

Worth two in the bush

While bird-watching in the north Queensland rainforests **Bridget Martin** gets more than she bargained for.

Like bushy eyebrows on a bald man, the tropical rainforests of Australia cling to the edge of the continent. A sparse woodland of wiry, drought-resistant trees, with tough names such as ironwood and stringy-bark, struggles to clothe the vast, parched savanna lands that stretch across much of the Top End.

But the north-eastern coastal strip, thanks to a collaboration of geology and meteorology, is overindulged with rainfall; it luxuriates in rainforests that would look more appropriate in New Guinea.

Indeed, the Australian and New Guinean rainforests have much in common, sharing animal species that are foreign to the rest of Australia: birds of paradise and kangaroos that live in trees, striped possums and cassowaries - enormous, flightless birds with a mean reputation. Some birds live in both places, migrating seasonally.

Arriving in north Queensland in summer, I hope to see some of these - an opportunity to gain a few more ticks in my bird book. I particularly

want to see the kingfisher that graces my book's cover. A medley of blue and orange, with coral-red beak and feet, this spectacular bird is encumbered not only with an unwieldy name - the buff-breasted paradise-kingfisher - but also a pair of white plumes, 18 centimetres long, for a tail. At the start of summer it flies from New Guinea, trailing its magnificent tail behind it, to nest in the termite mounds of the north Queensland rainforests. I've had a tip-off. A pair is nesting along a certain track.

The forest canopy affords instant relief from the sun but no escape from the humidity. Trees stretch high above me, their upper branches bulky with epiphytic ferns. Roots of a strangler fig weave a deadly embrace around the trunk of an unfortunate host. The hooks of a lawyer vine clutch at my sleeves, eager to attach to anything that might provide a step up from the forest floor.

An electric-blue butterfly zigzags idiotically along the track and a brush turkey, its yellow wattles dangling,

scuffs the leaf litter. A drongo calls, discordantly, nearby. Cicadas deafen.

As I pause to untangle myself yet again (locals call this vine "wait-awhile"), I notice a large forest dragon lizard clinging to the side of a narrow trunk. Its crest and back are lined with tooth-like scales. I move forward, camera poised, but it sidles around the trunk.

I realise then that I am being watched. Standing on the track, not 10 metres away, is a cassowary. It is huge, its body covered with black plumage, more hairlike than feathery. With its neck fully stretched, it is easily taller than me. The horn-like casque on its head, a jaunty helmet that could render it ridiculous, enhances its stature. And its attention is unblinkingly on me.

I freeze. The cassowary turns its head and regards me with its other eye. The red wattles on its blue neck wobble slightly. Then it takes a step forward. Its feet are those of a genetic experiment - possibly involving giant chickens or dinosaurs - gone wrong. Scaly, solid, with

pointed, clawed toes, they furnish the powerful legs with a formidable weapon; this cranky bird can deliver a lethal kick.

I know not to flee - it could easily outrun me - so I step into the safety of a generously buttressed tree trunk. Following the example of the lizard on the adjacent tree, I press myself, motionless, to the trunk.

Sweat trickles like tears down my cheeks. A large green ant bites me. More are tickling my neck and I try, surreptitiously, to brush them away. A leech loops its way up my boot. I wonder where the cassowary is. There is a long silence.

Eventually, heart in mouth, I peer around the tree and catch sight of the cassowary's back as it plods into the forest. I was of no more than passing interest. As I watch it depart, a flicker of white catches the corner of my eye. A red beak materialises and then, cheekily, the kingfisher flicks its double-plumed tail and flies off. Panic gives way to elation.

With shaking hands, I open my bird book and insert two new ticks.



In full plume ...
the buff-breasted
paradise-kingfisher
sticks its beak in
where it is wanted.
Photo: Mike Proxiv/
WetroPics