



BIRD LOVERS' BLISS

The Cairns Esplanade is a magnet for our feathered friends who fly in from as far as Siberia to relax on its foreshore, writes BRIDGET MARTIN.



FACT FILE:

The best birdwatching area on Cairns Esplanade is opposite the end of Florence St to opposite Minnie St. The best time is before high tide. October is one of the best months for birdwatching in Cairns. The Esplanade runs from the centre of the city north for 2.4km. At the southern end, there is a sandy swimming lagoon with free entry, an amphitheatre and boardwalk. There are also picnic tables, barbecues, playgrounds, a skateboard ramp and a kite-flying venue along the Esplanade.

At low tide, the view from the Cairns Esplanade is a sea of mud stretching beyond the narrow fringe of sand.

While some tourists find this disappointing, there are thousands of visitors who come to Cairns specifically for its life-giving microbes.

Admittedly the majority are feathered visitors, migratory wading birds for whom the mud flats of Trinity Bay are a welcome stop. After breeding in the Far North of the northern hemisphere – Siberia, northern China and Alaska – they flee before the approach of the northern winter, flying up to 12,000 self-fuelled kilometres in order to experience life in Tropical North Queensland.

Godwits and whimbrels, tattlers and turnstones, sandpipers and knots arrive in Cairns between September and November. Some keep going, making their way to southerly feeding grounds, but many stay until March.

And what attracts the birds also attracts the birdwatchers. "It's wonderful," enthused a visiting Irishman, his binoculars trained on

the muddy expanse. "We are just a couple of kilometres from an international airport, a stone's throw from a major city and ... there is all this!"

I had stopped to point out a beach stone-curlew, knowing it to be an endangered (resident) bird – there are thought to be just a few thousand left – and I wanted to make sure he didn't miss it. However, he had already spotted it and was beside himself with delight.

"I've been looking for these all up the coast," he said. "I've been wandering around on beaches at night because they are supposed to be nocturnal, they are supposed to be shy – and here is one, right out there, in broad daylight!"

Birdwatchers know all about the Cairns Esplanade. They appear with sturdy binoculars and massive telescopes on tripods trained on the mud. It is the easiest place in Australia to watch waders. At high tide the birds are corralled by the water towards the shoreline. What could be easier than to settle down and train your

binoculars on the clustered flocks, then tick them off in the bird book? Nonetheless, wading birds are not everyone's cup of tea. Their non-breeding plumage, reserved for their southern holiday destinations, is almost uniformly brown and they are difficult to identify. But there are birds on the Esplanade for all tastes. A group of pelicans, present for most of the year, steals the show with their synchronised flying and fishing. Back on the grassy foreshore, flocks of rainbow lorikeets stop visitors in their tracks as they screech and chatter. Even those with a lack of interest in birds are dazzled by the gaudy colours and sheer quantity of these parrots.

Eager to provide for tourist expectations, the Cairns City Council periodically arranges for truckloads of sand to be deposited on the shoreline to maintain the beach. Even the mudflats are manipulated – the mangrove seedlings which establish themselves on the mud are removed. Otherwise nature would take over and a mangrove forest would obscure views of sea – and all that marvellous mud.