



Weekend at Bruny

How many birds can you see in just three days? *Natasha Harris* heads to Bruny Island for a long weekend to find out, and uncovers a whole lot more in the process.

When you work at BirdLife Australia, you keep company with some pretty formidable birders, and it's hard not to judge your own skills and experience by comparison. What's more, you hear and read about so many intriguing and incredible species that the urge to see them in the field only grows. My fledgling life list is a humble one, and very geographically limited, so last spring, when the chance to visit Bruny Island on a three-day birding trip came my way, I jumped at the chance.

As a location to kick-start a birding list, Bruny Island is ideal. Tucked against the south-eastern coast of Tasmania, Bruny packs a lot of biodiversity into a relatively small area, with a range of ecosystems that support over 150 bird species, including all 12 of Tasmania's endemics. It is divided into north and south islands, joined by a

narrow isthmus known as The Neck. For the Indigenous Nuenonne people, it is Lunawanna-alonnah, names now given to two small townships on South Bruny. Sharing Tasmania's species diversity, and free from many of the threats facing birds there, Bruny Island is a refuge for several endangered species. The Critically Endangered Swift Parrot breeds there in the summer, and the Endangered Tassie endemic, the Forty-spotted Pardalote, has one of three remaining populations on Bruny Island.

So one chilly Friday morning finds me on the Hobart waterfront, waiting with our tour group and guide Bridie for the ferry that will take us across to the northernmost tip of the island, Dennes Point. The birdwatching begins within moments of our departure, with big Pacific and Kelp

Gulls circling overhead, and a pair of Black-faced Cormorants soberly observing our progress out to sea from the top of the John Garrow Light.

As soon as we hit the island, we tick off our first endemic. We've collected our boxed lunches from the Jetty Café and are heading south in a minivan when we spot the knee-high, dark 'turbo-chook' in the farmland surrounding us. As the earliest site of white settlement on the island in the early 1800s, the landscape of North Bruny is dominated by open pastures and light bushland—perfect foraging ground for the Tasmanian Native-hen.

The first day's adventure is a long walk out to Miles Beach, on the eastern coast, through a dry sclerophyll forest. With so many new birds and birdsongs animating the forest, we're especially grateful to have a

bird expert along with us—Dr Cat Young from Inala Nature Tours. A threatened species expert from the Difficult Birds Group, and a long-time guide for Inala, Cat is familiar with Tasmanian wildlife and terrain, and adept at identifying the sounds around us. From the resonant, comical *bonk* of the 'pobblebonk' or eastern banjo frog to the pulsing, descending trill of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Cat has a name for every sound we hear, and the longer we walk, the more the landscape comes to life around us.

My first glimpse of the Yellow Wattlebird with its fancy, drooping wattles is exciting—how could such an exotic-looking bird be so common?—but the morning quickly becomes a blur of birds and names as we stop every 20 metres to locate a new call. Pallid Cuckoo, Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Brown Thornbill, Strong-billed

Left: The Forty-spotted Pardalote was once widespread across Tasmania, but is now restricted to a small area in the south-east which includes Bruny Island.

Photo by John Barkla

Above: Tasmania's endemic Green Rosella is a sight to behold. Photo by Helen Cunningham



Honeyeater, Crescent Honeyeater... the list goes on, and we pause on the side of the track each time, bins trained on the trees above.

The track we are walking takes us south-east to the secluded beach and impressive rock formation known as The Arch on the south-eastern coast of North Bruny. The gourmet lunchboxes come out, and we take a break in the lee of the rocky cliffs looking out over the vast Tasman Sea.

Before we head up the cliffs again, our guides lead us quietly along the beach in the other direction, evidently on the lookout for something. The force of the wind whips back our hoods and finds every gap in our layers, and I'm inclined to leave this remote beach to the gulls and oystercatchers, when Cat and Bridie stop and point halfway up the sand. There, holding its ground against the buffeting winds, is a tiny Hooded Plover, scuttling like a wind-up toy along the sand.

Though I've read and written about them, I've never seen a Hooded Plover before, and the sight is unexpectedly moving. It could just be my knowledge of the odds stacked against them that makes this little bird seem so vulnerable, but the fact that we could only reach this beach after hours on foot makes me glad. On this beach, it's us humans who are out of place, while for the rest of Australia's coastline, it's the Hooded Plovers that have been pushed to the margins by human activity.

Our camp is a series of 'glamping' tents set on a sloping hill among the trees of Mount Mangana Forest Reserve, with a cosy camp lodge and bathrooms that offer amazing views through a single glass wall. A hot shower overlooking the forest and the fresh white sheets on my bed are welcome delights at the end of the long day, but the meal we enjoy of Bruny Island produce has to top the list of luxuries I wouldn't have expected on a birding trip.

My bird list is looking pretty healthy after just one day: over 30 birds I'd never seen before, and at least half the endemics. Though we stopped at a few stands of blue gum as we drove that day, the Swift Parrot had eluded us, and there was some conjecture over whether the tiny brown

birds a few of us had seen flitting about the camp site before dinner were Tasmanian or Brown Thornbills. Try as I might, I still found it difficult to clearly remember a bird's features once I had the field guide in hand—could the delicate little beauty darting through the branches while I showered be a Scrubtit, or a Tasmanian Scrubwren? I had an impression of a paler colour around the throat, but after flicking through the pictures in the *Guide to Birds of Bruny Island*, the image in my mind's eye melted away. But when you share your shower with a curious little bird, does it really matter if you know its name?

The next day we visited Inala Nature Reserve, a 600-hectare private reserve owned by Dr Tonia Cochran, who has been involved in the conservation of Endangered Forty-spotted Pardalotes for more than 30 years. Thanks to decades of planting manna gums at Inala and elsewhere on Bruny Island, the population of Forty-spots on Inala has grown tenfold since numbering just 12 in the early 1990s.

At the custom-built 'pardalote tower', an elevated viewing platform set among the white gums, we have our first sightings of this tiny bird. The pardalotes seem to be whizzing in wide loops around the trees, only briefly stopping long enough for anyone to get a photo. Cat explains that the birds are manna 'farmers': they scratch the leaves with a tiny hook on their beaks, causing the sugary manna to ooze from the damaged leaves. This accounts for the birds' circular flight, as they prepare the leaves so they can collect the manna on their next round. Watching them has us all transfixed. Though it has begun to rain quite heavily, we can't drag ourselves away, and huddle undercover with binoculars and lenses trained on the trees above for some time.

As expected, Inala is a boon for my growing bird list. Specifically purchased by a far-sighted Tonia as a haven for Bruny wildlife, Inala supports nearly a hundred different bird species. Along with the pardalote tower, a raptor hide near the main office offers views of the Tasmanian subspecies of Wedge-tailed Eagle and Grey Goshawk

(white morph) as well as other birds of prey, though on our rainy-day visit no raptors visit the broad field. We add more endemics to our list—Green Rosella, Black Currawong, Dusky Robin—and take advantage of a break in the rain to follow the pathway through the Jurassic Garden, a five-acre living museum of over 700 plant species descended from ancestors living when the Gondwanan Supercontinent started splitting apart.

In the afternoon, we take in epic views from the southern tip of Bruny Island after climbing the Cape Bruny Lighthouse. It's a wild, rugged coastline, and it's not hard to imagine the spartan lives of the nineteenth-century lighthouse keepers that are memorialised in the historical museum below. White settlement notoriously



precipitated the extinction of island species all over the world, but Bruny actually offers a haven for several birds that struggle elsewhere.

Swift Parrots are one such species. With a total population numbering in the hundreds, Swift Parrots have lost most of their breeding habitat in Tasmania through logging and the hollows that remain are subject to the predatory pressure of sugar gliders. The old-growth gums on Bruny are a crucial nesting place for the birds, and the protection of such trees along with widescale planting by Tonia Cochran and others has been critical in this bird's survival.

It's only on the last day, as we head back to Dennes Point and the ferry, that we see these forest gems for the first time in

the high gums near the Adventure Bay carpark. True to their name, the birds move quickly and are difficult to see: just a flash of emerald green and a swaying branch to indicate their presence.

But that's not the last treasure Bruny Island yields. Walking through the dark and ancient Mavista Rainforest, someone spots a flash of bright colour—there amongst the mossy trees is a male Pink Robin. Something about this tiny, perfect bird set against the gloom of the forest gives me an intense jolt—I feel excited and deeply still at the same time. It's a strange feeling, to share a private moment of connection while standing in a group of people. Magic, somehow.

It occurs to me that birdwatching is like this: I may have started with a list in hand and a goal to reach, but I've come away with a string of moments, mostly personal, that compel me in a way I can't quite explain. Thanks to our expert guide, I ticked off all the endemics, but it's moments like the one in the rainforest—or seeing that Hooded Plover for the first time—that will stay with me. And maybe that's why we chase new species and doggedly keep our lists. It's the chance of experiencing that magic; the first time, over and over again.

Natasha Harris travelled to Bruny Island courtesy of Tasmanian Walking Company. The Bruny Island Long Weekend – Limited Edition is a collaboration between Inala Nature Walks and Bruny Island Long Weekend. Find out more at www.taswalkingco.com.au/discover/bruny-island/

The Tasmanian Scrubwren (top left), Strong-billed Honeyeater (middle) and Yellow-throated Honeyeater (bottom), along with the Tasmanian Thornbill (above) are some of the Tasmanian endemics you'll see on Bruny Island. Scrubwren and thornbill by Helen Cunningham, Strong-billed Honeyeater by Brian McCauley and Yellow-throated Honeyeater by JJ Harrison