

Your complete wildlife-watching guide...

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There's nowhere quite like Australia; after being isolated for millenia, much of its flora and fauna is utterly unique

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From Queensland's lush tropical forests and coral reefs to Tasmania's wild and remote landscapes, and everywhere in between

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Australia boasts a boggling array of wildlife in its varying habitats, from the curious Platypus, to the iconic Koala

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Suggested itineraries, facts, advice and recommendations to help you on your way



Essential

AUSTRALIA

Australia is as varied as it is big, and much of its diverse wildlife is unique. Therefore, a visit should be savoured, not rushed.

Slowly DOES IT

WORDS BY STELLA MARTIN

Thanks to 35 million years of isolation, Australia's animals have evolved in their own distinctive style. From Platypuses paddling in pristine creeks and Koalas slumped on eucalypt branches to Frilled Lizards skittering through savanna woodlands and Thorny Devils tottering across hot desert sands, many can be seen nowhere else on Earth. While mammals can be elusive, birds are everywhere: Rose-pink Galahs amass in deafening flocks at sunset; lyrebirds wander under tree ferns; perky fairywrens twitter in the undergrowth; honeyeaters rifle through Bottlebrush blossoms; Emus stride across farmers' fields... and Kookaburras simply laugh.

Much of Australia is arid but it is far from dull, supporting one of the world's highest diversity of reptiles, masses of spring wildflowers and flocks of bright nomadic birds. This rust-red landscape is studded with spectacular rockscapes threaded with lush, shady gorges providing oases for

wildlife. In complete contrast there are dense, dripping rainforests, soaring forests of the world's tallest flowering trees, alpine moorlands, diverse flowering heathlands, beaches, coastal cliffs and coral reefs. Then there is the sparsely populated savanna region, covering the northern quarter of the country. Dominated by summer floods and winter drought and fire, this swathe of grasslands, woodlands and wetlands includes Australia's bio-diverse Kakadu, Kimberley and Cape York Peninsula regions.

It is possible to watch wombats snuffling through snowdrifts and, within a couple of days, go diving on coral reefs or boating past crocodiles in a tropical billabong, but a trip should not be a hurried affair. Whether opting for guided tour or self-drive adventure, it's better to choose one area and get off the beaten track, rather than spend too much time in airports. Australia's animals can be shy – take your time to get to know them!

MY AUSTRALIA

ALAN GILLANDERS
Naturalist, Guide
and Educator

The Wet Tropics of Queensland are rightly renowned for their natural history values. For those interested in animals, the Atherton Tableland is the highlight not only for diversity but also the endemics. Bowerbirds build and decorate structures for courtship; from September to New Year it is possible to see five species in one day. Some are master builders, others jazz musicians. One of my most memorable wildlife experiences was watching two male Golden Bowerbirds fighting – it was a gold disco light show! Tree-kangaroos and the many possum species are best sought at night. In the forest are strange lizards that recall armoured dinosaurs and huge spiny insects. www.alanswildlifetours.com.au

Queensland

The Great Barrier Reef shadows the Queensland coast for 2,300km, containing nearly 3,000 reefs harbouring over 1,500 fish species, turtles and numerous invertebrates. Generally, the best sites are those furthest from land; trips heading north from Port Douglas offer chances to snorkel with Minke Whales in June and July. Many islands have fringing reefs and some have significant seabird breeding colonies.

Hinchinbrook Island offers a challenging 32km wilderness hike. Magnetic Island has resident Koalas and allied rock wallabies. Fraser Island is a massive, rainforested sand island with some of Australia's purest Dingoes. Whale-watching trips visit migrating Humpback Whales in nearby Hervey Bay between late July and October.

Cape York Peninsula is a remote wilderness accessible only by 4x4 in the dry season (May to October). The savanna woodlands, termite

mound-studded grasslands and crocodile-inhabited wetlands support over 500 terrestrial vertebrates; some species such as Green Python, Common Spotted Cuscus, Palm Cockatoo and other colourful birds are also found in New Guinea, but nowhere else in Australia.

Rainforests of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area cover a narrow coastal strip between Cooktown and Townsville, but host 34 per cent of Australia's mammal and 40 per cent of bird species. While Daintree National Park is a major tourist destination, other parks offer quieter experiences. The upland rainforests boast 10 species of possum and glider and one tree-kangaroo – though they are difficult to find without an experienced local guide. Kingfisher Park, at Julatten, with over 200 bird species and nesting Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfishers in summer, is a mecca for birdwatchers. Further south,

Eungella National Park has reliably seen Platypuses, noisy pittas and Regent Bowerbirds. Summer season tours at Mount Etna Caves National Park allow visitors to observe the nightly departure of thousands of little bent-wing bats. Mon Repos Conservation Park is a major summer nesting area for Green, Flatback and Loggerhead turtles.

On the New South Wales border, Lamington National Park is good for birds including Regent Bowerbirds, Logrunners, Paradise Riflebirds and Albert's Lyrebirds. Red-necked Pademelons are abundant; Land Mullets and spiny crayfish wander rainforest tracks. The wonderful granite boulders of Girraween National Park host a great variety of lizards and spring wildflowers.

In the vast outback, occasional deluges fill wetlands, attracting many thousands of breeding waterbirds. Lava tubes of Undara Volcanic National Park support vine thickets and insectivorous bats, and Cobbold Gorge harbours Freshwater Crocodiles. In the west, visitors to Boodjamulla National Park can canoe between towering sandstone cliffs of Lawn Hill Gorge, home to Freshwater Crocodiles, Purple-crowned Fairywrens and Great Bowerbirds. Carnarvon National Park is another outback oasis with numerous Echidnas, macropods and gliders.

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While you're there...

Every Wednesday the **Gulflander railmotor** leaves Normanton, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, for a leisurely five-hour, 152km, journey to Croyden, a former gold-rush town in the heart of Queensland's outback. And every Thursday it returns, delivering supplies to cattle stations along the track. Built between 1888 and 1891, with steel sleepers designed to foil termites and withstand summer floods, the railway initially serviced the burgeoning goldfields as Croyden's population swelled to 30,000. Now **Croyden** has fewer than 300 inhabitants and the rail service's main cargo is tourists. The driver knows every inch of the track and stops to show off highlights ranging from a bowerbird bower and a flying fox colony to an abandoned gold mine. Staff also help to identify savanna plants and share stories of colourful outback characters and local trivia. Train enthusiasts can combine this with a trip on the Savannahlander which runs between Cairns and Forsyth. www.gulflander.com.au; www.savannahlander.com.au



Far left: an aerial view of a coral reef at Lizard Island National Park. **Top:** a diver watching a Green Sea Turtle at the Great Barrier Reef. **Above left:** a Red-necked Pademelon female with young in pouch. **Left:** Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher holding an ant. **Directly above:** the Gulflander crossing the Normanton Bridge near Normanton.





Here: Queensland rainforest near Mount Warning. Below left: Emus on the road in Sturt National Park. Bottom: an adult male Regent Bowerbird.



© TIM HESTER/ALAMY, THEO ALLOPS/FLPA, GIANPIERO FERRARI/FLPA

New South Wales

The Great Dividing Range splits the relatively narrow coastal plain from the extensive, drier outback and hosts many of the state's national parks. In the south, an area of winter ski-fields, the alpine heathlands of Australia's highest peaks are protected in Kosciuszko National Park while the temperate rainforests of the northern slopes are included in Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area. These relict patches left from Australia's ancient forests are a diversity hotspot for frogs, snakes, birds and marsupials.

Many of these reserves are rugged, wilderness areas suitable for long-distance hikers but Dorrigo National Park, with its elevated skywalk, has easy rainforest walks with chances of Regent Bowerbirds. The gnarled, mossy Antarctic beech forests of Border Ranges National Park overlook the spectacular volcanic plug of

Mount Warning. Capertee Valley/Glen Davis on the western side of Wollemi National Park is an outstanding birding area with over 235 species recorded including Turquoise Parrots, Diamond Firetails and endangered Regent Honeyeaters and Swift Parrots.

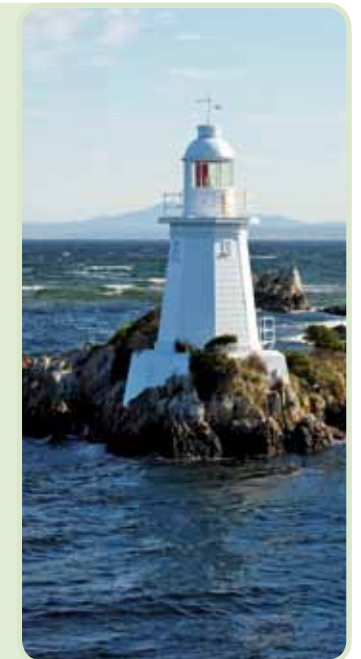
The seaboard is dotted with an interesting variety of reserves covering beaches, wetlands, cliffs, coastal heaths and forests. Migrating Humpback Whales and other cetacean species come quite close to shore around Eden, particularly in October and November.

The western slopes of the Great Dividing Range have been largely cleared for farming but Warrumbungle National Park is a haven for numerous macropods as well as Emus, parrots and other birds. Further west, as conditions become drier, Red and Western Grey kangaroos, Euros and dry-country birds become common.



While you're there...

In its time (1822 to 1833) the penal colony on **Sarah Island**, on Tasmania's west coast, was the harshest in Australia. But, from September to May, visitors to Strahan have the opportunity to see its funny side in a theatre production, **The Ship That Never Was**. Australia's longest running play, written by Richard Davey and produced by The Round Earth Company, is based on real events when 10 convict shipwrights hijacked the ship they had been building. This great escape led to an extraordinary voyage and a tale with many intriguing twists and turns. All parts are played by just two actors (who earlier treat passengers on the Gordon River cruise to a spirited guided tour of Sarah Island) with help from the audience, in a production that is energetic, witty and hilarious. And if the weather is cold, audience members are given blankets and hot water bottles!
www.roundearth.com.au/ship.htm



Clockwise from far left: a Tasmanian Devil; Hells gate at Macquarie Harbour on the west coast of Tasmania; a Common Wombat mother and joey; Lake Seal at Mount Field National Park

MY AUSTRALIA

TONIA COCHRAN
Wildlife Guide

Bruny Island, off Tasmania's southeast coast, is famous for its biodiversity and stunning scenery, attracting visitors from around the world. With just 600 permanent residents, the island is relatively undeveloped and features large tracts of untouched forest and pristine beaches. It is a stronghold for a number of threatened species; there is a significant population of Eastern Quolls, a carnivorous marsupial which is now restricted to Tasmania and hard to find outside Bruny. It also has an abundance of White Bennett's Wallabies and Golden Brush-tailed Possums. Not least, all of Tasmania's endemic birds can be found here. Bruny Island is one of the world's best places to witness true 'wild' life. It's my home and I feel privileged to live here.
www.inalabruny.com.au

Tasmania

Tasmania is the best place in Australia to see a wide variety of mammals, some of which are extinct, rare or non-existent on the mainland. Most commonly sighted are the endemic Rufous-bellied Pademelon and Bennett's Wallaby. The Forester, a Tasmanian Eastern Grey Kangaroo, occurs in large numbers in places. Common Wombats can be very numerous, echidnas are often seen during the day and Platypuses inhabit many waterways. Eastern and Spotted-tailed Quolls are sometimes encountered and the iconic Tasmanian Devil can still be found, although numbers have declined drastically due to disease.

One-fifth of the state is protected in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Included are tall eucalypt forests and Australia's largest expanse of magical, mossy, temperate rainforest. In Mount Field National Park it is possible to explore all the major vegetation types, from forests to alpine heathland, along just 16km of road. The

largely uninhabited south-west lies in the path of cold, moisture-laden, westerly winds, so this stunning landscape of glaciated peaks, alpine moorlands, forests, rivers and lakes can experience wild weather.

An easy way to explore this area is to cruise, or kayak, the Gordon River from Strahan. A true wilderness adventure for the experienced is to raft the Franklin River or follow the 65km Overland Trek in Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park. The northern Cradle Mountain end of this park is a major tourist destination, but there are numerous walking tracks and mammals are plentiful. Wallabies and wombats graze in the evening and when driving extremely slowly along park roads at night it is possible to see quolls, possums, pademelons and even Tasmanian Devils.

In the north and east, impressive numbers of Foresters, wombats and pademelons can be seen at dusk in Narawntapu and Mount William national parks. About 18 million

Short-tailed Shearwaters nest in Tasmania, returning to their burrows at nightfall – good spots are The Nut at Stanley and The Neck on Bruny Island, where they share the site with a Little Penguin rookery.

Penguins also nest at Bicheno and near Devonport, Burnie, Penguin and Stanley. Bruny is an excellent place for Tasmania's 12 endemic bird species and various mammals, including a white form of Bennett's Wallaby. Take a boat trip to Bruny Island and the Tasman Peninsula for Australian and New Zealand Fur Seal colonies, Bottlenose and Common dolphins and, in winter, Humpback and Southern Right whales. Traffic-free Maria Island has a good variety of mammals, some reintroduced, and most of the endemic birds. Boat trips target pelagic seabirds, such as Albatrosses, particularly in winter when they move north from the freezing Antarctic for a warmer climate.

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Here: Little Blue Penguins heading to their nesting burrows
Below: a Leafy Seadragon male



South Australia

Despite widespread habitat clearing, the state contains some of Australia's wildlife hotspots. Koalas are numerous on Kangaroo Island and some species, such as Tammar Wallabies, Cape Barren Geese, black cockatoos and the Southern Heath Monitor Lizards, in decline elsewhere, are common. There are Little Penguin rookeries and colonies of Australian Sea Lions and New Zealand Fur Seals.

From Port Lincoln it is possible to join cruises to see Bottlenose Dolphins and

swim with sea lions or farmed Southern Bluefin Tuna, and to go cage-diving with Great White Sharks. Near Whyalla you can dive or snorkel with the thousands of Giant Australian Cuttlefish that migrate to breed between May and August. Southern Right Whales calve below cliffs at Head of Bight from May to October.

Migratory and nomadic waders and waterfowl congregate at the Coorong, the mouth of the River Murray, and on the rare occasions when Lake Eyre fills with

water, massive numbers of birds, notably Banded Stilts and pelicans, descend to breed. In the southeast, a 50,000ha area of undisturbed mallee scrub in BirdLife Australia's Gluepot Reserve shelters 190 recorded bird species.

Flinders Ranges National Park is a refuge for the threatened Yellow-footed Rock Wallaby and also supports good numbers of Red and Western Grey kangaroos, Euros (aka Wallaroos), plus a variety of reptiles and inland bird species.



MY AUSTRALIA

SIMON MUSTOE
 Founder, Wildiaries
 Nature Travel

While most people enter Australia via Sydney, Melbourne is regarded by many as the country's cultural and wildlife capital. Victoria's capital city boasts internationally significant wetlands and a quarter of Australia's bird species. The city is surrounded by lush rainforest which is home to Greater Gliders. There are Platypuses in the city's rivers; Eastern Grey Kangaroos en route to the airport; grasslands teeming with Eastern Barred Bandicoots; steep rocky mountains with Koalas; Bottlenose Dolphins in the sea and, in the heart of the urban jungle, one of the world's largest owls, the Powerful Owl, which resides near a colony of Little Penguins. Just a half hour drive from the city centre, there is nothing quite like hearing and seeing mimicking lyrebirds displaying in the lush forest.
www.wildiaries.com

Victoria

The Great Dividing Range takes a westward turn in Victoria, ending in the sandstone escarpments of Grampians National Park. The magnificent, soaring mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands are inhabited by eight different possums and gliders; the prolific birdlife of Sherbrooke Forest includes Superb Lyrebirds.

Southwest of Melbourne the Great Ocean Road and 91km Great Ocean Walk follow a dramatic coastline with high cliffs, forests and heathlands; Koalas, echidnas, macropods and wombats are fairly common with Yellow-bellied Gliders in places.

Marine protected areas, dotted along the state's coastline, protect some unique temperate underwater life, including endemic seadragons and, in winter, calving Southern Right Whales are visible from land near Warrnambool. There are Australian Fur Seal colonies and on summer evenings Short-tailed Shearwaters and Little Penguins return, en masse, to coastal rookeries. The very popular Penguin Parade on Phillip Island is near a Koala reserve.

Croajingolong and adjacent national parks

in the southeast corner are a hotspot for possums and gliders. The elusive ground parrot and Eastern Bristlebird are among 300 plus recorded bird species; and waders and seabirds flock to the wetlands.

In the more arid inland Emus are abundant, Western Grey Kangaroos take over from Eastern Greys and Malleefowl are a highlight. The Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park protects remnant box-ironwood woodland attracting some rare honeyeaters and parrots when the trees are flowering in spring.



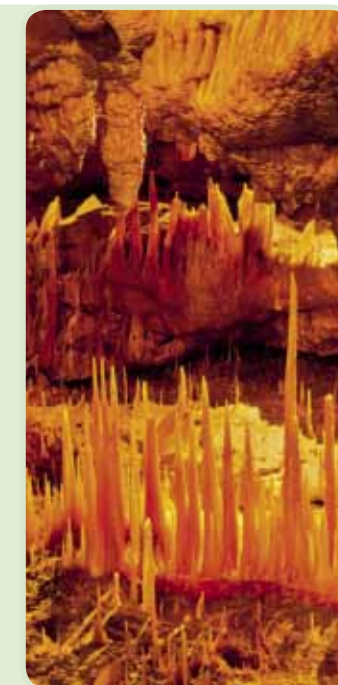
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Above: pelicans in flight. *Here:* a Yellow-footed Rock Wallaby at Flinders Ranges. *Right:* stalagmites and stalactites at Naracoorte Cave.



While you're there...

A cast of strange characters once roamed Australia. Including marsupial lions, giant kangaroos (some carnivorous), rhino-sized wombat-like herbivores and enormous birds, lizards and snakes, this megafauna became extinct roughly 60,000 years ago. Their legacy is two major fossil deposits. The older site is at **Riversleigh, in Queensland**, (with a visitor's centre in Mount Isa). The other is at **Naracoorte Caves**, 320km south-east of Adelaide. Among the world's 10 greatest fossil sites, they were listed jointly in 1994 as the Australian Fossil Mammal Sites World Heritage Area. For over 500,000 years the Naracoorte limestone caves functioned as pitfall traps, fossilising the bodies of over 120 species, ranging from extinct megafauna to more modern animals. The **Wonambi Fossil Centre**, at Naracoorte, brings this vanished world to life. Visitors can also join guided cave tours (and try 'adventure caving'). An added bonus is the large resident colony of Southern Bent-wing Bats.
www.naracoortecaves.sa.gov.au





Here: snorkellers getting a close-up of a Whale Shark.
Below: the Pinnacles at Nambung National Park.

MY AUSTRALIA



PAT CHANNING
Lodge Operator

I am an Aboriginal descendent of the Bardi and Kija people of west and east Kimberley. My husband David and I operate Mercedes Coastal Retreat on the Dampier Peninsula, 120km north of Broome. Each year, between July and October, the Humpback Whales return home to calf and breed. We can see these wonderful creatures from our lookout, even without binoculars, and have witnessed both birthing and mating. I never tire of watching them breaching, tail slapping, fin waving or just swimming past. Even at night we hear them breaching and when they've been snorkelling our guests have heard them singing. We are truly blessed to live in this wonderful environment and to share it with our guests.
www.mercedescove.com.au

© FRED BAVENDAM/FLIPA

Western Australia

This sparsely populated state is huge and, isolated by deserts, a large proportion of its flora and fauna is endemic. The southwest, Australia's only internationally recognised terrestrial hotspot for biodiversity, includes towering forests of endemic eucalypts on the well-watered coastal fringe and mega-diverse heathlands. Stirling Range, Fitzgerald River and Lesueur National Parks are notable botanical hotspots with spectacular spring wildflowers and nectar-dependant animals.

Although the southwest has been extensively cleared for agriculture, pockets of native woodland at Perup Forest and Dryandra Woodland provide refuges for Numbats, quolls, Brush-tailed Bettongs, Tammar Wallabies, Western Ringtail Possums, Echidnas, Southern Brown Bandicoots and good numbers of birds. Barna Mia captive breeding centre offers close encounters with some very rare animals, such as Bilbies.

The coastal waters and islands are rich in

wildlife. Southern Right and Humpback Whales, visible from various coastal vantage points and on cruises, visit southern and western coastal waters between June and early December. There are also Australian Sea Lion and New Zealand Fur Seal colonies, and Little Penguin rookeries. Quokkas are common on Rottnest Island. Further north, at ➤





Shark Bay World Heritage Area, living stromatolites, with a 3.5 billion-year ancestry, thrive in Hamelin Pool.

In warmer months on boat trips it is possible to see Dugongs along with turtles, rays, sharks and sea snakes. Bottlenose Dolphins come to shore to be hand-fed by crowds at Monkey Mia, and birders can find Thick-billed Grasswrens in the car park. Nearby, captive-bred and released Malleefowl, Bilbies and Brush-tailed Bettongs may be seen living on the



predator-free Peron Peninsula.

Swimming with Whale Sharks is big business at Coral Bay and Exmouth from March to July; manta rays, turtles, sharks and whales may also be seen. From Cape Range National Park it is possible to snorkel from the shore over the corals of Ningaloo Reef, while on land, Black-footed Rock Wallabies, abundant Euros, occasional Red Kangaroos and Emus inhabit the gorges and plains. Green, Loggerhead and Hawksbill Turtles nest in nearby Jurabi Coastal Park during the summer months.

The arid, rust-red Pilbara contains rich iron deposits, some of the most ancient rocks on the planet, an extraordinary amount of Aboriginal rock-art and stunning national parks providing watery oases for a variety of wildlife.

The Kimberley is a remote area of rugged ranges, savanna woodlands and forested valleys, inaccessible in the monsoon season. Central gorges host diverse bat colonies and macropods as well as freshwater fish and crocodiles, while those in the north provide refuges for species such as the Gouldian Finch and various frogs. From September to March significant numbers of shorebirds can be seen at the Broome Bird Observatory.

While you're there...

The treacherous Western Australian coast claimed many of the first European ships to reach Australia. The stories of several wrecks are told alongside salvaged timbers, cannons and other artefacts on display in the Shipwreck Galleries of the Western Australian Museum branches in **Fremantle** and **Geraldton**. None of the tales are quite as colourful and gruesome as that of the oldest, the *Batavia*, a Dutch ship that was wrecked off the coast near Geraldton in 1629. About 280 survivors managed to reach nearby islands. The commander, captain and senior officers set out in the ship's longboat for Batavia (now Jakarta) in Dutch Indonesia. Meanwhile, a mutinous junior merchant took control, instigating a reign of terror which saw a total of 110 men, women and children murdered by the time the rescuers arrived three months later. In the end, fewer than 100 of the more than 320 original passengers reached safety in Batavia.

www.museum.wa.gov.au/museums/shipwrecks



Top: a Quokka hopping through water at Rottnest Island. **Above:** entrance to the Western Australian Maritime Museum. **Left:** a Western Bowerbird male tending his bower filled with gifts for the female.



MY AUSTRALIA

JENNY HUNTER
Kakadu Ranger



I was born in Kakadu and I've been a ranger here for 20 years, so it means a lot to me when I see some of the rare animals that used to roam here a long time ago coming back. Last year I saw a baby Emu as I was heading past Nanguluwur, a really old rock-art site. It was having a snack on a sand palm. We use this palm to make string bags, but we don't eat the berries that hang off it – Emus love them though, and this one popped his head up and grabbed some in his mouth.

Emus were really common in Kakadu a long while back, but for many years you didn't often see them. Recently we're starting to see more of them. It's great – and important to teach the kids about our wildlife because in the future it may disappear.

www.parksaustralia.gov.au/kakadu

Northern territory

The territory is dominated by climatic extremes. While the arid 'Red Centre' receives less than 300mm of rain per year, the 'Top End', as the northern 25 per cent is known, is inundated in summer with monsoonal deluges. Replenishing the wetlands of Kakadu National Park, this triggers a surge of life but renders the park largely impassable. During the winter dry season wildlife is concentrated at shrinking water bodies – as are the tourists.

Kakadu's varied habitats, from savanna woodland to floodplains and rocky escarpments, support a great diversity of wildlife. Estuarine and Freshwater crocodiles are plentiful, along with File Snakes, Northern Long-necked Turtles and Mertens Water Monitors in the billabongs.

Massive numbers of wetland birds congregate at Yellow Water, Mamukala and Anbangbang Billabong. Agile Wallabies and Antilopine Wallaroos frequent open areas with

rarer rock wallabies and Black Wallaroos on escarpments. To the west of Kakadu, Mary River Park is good for woodland birds and Fogg Dam is a haven for wetland species, with huge numbers of Water Pythons crossing the dam wall at night.

Popular Katherine Gorge, complete with Freshwater Crocodiles, zigzags through the sandstone landscape of Nitmiluk National Park and can be explored by canoe, cruise and walking track. A quieter option is the 58km Jatbula Trail or guided canoeing trips downstream of Katherine.

Agile Wallabies are common and there are Euros and Antilopine and Black wallaroos. A noisy Black Flying Fox camp occupies the picnic ground, and there's another in Katherine town. Leliyn (Edith Falls) section is good for birding.

The Alice Springs Desert Park is an excellent introduction to the arid zone and also attracts a variety of wild lizards and birds. Euros hang out



at the Telegraph Station with occasional Red Kangaroos. The Olive Pink Botanic Garden is ideal for learning about Aboriginal plant uses and spotting birds. The Ilparpa Sewage Ponds (permit and key required) support over 60 bird species, including waders, with chances of rare vagrants.

In the West MacDonnell National Park there are good populations of Black-footed Rock Wallabies at Simpsons Gap and Serpentine and Ormiston gorges. Birding is good at these gorges and at Ellery Creek Big Hole. Reptiles can often be seen basking on walking trails in

the morning. Newhaven Sanctuary has over 160 bird species, some rare desert mammals – and abundant wild camels.

Around Uluru and Kata Juta large numbers of Thorny Devils may appear after rain, and Spinifex Hopping Mice may frequent the campgrounds at night. Dingoes, Euros and Red Kangaroos are present. The latter, along with Perentie Goannas, are common around Mount Conner. Beautiful King's Canyon, in Watarrka National Park, shelters a permanent spring with rare cycads and ferns.

While you're there...

Aboriginal people arrived in Australia over 50,000 years ago. As hunter-gatherers they were finely tuned to natural cycles and today retain a profound spiritual connection to their ancestral country. **Kakadu National Park** is imbued with the culture of its traditional owners which is proudly displayed in the **Warradjan Cultural Centre**. It is also well worth joining tours conducted by Aboriginal park rangers or by one of several Aboriginal-owned and operated companies (here, and in other parts of Australia). Guides provide insights into the elaborate artwork preserved on rock surfaces and share Dreamtime stories. They may also show how wild food ('bush tucker') is gathered; how toxic plants are made edible; how 'calendar plants' provide cues for finding seasonal food; how fish and other animals are trapped and caught; and may involve visitors in everything from food preparation to basket-making. Such an experience adds an unforgettable extra dimension to your visit. www.gagudju-dreaming.com/Indigenous-Experience/Warradjan-Cultural-Centre.aspx



Clockwise from far left: a Thorny Devil in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park; a Dingo near Uluru; ancient aboriginal rock art site at Obirr Rock in Kakadu National Park; a rare waterfall after a heavy downpour on Uluru; a Saltwater Crocodile leaping from the water at Kakadu National Park.

Ones to watch

Australia's unique wildlife not only looks distinctly different but exhibits some fascinating behaviour as well



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Southern Cassowary

Casuarius casuarius

Although not quite as tall as the more widespread Emu, the 2m high, flightless cassowary is Australia's heaviest bird, larger females weighing up to 60kg. It is confined to tropical rainforests of north Queensland where it is an essential distributor of rainforest fruits, although it is now endangered due to habitat loss and other human pressures. The Southern Cassowary has coarse, black plumage contrasting with the bare skin of its head, neck and wattles which are bright blue and red. It sports a jaunty casque on its head which is not horn or bone but is formed from tough skin with a core of firm, cellular material. The function of this casque remains a mystery but it may indicate age and status. Its enormous feet have a long, dagger-like middle toe which it can use defensively, jumping up and kicking forward with both feet. By nature, the bird is shy, melting into the forest, although those used to being (illegally) fed can be demanding.

Spotting tips: Despite their low numbers there are still places to see them reasonably easily, notably the Mission Beach area.



Koala

Phascolarctos cinereus

The Koala (which is not a bear) derives so little energy from its diet of nutrient-poor eucalypt leaves that it spends about 20 hours a day asleep or resting. Even its brain is an energy saver – it is so small it does not even fill its skull. Koalas are found in eucalypt forests and woodlands on the eastern mainland, from north Queensland to Victoria and in coastal South Australia. Adults are solitary, except at mating times, when amorous males grunt and bellow so loudly they can be heard a considerable distance away.

Spotting tips: Look in the upper parts of trees for a Koala wedged in a fork or slumped on a horizontal branch. You might spot a white flash from its chest fur or smell the pungent odour of a male on heat.

Red Kangaroo

Macropus rufus

The male 'big red' is the body-builder of the macropod (kangaroo and wallaby) world: impressive but not especially pretty. The largest living marsupial, he weighs up to 90kg and can stretch to over 2m in height. He is also the supreme athlete, reaching 60km/h in short bursts and covering 12m in the long jump and up to 3m in the high jump. Most males have rusty-coloured fur while the females, which weigh just half as much as the males, are generally a bluish grey; they are sometimes called 'blue fliers'. Red Kangaroos are common and widespread, favouring arid and semi-arid parts of Australia. They hop with their bodies held almost horizontal to the ground and tails curving up; hopping is so energy-efficient that they actually expend the least amount of energy when they are moving fast.

Spotting tips: Large mobs gather on green growth after rain, resting in shade during the heat of the day.



Short-beaked Echidna

Tachyglossus aculeatus

The Short-beaked Echidna, Australia's other monotreme beside the Platypus, is found in every part of the country, from deserts to humid tropics to alpine heights, and can be abundant. About the size of a rabbit, it is covered with spines and fur which in Tasmania grows long enough to conceal the spines. It wanders along with a slow, rolling gait, rather like that of a large lizard but, if threatened, wedges itself under a log or rock, digs rapidly into soft ground, or rolls into a ball. Apart from sensitive hearing and smell, the echidna uses electro-sensors on its long snout to detect prey. It feeds mainly on ants and termites, breaking into nests with its strong front feet and using its long, sticky tongue – up to 18cm long – to lap up the occupants. During the winter breeding season a train of up to a dozen hopeful males can be seen following one female for as long as six weeks. She incubates her single egg and carries the baby, once hatched, for about two months in a muscular pouch made of folds of skin.

Spotting tips: Look for signs of digging at ant or termite nests.



Barramundi

Lates calcarifer

The Barramundi is found in billabongs and rivers around northern, tropical, coastal areas. It is prized by anglers for its fighting spirit as well as its flavour; it is served up in restaurants as quintessentially Australian cuisine. Affectionately known as "barra", it grows up to 1.8m and has a humped back and pointed head. In fresh water it is greenish-blue but in salt water it is silvery. Indeed, this is a fish of two worlds. During the wet season, October to April, adults migrate to coastal waters to spawn. The juveniles develop among the mangroves but migrate back up to fresh water at the end of the wet season, remaining there for up to five years until mature. At this stage they are all male – but the Barramundi is a transsexual: when the males reach about 80cm in length, they become female (this can only happen in salt water). This strategy maximises their breeding potential since larger females are able to produce more eggs – up to 40 million in a season.

Spotting tips: Barramundi lurk around submerged rocks and logs to ambush prey. Local fishers and guides can take visitors to their favourite haunts. Some dams are artificially stocked.

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Lace Monitor

Varanus varius

Australia is home to 27 of the world's 50 or so monitor lizard species. Often called goannas, they tend to be large lizards with loose, patterned skin. Monitors are carnivorous, eating everything from invertebrates to fish, birds' eggs, possums and carrion. The Lace Monitor, which can reach lengths of over 2m, is found all along the east coast and into Victoria, and often appears at picnic areas and campgrounds to scavenge food. It lumbers confidently along the ground but can run quickly and climb rapidly up tree trunks. The female lays her eggs in a termite mound which makes an ideal incubator when the termites reseal the hole she has made. She later returns to dig out the babies which are colourfully striped in blue and yellow.

Spotting tips: *Lace monitors are common in woodlands. Listen out for the sound of startled scuffling in the leaf litter.*



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Platypus

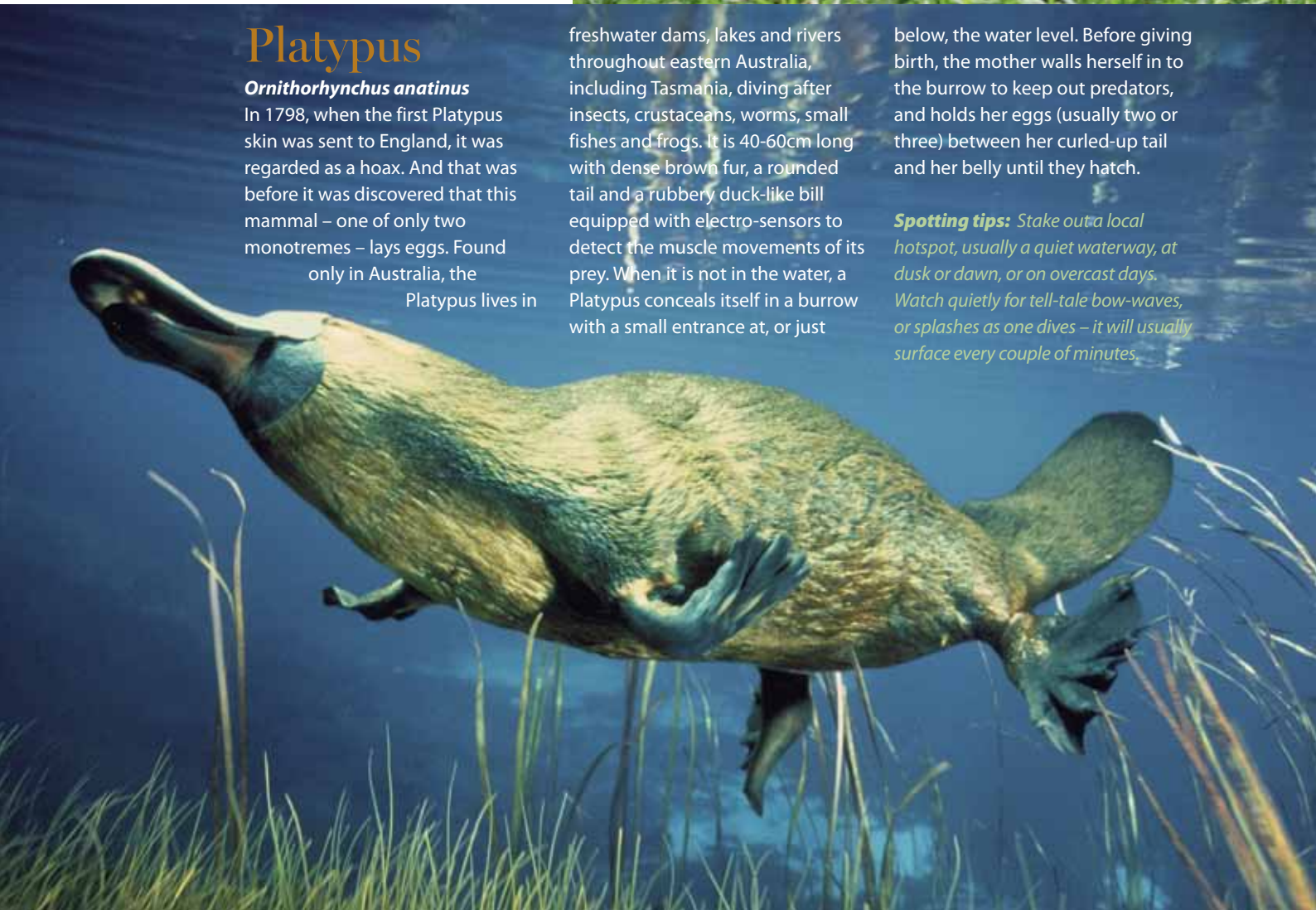
Ornithorhynchus anatinus

In 1798, when the first Platypus skin was sent to England, it was regarded as a hoax. And that was before it was discovered that this mammal – one of only two monotremes – lays eggs. Found only in Australia, the Platypus lives in

freshwater dams, lakes and rivers throughout eastern Australia, including Tasmania, diving after insects, crustaceans, worms, small fishes and frogs. It is 40-60cm long with dense brown fur, a rounded tail and a rubbery duck-like bill equipped with electro-sensors to detect the muscle movements of its prey. When it is not in the water, a Platypus conceals itself in a burrow with a small entrance at, or just

below, the water level. Before giving birth, the mother walls herself in to the burrow to keep out predators, and holds her eggs (usually two or three) between her curled-up tail and her belly until they hatch.

Spotting tips: *Stake out a local hotspot, usually a quiet waterway, at dusk or dawn, or on overcast days. Watch quietly for tell-tale bow-waves, or splashes as one dives – it will usually surface every couple of minutes.*



Classic itineraries

WESTERN AUSTRALIA ITINERARY

DAY 1 TO 4
Perth / Perup /
Karri Forest /
Dryandra
DAY 5
Lesueur
National Park
DAY 6 TO 8
Shark Bay World
Heritage Area
DAY 9 TO 11
Exmouth/Cape
Range National
Park
DAY 12 TO 14
Pilbara
DAY 15 & 16
Broome Bird
Observatory
DAY 17-21
Kimberley



WINTER ITINERARY (May to October)

■ **NORTHERN TERRITORY**
DAY 1 TO 5
Darwin/Fogg Dam/Kakadu &
Nitmiluk national parks
DAY 6 TO 9
Alice Springs & West
MacDonnell National Park
■ **QUEENSLAND**
DAY 10 TO 15
Cairns/Port Douglas, Daintree
National Park & Atherton
Tableland, Great Barrier Reef
DAY 16 TO 18
Fraser Island National Park &
Hervey Bay cruise

SUMMER ITINERARY (September to May)

■ **VICTORIA**
DAY 1 TO 3
Melbourne/Dandenong
Ranges/Phillip Island
■ **TASMANIA**
DAY 4 TO 6
Bruny Island
DAY 7 & 8
Mount Field National Park/
Strahan/ Gordon River cruise
DAY 9 TO 11
Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair
National Park
■ **SOUTH AUSTRALIA**
DAY 12 TO 15
Kangaroo Island

Whatever time of year you decide to visit Australia it is always a fantastic destination for wildlife watching. These tours will show you the highlights.

Factfile

COUNTRY FACTS

- **Location:** Southern hemisphere
- **Capital city:** Canberra
- **Terrain:** desert to rainforest to alpine heathlands
- **Highest point:** Mount Kosciuszko
- **Lowest point:** Lake Eyre
- **Population:** 23.5 million
- **Most widely spoken language:** English
- **Currency:** Australian dollar
- **Time zones:** GMT +8.00 to +10.00
- **Flight time from UK:** approximately 21 hours
- **Visas:** UK citizens can apply on-line for a free, three-month tourist visa
- **Vaccinations:** standard types

CLIMATE

October to March is hot, humid and wet in the northern tropics, very hot in the centre and generally pleasant in the south. Winter months are cold in the south and very pleasant in the north and centre.

WHEN TO GO

Generally, the north and centre between May and October; the south from September to May.

TIPS AND WARNINGS

Respect crocodile and stinging jellyfish warnings in the north. Wear sensible shoes and trousers to avoid (rare) snake and insect bites. Always wear a hat and sun protection, even when swimming, and carry water. Avoid collisions with wildlife by not driving at night outside urban areas.

LODGES AND CAMPS

■ **WESTERN AUSTRALIA**
www.mercedescove.com.au
www.drysdaleriver.com.au
www.elquestro.com.au
www.kimberleycoastalcamp.com.au

■ **NORTHERN TERRITORY**
www.gagudju-dreaming.com

■ **QUEENSLAND**
www.oreillys.com.au
www.redmillhouse.com.au
www.birdwatchers.com.au

■ SOUTH AUSTRALIA

www.kiwi.com

■ TASMANIA

Waldheim cabins,
Cradle Mountain:
www.parks.tas.gov.au/?base=412

MORE INFORMATION

- www.australia.gov.au/topics/tourism-and-travel/tourist-information
- www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/national-parks
- www.birdlife.org.au/visit-us
- www.australianwildlife.org

TOUR OPERATORS

- **Country-wide:** www.wildidiaries.com;
www.inalabrundy.com.au
- **Across the north:** www.savannah-guides.com.au;
www.gagudju-dreaming.com
- **Aboriginal tours:** www.aboriginalaustralia.com.au; www.waitoc.com
- **From the UK:**
www.naturetrek.co.uk