

# Queensland's Rainforests & Great Barrier Reef

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 – 10 September 2014

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Report compiled by Carol Iles



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## Day 1

## Monday 1st September

We all first met as a group over lunch at our hotel, the Bay Village Resort in Cairns. The afternoon was scheduled as free, so two of the party went shopping for books while the others, due to the strong wind on the Esplanade, took a taxi to the Botanic Gardens. At 4pm I met up with the shoppers where the 4 O'clock Club (local birders) meet and, after identifying Australian Pelicans and various waders including Eastern Curlew, Grey-tailed Tattler and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, we were happy to be shown where Nankeen Night-herons and a Rufous Owl were roosting. Dinner that evening was in the hotel's Balinese restaurant.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 2nd September

After a buffet breakfast we met for the 7.40am Great Adventures bus transfer (past roosting Spectacled Flying Foxes) to the marina, for our 45 minute trip to Green Island. It was perfect weather and, on arrival at Green Island, we watched a pair of Eastern Ospreys at their nest near the jetty. From there we immediately boarded the glass-bottomed boat for a tour over the reef, seeing Giant Clams, brightly-coloured fish such as Yellow-tailed Fusiliers, Batfish, and Parrotfish, Sea Cucumbers and numerous types of coral. After walking to the resort and collecting snorkel gear we moved to the life-guarded beach, to try our hand at snorkelling with colourful fish and even a Green Turtle.

Back on shore, after a buffet lunch in the restaurant, we followed the boardwalk through the rainforest that makes this coral cay unique on the Great Barrier Reef. Birds such as Spangled Drongo and Rose-crowned Fruit-dove called tantalisingly but stayed hidden, while Eastern Reef Egrets (both white and grey morphs) patrolled the shoreline or stood hunched in patches of sunlight in the forest. Ice creams went down well after our walk while the ubiquitous, cheeky Buff-banded Rails wandered hopefully round our feet.

Having tickets for the 4.30pm return boat, we wandered along the jetty and that gave us some of our best sightings, with a pair of fish like striped dinner-plates, a Green Turtle, a metre-long Black-tipped Reef Shark and then a male Brown Booby that was sitting on the roof sporting smudged pale-blue eye-shadow.

After our return boat ride to Cairns, two of our party elected to walk in the evening sunlight along the Esplanade while the rest of us let the bus transfer us to Bay Village to prepare for dinner. This involved a short taxi-ride back to the marina, now a mass of twinkling lights, for a tasty meal at Marina Paradiso Italian restaurant, before a taxi ride back.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 3rd September

Next morning saw us repeating the 7.40am bus transfer, this time to board the fast catamaran Ocean Spirit to Michaelmas Cay, famous for its breeding seabirds. Coffee and muffins were laid on before departure, and then the friendly crew did an excellent job of explaining not only the safety requirements, but how to get the best out of snorkelling while safe-guarding the precious Great Barrier Reef.

About an hour after we passed Green Island, the white beach and turquoise shallows that make up Michaelmas Cay appeared ahead and, once the engines were turned off, the noise of screaming Crested and Sooty Terns and Common Noddies filled the air. Dave, the friendly on-board biologist, was especially helpful and made sure we all spotted both Lesser and Greater Frigatebirds before we boarded the semi- submersible, for a delightful trip with him between the coral outcrops - like humans in a bowl while the fish look on from outside! To see coloured corals with descriptive names like Spaghetti Coral and Brain Coral, shoals of electric-blue fish, goofy-toothed Parrotfish, inseparable pairs of yellow Butterflyfish and Green Turtles, all at eye-level, is as close to diving as possible while staying dry, and our trip was a great hit with everyone.

Back on the ship we were first to lunch before boarding the glass-bottomed water taxi to the beach. Once there we could truly appreciate the spectacle of thousands of seabirds at arm's length. Cyclone Ita, a late visitor in April, had scoured the island of its accustomed greenery, so the goofy-looking Brown Boobies were waddling about, picking up any bits of debris for their sparse nests. A lone Ruddy Turnstone, newly-arrived from the Arctic, pecked along the shoreline, and the Frigates swooped on unwary Crested Terns in hopes they'd drop their fish.

There was a steady breeze but the area reserved for humans is on the sheltered side, so we all entered the water to wade, swim or snorkel, some right out over the amazing coral. Having pre-arranged with the skipper a trip to the area of the Cay that can't be seen from the beach, we all boarded the glass- bottomed boat. Due to the wind and tide, we weren't able to circle the Cay but did go to each end and saw our only Lesser Crested Terns, plus more Brown Boobies, before returning to the catamaran for a nice cup of coffee and a muffin. Once the divers all returned aboard, we headed for Cairns, sails up, the boat at times bucking like a "rodeo bronco" at being forced to cut across the waves in the SE wind. Once past Green Island, the sea calmed and Dave came to our rear deck for "show and tell" with two species of the Crown of Thorns Starfish, native but destructive creatures that he and others are studying and attempting to control. Once we docked, there was just time for those who had missed it to view the Rufous Owl, before catching the transfer bus back to Bay Village for a shower and dinner in the restaurant.

## Day 4

## Thursday 4th September

After breakfast we packed our luggage into the minibus I had earlier collected, and by 9.30am we were travelling south towards Gordonvale, obvious from the steaming chimney of the working sugar mill. Walsh's Pyramid marked our turning west up the historic Gillies Highway, past the pub where many a driver used to wait his turn when the road was one-lane only. Winding uphill past Grass Trees and Cycads, the Mulgrave River far below us in thick rainforest, we touched on green rolling farmland before turning to visit the magnificent 500yr-old Cathedral Fig Tree. Along with birds like the Grey-headed Robin, a Wet Tropics endemic, we were treated to an eye-level concert by a male Golden Whistler, before we continued on our way, pausing to watch Red-backed

Fairywrens on a fence. We reached Yungaburra village for lunch in the garden of the quirky Whistlestop Cafe, whose flowers brought us birds such as Lewin's Honeyeater and Olive-backed Sunbird.

Now rested and refuelled, and after checking into nearby Kookaburra Lodge, we set off west, sighting Sarus Cranes along our route and stopping in Herberton beside the Historic Village Museum to watch Eastern Spinebills and Blue-faced Honeyeaters in the grevillea bushes, while Pied Currawongs swooped past us, no doubt heading for the cafe. Passing the lovely 1880s pub, we drove uphill through ever-drier country to Wondecla and found a lone Brolga, along with Comb-crested Jacana and various waterbirds on a farm dam, plus Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters, Jacky Winter, Grey Shrike-thrush, Scaly-breasted Lorikeets and Dusky Woodswallows nearby.

Within just a half-hour drive, we were in thick, high-altitude rainforest at Mt Hypipamee, more simply referred to as the Crater, where we walked first to view the precipitous crater itself, before returning to lay out our picnic dinner at dusk on one of the tables in the clearing, as a Grey Goshawk gave us a fly-over. The catering then came to an abrupt halt, when Sheila pointed out two adult Southern Cassowaries with a striped youngster strolling in along the access road! The birds ignored us and, after walking slowly into the parking area, melted into the rainforest - proving that so much of birding is being in the right place at the right time.

No longer concerned we might have to share with a Cassowary, we settled down to a candlelit dinner, with a glass (well, plastic cup) of wine for some, before setting off with a spotlight to track down some of those rustling noises. I lost count but think we had one Lemuroid Ringtail Possum, two Herbert River Ringtails and several Coppery-morph Common Brushtails. We also sighted a Leaf-tailed Gecko, characteristically head down and perfectly camouflaged, apart from its faint and brief eyeshine, high up on a tree trunk. On the drive home one Eastern Barn Owl swooped across our windscreen, and we had to dodge another sitting on the centre line near Yungaburra.

## Day 5

## Friday 5th September

After a long previous day, guests confirmed their desire to forgo the dawn chorus for a lie-in. It was still early when we took off, so we surprised two Bush Stone-curlews on a garden path as we sought a post box, and everyone got great views. Arriving before most people at Lake Barrine, we had good looks at Wompoo Fruit-doves and King Parrots perched in the quiet gardens, before walking to see the massive twin endemic Bull Kauri trees. Alastair also walked the 600m rainforest track as his morning exercise, before the full Aussie breakfast in the 1928 teahouse overlooking the crater lake. At 9.30am we boarded the cruise boat for a leisurely, guided circuit of the lake, stopping to view Saw-shelled Turtles, a huge Silver-finned Eel and a tiny Common (Green) Tree Snake. Several species of waterbirds included our first Australasian and Great-crested Grebes and Great Cormorant.

On land again, we viewed the old photos of the logging days before driving to the Curtain Fig Tree, another massive *Ficus virens*. These trees are almost bare of leaves for winter, though "winter" is relative in North Queensland, and the perpetually sunny days on this tour had temperatures in the 20s. Even at the Crater at 1200m, we were unexpectedly warm. From the fig tree, we drove to Malanda where, in walking alongside the river in hopes of platypus, some of the group saw a Red-legged Pademelon, as well as various birds including White-throated Treecreeper, Spotted Catbird and bathing Bridled Honeyeater.

Leaving the dairy town of Malanda we drove through open country, stopping to view a lovely Spotted Harrier Diana saw perched on a fencepost, before pulling up at the viewpoint overlooking magnificent Bromfield Crater, also known as Bromfield Swamp for the wetland covering its centre. In spite of the lack of a table, the group elected to eat lunch here, to the sound of hundreds of trumpeting Sarus Cranes. Other birds below included White-necked Herons, a Swamp Harrier and a perched Brown Falcon, while beside us we had a confiding Grey Fantail and a pair of Eastern Whipbirds. Being so close, we made another visit to the Crater car park, where we caught sight of a Tooth-billed Bowerbird but missed out on a Golden.

From Mt Hypipamee we drove towards Atherton, with a stop to view thousands of Plumed Whistling-ducks, like pebbles on a beach, around a farm dam. Next stop, by unanimous vote, was the Bat Hospital near Atherton, where Jenny Maclean, dedicated bat carer and world expert on flying foxes, gave us a tour of the exceptional facilities which she's developed over 20 years to perfectly suit the needs of bats and their helpers. The visit rated as one of the highlights of the tour, and I was delighted to be able to visit Nicky, the 'Tube-nosed Bat' my husband and I had rescued from a barbed wire fence months before, now a 'TV star' and "educational bat". We even had a new bird in the lovely gardens - two Pale-headed Rosellas perched in a tree.

With time still available, we drove to Hasties Swamp (Nyleta National Park) for great views of rare Freckled Ducks on a log, as well as delightful zebra-striped Pink-eared Ducks and comical Purple Swamphens. I found a (small) Giant Green Tree Frog in the sink in the toilet, and had to explain that such habitat is quite normal for our green tree frogs! As we drove out, thousands of Magpie Geese on an adjacent harvested paddock lifted off as a hopeful but unlucky Dingo trotted across.

When we stopped at Yungaburra Platypus-viewing area on Peterson Creek, Brian did a bit of networking and heard that a platypus had been sighted further along the creek. So we set off walking and, sure enough, there was a platypus, paddling along below the bank. We followed it back towards the bridge for some time, until the light began to wane, and then went straight in to adjacent Nick's Restaurant for a very pleasant three-course meal. After dropping off one of the party who was already doing some dropping off of her own, the rest of us drove a short distance to do a little spotlighting. This resulted in sightings of our first Green Ringtail Possums and more Brushtails. We could have continued the search for a tree-kangaroo but bed won out.

## Day 6

## Saturday 6th September

A pre-breakfast visit to Lake Eacham was a pleasant way to start the day, glassy-calm and peaceful before the day-trippers arrived to swim. Brown Cuckoo-doves and Spotted Catbirds were nice to see, and the Bleeding Heart trees proved their worth, allowing us views of a feeding black and turquoise male Victoria's Riflebird, one of Australia's four Birds-of-paradise. We then made a quick visit to Lake Tinaroo, where weekend boaties were already starting their activities so not many waterbirds were lingering. Breakfast had been ordered, so we returned to Kookaburra Lodge where delights such as porridge with cream, home-mixed muesli, and blueberry muffins were some of the options served on our verandas.

With no great distance to travel yet lots of great places and wildlife to see, we were soon away, and made our first stop at a field covered in Sulphur-crested Cockatoos feeding on peanuts left over after harvesting. We paused at the site of the Second World War hospital at Rocky Creek, before moving on through drier farmland irrigated from Lake Tinaroo. After a stop at a stall selling Ladyfinger Bananas, we turned west towards Granite Gorge. It

was a nice surprise to encounter our first Black Swans close to the road on a little dam, and Granite Gorge did not disappoint, with Rainbow Bee-eaters, Squatter Pigeons, a glowering Tawny Frogmouth and cute little Mareeba Rock Wallabies. We had morning tea in the shade before leaving for Mareeba, where we bought food for lunch and watched a big mob of Eastern Grey Kangaroos, also lounging in the shade.

Moving on north, we spotted a Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Black-fronted Dotterel and Grey Teal before we drove in to Mareeba Wetlands, with a stop for good views of gorgeous Black-throated Finches, first seen flying up from the roadside by Alastair. We ate lunch, which included a sweet local pineapple, in the shade under the intimidating gaze of a couple of Emus, before taking the telescope to view some of the birds on Clancey's Lagoon, including Australian Darter and Green Pygmy-goose. Fledgling Welcome Swallows waited to be fed by their parents on the rafters of the open-sided Visitor Centre, and a Yellow Honeyeater flitted about in the Callistemon tree by the decking.

Our next stop was Lake Mitchell, a failed building project but a masterpiece for waterbirds. Top for us were a confiding Australian Hobby and a pair of Cotton Pygmy-geese, but there were also Little Pied Cormorants, Great, Intermediate and Cattle Egrets, Hardhead and other waterbirds. From the lake it was a short drive to Mt Molloy to see our first Red-winged Parrots, and a Great Bowerbird above his avenue bower, which was decorated with glass, foil and pink, green and white treasures.

Taking a back route we found Tree Martins, an eye-level Forest Kingfisher and our first Agile Wallabies before arriving at Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge in Julatten. The soup course of our dinner, in the open-sided dining area, was followed by a short walk over to the local park in time to see Eastern Barn Owls emerging from their nest hole. On our return to the lodge, Lindsay had found us a Leaf-tailed Gecko that we could all see at close range, near the base of a tree. Then we returned for our next two courses!

While one of the group opted for extra sleep, the rest of us set off around the Lodge grounds in search of nightlife, rewarded with sightings of a less-than-dainty Giant White-tailed Rat, Long-nosed and Northern Brown Bandicoots, Fawn-footed Melomys, Bush Rats and a Spectacled Flying Fox. After saying goodnight, I came across a Green Ringtail Possum with its tail curled over its shoulder, so everyone came back out for that.

## Day 7

## Sunday 7th September

All meeting for a pre-breakfast walk, we went down into the orchard with owner Keith, to see where a Scrub (Amethystine) Python was hiding in a log, and to see two roosting Papuan Frogmouths as well as birds such as Metallic Starling. However, these were all quickly eclipsed by the views we had of at least two platypus swimming and feeding directly below us in the crystal-clear, shallow Bushy Creek. What a way to start the day! During breakfast, to which we added the local pawpaw I'd bought, and with Emerald Doves and Macleay's Honeyeaters eating theirs, Sheila got a gold star for spotting a Boyd's Forest Dragon on a tree trunk.

After breakfast, we dressed for the cool of Mt Lewis on a windy and slightly cloudy morning, then first took a detour to find a Red-legged Pademelon for Sheila. A quiet side track allowed us views of Fernwren and Chowchilla, though not as clear as I'd hoped, and the main walking track yielded Yellow-throated and Atherton Scrubwrens, Mountain Thornbill, Grey-headed Robin and the dark *keasti* (mountain) subspecies of the Grey

Fantail. We also had, politely, to ask a large Red-bellied Black Snake to move from the middle of the narrow footpath, which it did, reluctantly.

We returned to Kingfisher Park for a tasty lunch, then allowed ourselves the luxury of an hour off, though some of course chose to go birding, and Alastair was treated to the sight of a Lace Monitor sitting atop the python log, an indication that the snake was probably guarding eggs.

As the now-sunny day cooled just a little, we headed out to nearby Abattoir Swamp, where bushes were attracting honeyeaters that included Yellow, Brown, and an immature White-throated. From here we moved to Mt Molloy to catch up with owl-faced Double-barred Finches, before heading north-west towards Mt Carbine through Australian Wildlife Conservancy's ex-cattle property, Brooklyn. A grass fire en route attracted dozens of Black Kites, swooping to catch fleeing insects. At our first stop we found an extravagant, displaying male Australian Bustard with a Nankeen Kestrel overhead. White-winged Trillers flew past, but too quickly for some. At our next stop we saw Apostlebird, a Tawny Frogmouth on its nest, Blue-winged Kookaburra, Little and Noisy Friarbird, Australian Magpie, Pied Butcherbird and Galah. Turning for home, while the setting sun lit up the western slopes of Mt Lewis, we just caught the right moment when a hundred or so Red-tailed Black-cockatoos had arrived at a farm dam, to drink and gossip before going off to roost. We finished the day with numerous female Bustards, and an Australian Pratincole making dashes after insects on the dry ground, but our final sighting was a Pheasant Coucal, looking like a charred tree stump by the roadside, on our drive back to Kingfisher Park.

That evening, after dinner with the bandicoots, those who wanted accompanied me in search of a Striped Possum. One decided to oblige in the expected tree in the first five minutes, so we continued on, checking the hollow log where the 4m Scrub Python we call Spud had been coiled. It was still there, its coils shining in the spotlight. Taking a short-cut to my house, we came almost eye-to eye with a perched Papuan Frogmouth, who appeared a lot less surprised than us. A few probable Northern Broadnosed Bats, along with a couple of Fishing Bats (Large-footed Myotis) were hanging up in the carport, and we watched the cute Melomys and Bush Rats scurrying out to eat birdseed, before I walked the guests to their rooms.

## Day 8

## Monday 8th September

One very early birder had caught sight of a Barking Owl in the orchard but we dipped on that, though a pre-breakfast stroll to the adjacent park did give us Lemon-bellied Flycatcher, Yellow Oriole, Rufous Whistler, Barred Cuckoo-shrike and a White-bellied Sea-eagle making good its escape with a nice barramundi from the fish farm. After breakfast we searched in vain for Pied Monarch and Fig Parrots, but did see Grey Whistler, Varied Triller, Yellow-breasted Boatbill and nesting Striated Pardalote, along with two more roosting Papuan Frogmouths. At 10am, we collected lunch from Lindsay and left to visit a friend's garden, where we saw not only the startling Scarlet Honeyeaters but also Yellow-faced, White-cheeked, Dusky and many more Honeyeater species. Nearby I was able to find Northern Fantail, before we left to make our way to the sea, via the back roads where possible. A roadside stop allowed us to watch Fairy Martins swooping into a drain culvert where they build their mud nests.

In the mangroves, we quickly found Mangrove Robin and Varied Honeyeater before moving to the mouth of the Mossman River, where low tide favoured us seeing a Beach Stone-curlew, so close another birder had missed it!

After that we sat in the shade of the Sea Almond trees to eat Lindsay's very good picnic lunch, before moving on north. We stopped at some ponds for Black-winged Stilts, Radjah Shelducks and Gull-billed Terns before eventually reaching the chain ferry across the Daintree River. As we waited we watched an Olive-backed Sunbird attending its nest.

Once across the river, we stopped for the beautiful view of the river mouth from Alexandra Lookout, and were rewarded with views of not only Topknot Pigeons but also a pair of Pacific Bazas. Ice creams seemed required so we stopped at the Daintree Ice Cream Factory, where all the exotic fruit trees are conveniently labelled, and each sampled a mix of Wattleseed, Raspberry, Coconut and Yellow Sapote ice-creams. Thus fuelled, Alastair felt inspired to swim in the beautiful, clear water of Cooper Creek, once we had checked in to Daintree Heritage Lodge. Sheila and I took a walk along the rainforest track instead, before our three-course dinner in the lovely creekside restaurant. Spotlighting after dinner was rather quiet, apart from the noise of Wood Frogs, Australia's only representative of the Ranidae family, puffing their cheeks out like bubblegum balloons and complaining "Ow, ow, ow, ow" from the edge of Cooper Creek, which looked beautiful under the huge full moon. A bright yellow, male Jungguy Frog, which leapt from among the flat river pebbles, was our only other notable sighting. Time for bed!

## Day 9

## Tuesday 9th September

A pre-breakfast walk gave us better views of Wompoo Fruit-dove and an eye-level Black Butcherbird, and those who hadn't yet seen one had looks at Musky Rat-kangaroo. After a good breakfast, we were set for a day spent exploring the lowland rainforest, which many fought so hard to save back in the 80s. We elected to go north first, in order to see Cape Tribulation beach before the crowds. En route, Diana spotted a Brahminy Kite and a brief stop ensured good views of this colourful raptor, collecting sticks for a nest. No-one was inclined to do the climb up the rainforested Cape, so we retired for a coffee at Kulki boardwalk, as the sun was already gathering strength. Next stop was Marrdja Boardwalk, which allows access to the mangroves. The tide was already low, so crabs and mudskippers were visible, and the still air was punctuated by the popping of mangrove seed pods. We watched a Black Butcherbird bathing in the creek and listened hard for kingfishers. At the last bridge, we were rewarded with views of an Azure and a Little Kingfisher, perched above the muddy, fast-receding water channel, both within the same binocular frame!

Excitement over, hunger pangs began to bite, so we continued south and found ourselves back at Daintree Heritage Lodge, where we ordered lunch in the dining room. The sprinklers on the tented roof were the nearest thing to rain this Rainforest Tour saw! Our next stop was for some to buy packeted tea from the roadside stand at Daintree Tea Plantation, before we continued on to the Discovery Centre. Luckily no-one disliked heights, so we could opt for the metal walkway that winds through the rainforest about 50 feet up, bringing us to eye-level with epiphytes such as pink Bottlebrush Orchids and Basket Ferns. A climb up the tower at the end of the walkway failed to supply the hoped-for Double-eyed Fig-Parrots, in spite of a good supply of fruit there. After looking at the excellent displays on everything, including geology, history, ecology, timber, fish, snakes and cassowaries, we returned to the Centre, where Sheila sat to write postcards while the rest of us set off to do the many-stepped walkway at Djindalba. Before we set foot on it, a man beckoned and pointed out a Southern Cassowary, calmly hunkered down only metres from the picnic area. After we returned from our circuit walk it was still there, unconcerned by the clicking of cameras from the track. I collected Sheila to come and see her fourth cassowary of the trip, before we headed out to visit the lovely beach at Cape Kimberley. Remnants of a



huge raft of pumice, tracked from a New Zealand eruption, still litter the shore here. We watched a Sacred Kingfisher flying out and landing on the beach, perhaps to catch small crabs.

Dinner that evening was at Heritage Lodge, under a full moon, followed by the inevitable packing for an early start. It seemed the local wildlife was determined to keep me awake, squeaking, rustling and dropping fruit on the roof, but no-one else seemed to notice.

## Day 10

## Wednesday 10th September

As if to compensate us for our early start, a Lesser Sooty Owl whistled, like a series of bombs dropping closer and closer, without the explosions thankfully, as we drank coffee at 5am. We had no wait for the ferry across the Daintree River, so we reached Daintree village boat ramp before our boatman, and watched the mist rise and the sun begin to bathe the hills beyond in a golden glow. As the fog lifted, we were treated to a fly-by from a Great-billed Heron, and heard the raucous calling of a Channel-billed Cuckoo from across the river. Near the jetty, we could see a mixed group, with one representative each of Great, Intermediate and Little Egret, Royal Spoonbill and White Ibis, all by the water's edge and making the most of the exceptionally low tide, plus two Radjah Shelducks.

By the time we set off the fog had gone, and on the two-hour birding boat trip, which took us under Barratt Creek Bridge, we had excellent views of two more Great-billed Herons and even heard one bellowing. We also had repeated sightings of Azure Kingfisher, saw Striated Heron twice, plus Large-billed and Fairy Gerygone, two beautiful Pacific Bazas in their stripey attire, a 4m Saltwater Crocodile, and a couple of large Common (Green) Tree Snakes.

Sadly the group had a plane to catch, so there was no hanging about after the boat trip beyond eating a sandwich or two. Travelling south on the Captain Cook Highway, which hugs the beautiful coastline for much of the way, we made just one stop at a small dam but it failed to offer anything new at this late stage of the trip.

All too soon I was saying farewell to my lovely guests at Cairns Airport, for their flight to Brisbane and the continuation of their Queensland Rainforests and Reef Tour.

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