

BIRDING IN THE KIMBERLEY

On 4 February 2009, Brice Wells of Birds Australia spoke to the Kimberley Society about the adventures that he and his wife Gail enjoyed while establishing and managing the Broome Bird Observatory. The talk was accompanied by many stunning pictures of Kimberley birds and, to the great delight of the audience, audio presentations of their calls. Brice's notes follow.

In 1987-88 Gail and I spent 18 months at Eyre Bird Observatory preparing ourselves to become the first wardens at the newly-formed Broome Bird Observatory. In February 1998 we left the deep south and headed north. We arrived into the steam bath conditions of Broome and to an arduous but exciting adventure. When we arrived we found two chalets on a roughly cleared patch of pindan with no water, no toilets, no electricity, no fly wire and a challenge. We had to get the observatory up and running in a few weeks—oh, did we mention—no money either.

Sufficient to say we made it but it was the greatest challenge of our lives. About six weeks after we arrived we had about forty visitors from the Australian Wader Study Group and set about catching and banding about 3000 waders.

To complicate the matter further our salary of \$4500 per year was not enough to live on, and Gail had to work two 10-hour night shifts at Broome Hospital as well as seven days a week at the observatory. We survived for just over three years but it became obvious that Gail would not survive another year of non-stop labour, so we left. Seven weeks at Fitzroy Crossing as a Community Nurse, then three years at Wyndham completed our Kimberley adventures, and we went to Darwin for 7 years, before returning to our roots in Perth.

If the work was unremitting, the rewards were wonderful. By the time we left Broome Bird Observatory, we had built a huge shed, two shade house dining room/kitchen structures, a generator room, and a big water tank and a caravan/camping ground with toilets. Dongas from the Pilbara gave us air-conditioned rooms, we made roads to service the complex and created a nature walk. The bird list stood at 269 species plus an animal and reptile list. We'd been involved in looking after film crews and had put together programmes for schools and service groups. We knew an Eastern Curlew from an Agile Wallaby, as well as how to get over-lubricated locals and tourists out of bogs in the mangroves and beaches in the face of incoming tides. They generally offered us slabs of Kimberley currency in gratitude but when they discovered that we were teetotalers, they gave us their sincere thanks and left.

Our short stay in Fitzroy Crossing brought us the Purple Crowned Fairy Wren and some wonderful walks. Wyndham brought Gouldian Finches, Pictorella and Yellow-rumped Mannikins, Black Falcons, Grey Goshawks, White Quilled Rock Pigeons and the rich avifauna of Parry Lagoon and Packsaddle Plains.

In all we spent nine wonderful years in the Kimberley and loved every wonderful moment. We were married in a garden in Broome at 0700 one wet morning and had a White Throated

Gerygone sing us a love song while Tawny Frogmouths, Black Chinned Honeyeaters, Zebra and Double barred Finches were spectators. Almost all of the guests were birders and it made for an unforgettable occasion.

The Kimberley made us sweat, cry and hurt and created a bond and belief in each other that never wavered, but rather increased. We loved the north and, if it wasn't for family ties, grandkids and work, we would be there still. Now we have memories, the odd scar and the satisfaction of achieving what we set out to do. That gave us riches beyond compare—pity about the money!