

Looking for raptors

It may be World Heritage listed for the trees that tower from its amazing sand, but Fraser Island has other, noisier attractions, writes LINDA VERGNANI

The ranger sends foam skittering as he powers the four-wheel-drive bus along the tide line on Seventy-Five Mile Beach. “Coming up on the right — a raptor,” calls a voice from the front. “It’s a beautiful whistling kite.”

The soaring bird, with its black finger-spike wing tips, is indistinct against a sullen sky. We crane to see it through binoculars.

“No, too light. It’s a young brahminy [kite],” comes the rapid rejoinder. Opposite me, a couple page quickly through a dog-eared ornithological guide, replete with pencilled notes. Suddenly, there’s a concerted roar of discontent. My grizzled neighbour shouts, “That’s not a brahminy!”

The passengers want a closer look, so the ranger is compelled to turn the bus around in pursuit of the hovering bird. “Let’s pile out and chase him,” says an exuberant birder. There’s a scramble for the doors and, once out on the glistening sand, the tourists line up and scan the skies, some taking photographs with massive telephoto lenses. Finally, the raptor is identified as a Little Eagle (*Heiraetus morphnoides*), one of 354 species of bird found on Fraser Island.

It’s 8.30am on Sunday and on this second day of Fraser Island Bird Week, we are as excited as preschoolers at a puppet show. There are 120 bird enthusiasts, ornithologists and biologists who have travelled from as far afield as the US, UK and Germany to track down the birds on the world’s largest sand island.

World Heritage-listed Fraser Island has a mosaic of different ecosystems that support

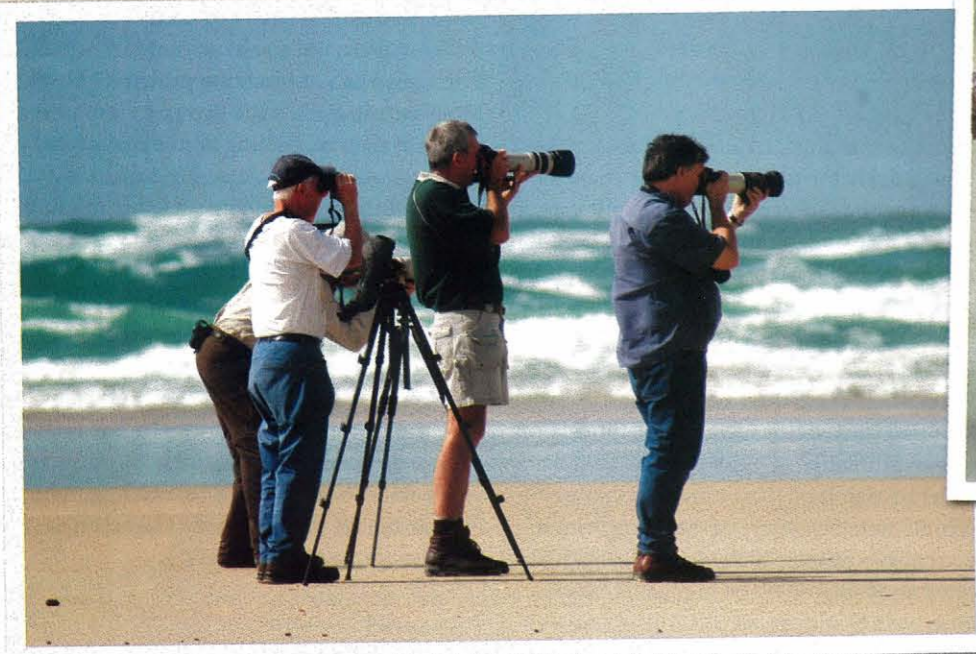
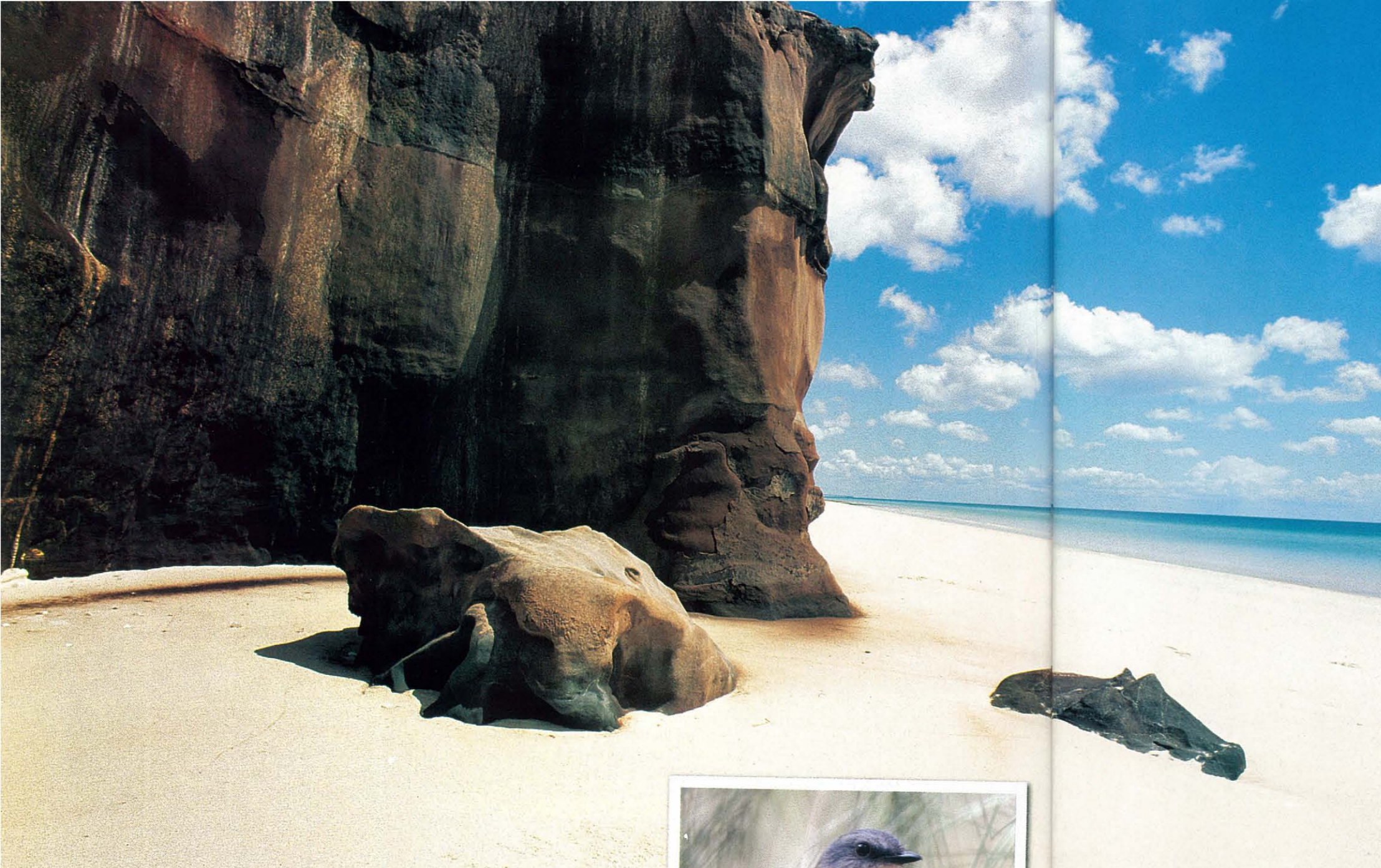


species ranging from vulnerable ground parrots to powerful owls. Key attractions include multicoloured sandscapes — cliffs, sandblows and undulating dunes — and about 100 jewelled lakes in shades of amber, citrine, emerald and turquoise.

The annual Bird Week is organised by Kingfisher Bay Resort, a lowkey ecotourism facility a half-hour boat trip from Hervey Bay. The environmentally friendly resort is embraced by forested dunes and overlooks a splendid wallum heath wetland, exultant with songbirds, including 11 species of honeyeater.

The program includes expeditions to prime birding sites and natural attractions; ranger-guided walks and canoe trips; talks by noted ornithologists, biologists and authors; and bird painting classes and photography workshops. Partners are catered for with things like bush tucker tastings and sunset Champagne cruises.

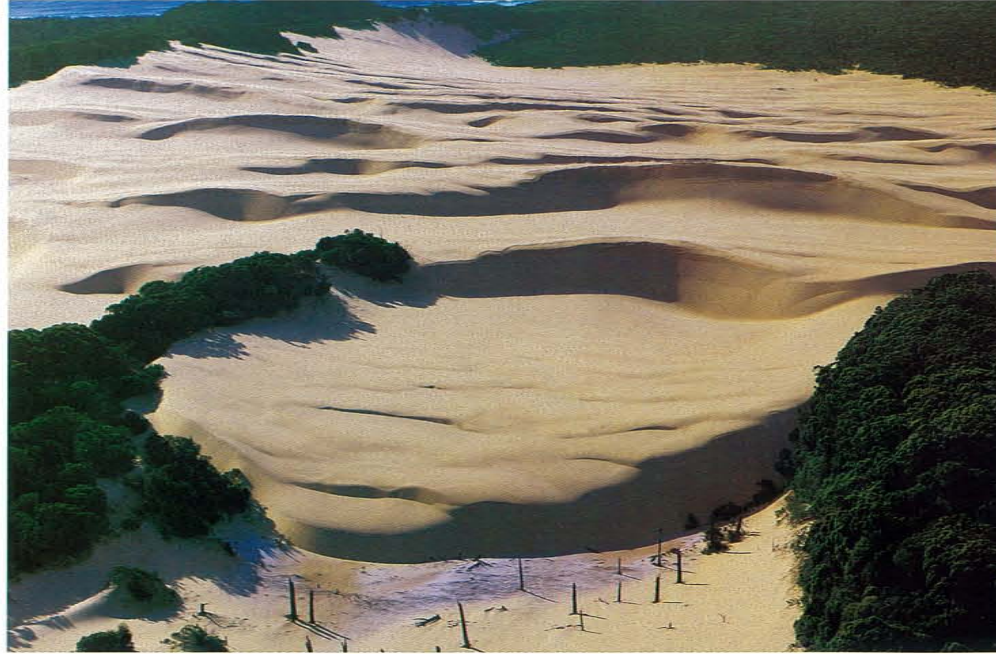
The guest speakers this year include outspoken ABC Radio Wildlife Talkback host Ric Nattress, who brings along a large, smiley-faced green tree frog, which he is



Clockwise from top: Fraser Island's magnificent sand and sea. A gull-billed tern takes flight. An eastern robin at rest. Bird watchers at work on Seventy-Five Mile Beach.



Clockwise from left: Ric Natrass releases a kookaburra. The island's pristine dunes. Stunning satinay trees in the centre of the island. A dingo with a keen photographer on the eastern shore. A green tree frog.



caring for until it can be returned to the wild in northern Queensland. Other lecturers range from biologist and author Tim Low, best known for his books *The New Nature* and *Feral Future*, to photographer Darren Leal, who trains participants to get the best out of their equipment as they focus on everything from spangled drongos to stunning sunrises.

The keynote speaker is self-confessed "bird nerd" Sean Dooley, author of *The Big Twitch*, who has ticked off more than 700 Australian bird species. He's accompanied by his wife who usually chooses not to join him on expeditions.

"It's good we got married before Bird Week, not after, because this is the first time she has seen me in full twitching flight," he explains as he constantly swivels and cranes, trying to tick off as many species as possible. Like other twitchers (birders), he recognises birds by their jizz (general impression) and uses an adjectival shorthand — "That's a buff-rumped" and "Blue-faced calling".

On the Sunday expedition, the twitchers tick off 82 species including various birds of prey drifting above the dunes. "What a bloody place — it's raptor heaven," exclaims expedition leader Mike West, Conservation Officer for Birds Queensland. During the 1980s, he was among the protesters who fought to save Fraser Island's remaining rainforests from logging.

We stop to photograph a young dingo, who

trots determinedly over and begins a series of short testing rushes. She yips and jinks, getting a little too close to the birders for comfort. "Don't turn your back on her," warns Ivor Davies, General Manager of Kingfisher Bay Resort Group.

For a while the visitors stamp their feet and try to shoo the beast away. Then they decide to ignore her, move down the beach and line up. They lock cameras and binoculars to their eyes and focus powerful, tripod-mounted "scopes" on a distant line of seabirds, including four different species of tern.

The expedition culminates at Inskip Point on the mainland, the best place in the world to spot vulnerable black-breasted button-quail. We scour the bush until the scuttling button-quails are located and everyone gets to glimpse the elusive creatures.

Next day, the rains set in and most birds disappear. We take the trip to the rainforests of Central Station, formerly headquarters of the logging company. Between showers, we head into the dripping forest where groves of palms and king ferns grow alongside a crystalline stream. Giant eels undulate over the pure white stream bed and some of our party detach leeches wriggling on their legs.

We spot yellow forest robins and other birds before heading for the chalky beaches of Lake Mackenzie. Some backpackers are playing ball in the turquoise water, said to have healing properties. Some of our group joke about emerging rejuvenated, but the few who brave a dip emerge sadly unaltered.

Other memorable trips include a walk down to the jade-green waters of Lake Wabby, which is gradually being

engulfed by dunes, and a wetlands cruise to uninhabited islands in the Great Sandy Marine Park. On the cruise, we watch vulnerable beach stone-curlews shelter under bonsai-like bushes and drift near dolphins cavorting through calm waters. By now, the birders are like family — a special breed with a shared passion.

For many, though, the highlight is the little eagle, which turns out to have been wrongly identified. For four days, avid amateurs and ornithologists study photographs of the soaring raptor and argue about its identity before finally agreeing it's a young brahminy kite. It's this absolute absorption in the avian world that keeps some guests winging back to Fraser Island year after year.

The writer attended Fraser Island Bird Week courtesy of Kingfisher Bay Resort.

BIRD WEEK 2008

The next Fraser Island Bird Week will be held May 10 to 17, 2008. Visit birdwatching.kingfisherbay.com/bweekindex.html or phone 1800 072 555 or 07 4120 3333 for details.

Fraser Island is a half-hour boat trip from Hervey Bay on the Queensland mainland. There are flights to the Fraser Coast Airport in Hervey Bay with Virgin Blue and Jetstar direct from Sydney and QantasLink (Qantas) from Brisbane. For those with 4WD vehicles who are prepared to drive through thick sand and very rough tracks, there is a vehicle barge from River Heads on the mainland to Kingfisher Bay Resort.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER MEYER, JEFFERY ROBINSON AND LINDA VERGNANI