and Cooktown is the largest surviving tropical lowland rainforest in Australia. Much of the area is jungle clad mountains sloping down to the Coral Sea. The lush vegetation is practically impenetrable in many places without the aid of a track. The backdrop of mountains, often clothed in clouds, with the forest jungle sweeping down towards the shore is both majestic and intriguing. It has survived short-sighted plans for development because of political activists attracting world attention to its majesty. One of those former activists (Mike Berwick) is now the Mayor of Douglas Shire.

However scenically stunning, this area is scientifically matched by the relatively recent discovery that the Daintree rainforest is a living archive; its remnants of plants and forest type once covered much of Australia. Some of the current plant species evolved in the age of Dinosaurs and thus provide a living link with Gondwanan flora.

Trying to get one's head around the incredible diversity of plants in this tropical forest could end up as a lifetime pursuit. I purchased the compact guide of a *Plants of Tropical Queensland* at the Cairns botanic garden. This informed me that there were over 1000 species of trees alone in the rainforest of the wet tropics, along with an incredible range of understorey plants. The guide could contain only a small number of the plants for the area (485), and was divided into prominent members of the various habitats such as Mangroves, Rainforest, Coastal Forest, Inland Forest, etc. I soon became overwhelmed by this abundant diversity, and gave up trying to identify anything that wasn't particularly spectacular along with readily unique features which might lead me to an answer. I met a retired botanist at the Botanic Gardens (a volunteer at the shop) who informed me that it is almost impossible to learn all the plants of the wet tropics. Even if one were to concentrate only on the Daintree, there are still over 400 tree species alone.

The other book I purchased was a bird book for the area, which was somewhat less intimidating in numbers of species, but still very frustrating because of the difficulty of identifying species within such thick, lush vegetation.



Cassowary

Our first exciting bird encounter was with a 'modern dinosaur' - a meeting with a Cassowary. This very large flightless bird is quite spectacular. These amazingly strange looking birds, with their dinosaur-like crest, their bright blue head and red wattles, their black feathers that look almost like hair, along with their stout, scaly legs and huge feet do truly suggest the linkage with dinosaurs. It is from the appearance of their feathers that they were named after the *Casuarina foliage*.

Cassowaries have a reputation for being potentially dangerous, but the one we saw up close was totally intent



on eating the blue fruit of the Quondong tree (*Elaeocarpus eumundi*) that littered the ground, and paid little attention to me as I cautiously crept closer for a photo. (We have a relative of the Quondong tree amongst our Tasmanian flora with *Elaeocarpus reticulatus*, (Blueberry Ash) which is found on Flinders and King Islands.)



Quondong

Our first stop (where we saw the Cassowary) was at the Daintree Discovery Centre at Cow Bay. We wanted to visit the Interpretation Centre there with its extensive platform running several metres off the forest floor. The Centre has won well deserved acclaim, and promotes a strong conservation message, and we found the people running it were willing to share their knowledge of both the wonders and the problems of the Daintree WHA.

After paying an entrance fee, a recorded guided walk is provided through a hand held receiver with a key pad to key in the numbered feature along the platform. This is an excellent introduction to the rainforest for it places you in the canopy where a lot of the action takes place. There are so many epiphytes and fruiting bodies that grow far above the forest floor, and it is a wonderful opportunity to get up close and personal with these. Eventually, you reach a tower where you can climb up several levels through the trees, with platforms at the different levels and finally come to the top platform overlooking the canopy. This look at all the different levels on the way up allows you close views of epiphytic orchids as well as other flowers, fruits and plants in the canopy. It also lets you view some of the birds that operate at the different levels, along with numerous invertebrates that live in the canopy.

At the first level of the interpretation tower, you can also choose to enter a large information building containing a great deal of interpretive materials. You can then exit the building down the stairs to a boardwalk along the forest floor to look at that level. Your ticket to the Centre allows you to go in and out during the day, and to return the next day if you want. At \$33 each, it is good value if you desire to spend the time to get up close and personal with the various levels of the forest, and gain understanding along with a unique perspective of the different forest levels. I particularly appreciated a close up, eye level view of the epiphytic ferns, such as the Bird's Nest (*Asplenium australasicum*) and the Elkhorn (*Platycterium hillii*).



King Fern

Speaking of ferns, a most impressive species is the King Fern (*Angiopteris evecta*). This species is said to be the world's largest ground fern. Its fronds are truly impressive reaching up to 5 metres long. This is a very primitive fern similar to fossils found in Upper Paleozoic rocks up to 300 million years old. Giant ferns such as this provided the source of most coal on all continents. Ferns are vascular plants, and the fronds are kept erect by the pressure of the sap ('turgor') in the cells. The King Fern is favoured by wild pigs as a food source.

From the Discovery Centre to Cape Tribulation the Daintree forest was pretty much as I remembered it. However, there are now some good interpretive tracks leading down to the ocean (where the rainforest really does reach the reef), and these were much appreciated because they allow access through the often almost impenetrable vegetation, and provide information signage along the way. You can see Orange-footed Scrubfowl and Brush-turkey along with the occasional huge mounds they make for incubating their eggs. You walk on platforms through the middle of mangrove species, with their array of prop roots, and their knee-like breathing roots (rhizophora). The signage informs that 'one teaspoon of Mangrove mud can contain around 10 billion bacteria', providing a basis of an incredibly rich food chain and thus being an invaluable nursery area for many important fish species. Once

mangroves were cleared and despised, but are now largely protected.

While walking through an area with mangrove species along the stream, I noticed some movement in the water and quietly approached the water's edge. Whatever it might be was now climbing out of the water onto a rock. Closer inspection revealed several mudskippers in the shallows. Mudskippers are completely amphibious fish and are members of the family Gobiidae (Gobies). (We often see little Gobie fish when looking in tide pools, which are not amphibious, but have very similar looking heads to the Mudskippers). One Mudskipper allowed me to get within about 60cm for a photo.

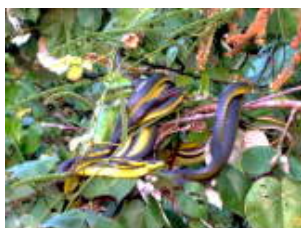


Mudskipper

One particularly common invertebrate inhabitant that needs to be avoided while walking through the forest is the ever-present green ant. These are lovely looking ants, but when disturbed they can deliver a painful bite. Unlike our Jackjumpers and Inchmen which sting you with venom, these green menaces bite open the skin and then squirt formic acid into the bite. The resulting burning, stinging sensation increases your awareness of their presence enormously! These ants form fairly small colonies within curled leaves, and if you happen to brush against these structures you can expect to be bitten. The forming of the nests is rather amazing, because it is accomplished by holding their larvae up and weaving them back and forth as they exude a silk over leaves which are then pulled close together to form the loose nest.

Anyone visiting the Daintree region should take a boat trip on the Daintree River. For bird watching, this means an early morning trip for the best sightings. To see crocodiles, however, it is best to go in the afternoon. We did a late afternoon (4-6pm) trip hoping to see a bit of both, and this was very rewarding. We managed to see a few crocs, and surprised one large male which is the local giant at 5M and weighing several hundred kilos. I have a wonderful photo of the splash he made as he quickly dived from the bank into the water. A 3m female was more cooperative and allowed a few photos before taking to the water.

Viewing the bird fauna on the river was very rewarding. We had found it very difficult to identify birds in thick, tropical rainforest. However, from the boat a number of the birds could be seen more clearly in the foliage at the river's edge, while water birds and raptors were also frequent and visible. The Azure Kingfisher was a particular vision of beauty. But the most spectacular bird was a rare sighting (according to our guide), and that was the large Great-billed Heron. This is an important bird to the ecosystem, being one of the few animals that can prey on small crocodiles. A Darter flew directly overhead with its obvious snake-like neck, otherwise looking much like a cormorant. There was also a brief sighting by the guide of the Little Kingfisher, but the rest of us missed it. This is a Kingfisher smaller than a sparrow, and confined to the tropics. Maybe next trip....



Tree snakes mating

A particularly exciting sight (for me, at least) during the boat trip was a writhing clump of tree snakes on the end of a tree branch hanging over the river. These would have been males clumped around a single female. They were quite intent on their purpose, and allowed us to come in very close for a photo. The guide said they had been on that branch for a couple of days.

This is but a small sample of our 3 days in the Daintree area, and I hope it might encourage others to see this wonderful area. For those interested in natural wonders in Australia it is perhaps unparalleled in terms of its abundant

richness. It encompasses about 1200 square kilometres from the Daintree River north to Cooktown and west to the Great Divide. Astonishingly, it is claimed to be home to: 60% of Australia's bat species, 30% of our frog species, 23% of our reptile species, 18% of our bird species and 62% of our butterflies.

It is a sublime time of year during the 'dry' in August to visit this area which is one of the wettest places in Australia. We never got out of shorts and T-shirts, there were almost no mossies and the temperature was mid 20s. Back home in Tassie in our 'wet' it had rained 450 mm over the 5 days we were away!

References:

- *Daintree, Jewel of Tropical North Queensland*. First published 1997, written and Published by Lloyd Nielsen, PO Box 55 Mt. Molloy, Qld 4871
- *Plants of Tropical North Queensland, the compact guide*. John Beasley, 2006 Footloose Publications [E-mail](#)

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