

# FLOATING IN PARADISE

## AN EXPEDITION TO YELLOW WATER

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

It's difficult to hold the camera steady but nonetheless, the best way to see a spectacular wetland and its wildlife is from the water.



**Above:** Paused on a lily pad, a comb-crested jacana appears to be walking on water.

**Below:** In a day of great visual opportunities, sunset is still one of the best photographic moments.

**Previous page:** Paperbarks form a sombre backdrop for the lush early-morning beauty of water lilies.

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# HAVE I DIED AND GONE TO HEAVEN?



Michael Snedic photographs wildlife in a wetland: great subjects; challenging conditions.

Thousands upon thousands of wandering whistling ducks (*Dendrocygna arcuata*) circle in unison above us. White-bellied sea eagles (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) sit atop dead trees, occasionally swooping the water for barramundi. Comb-crested jacanas (*Irediparra gallinacea*) trot effortlessly across water lilies – no wonder they're also called Jesus birds. Black-necked storks or jabiru (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) scour the lotus plants in search of file snakes.

Surrounded by a cacophony of bird sounds and unbelievably stunning scenery, sharing a canoe with one of Australia's foremost nature photographers and documentary makers – my expectations were high but nothing prepared me for this. Slowly, the calls of magpie geese (*Anseranas semipalmata*) replace the sound of thousands of wandering whistling ducks. Silhouetted against the magnificent red setting sun, the geese stream past, all flying in the same direction. Time to return to camp.

## Invitation to adventure

Over the past 10 or so years, my friend and fellow nature photographer Glen Threlfo has made annual visits to Kakadu in the dry season. I had seen many photos and film footage of Kakadu's majestic beauty, so when he invited me to share the experience (as well as driving and petrol costs!), I quickly packed my bags. Travelling 3500km on a budget, we spent nearly four days in an old, 4-cylinder, manual Datsun 'Sunny' with no airconditioning (we nicknamed it 'Datsun Slowie'). We were headed for a wetland within

Kakadu National Park known as Yellow Water.

Encompassing approximately 19,800km<sup>2</sup> and located about 250km east of Darwin and 300km north of Katherine, Kakadu National Park was declared in 1979 and is now World Heritage-listed. The name 'Kakadu' originates from 'Gagudju', the main Aboriginal language used in the early 1900s in the north of the park. Aboriginal people are now thought to have lived in the area as long as 50,000 years ago, creating rock art, stone tools and shelters which still remain. Today, Kakadu National Park (which includes Yellow Water) is jointly managed by the area's traditional Aboriginal owners and the Department of the Environment and Heritage. The Yellow Water wetland is at the confluence of the South Alligator River and Jim Jim Creek.

## Sunrise in paradise

Photographically, the best moments to capture the landscape and wildlife are at sunrise and sunset. Even though it was late July, the mid-afternoon sun was still quite penetrating, calling for suntan lotion, long sleeves and hats. Sunrises, on the other hand, were magnificent and cool, with birds at their most active. Each day we started off in our aluminium dinghy, using a small outboard motor to reach our destination. After switching to oars, photographing the sunrise and breakfasting under a spread of pandanus trees while soaking in the atmosphere, we paddled off in search of photographic subjects.

Most of my guiding, birdwatching, bushwalking and photographic

experiences have been on 'terra firma'. It was quite a different sensation to view wildlife from a moving boat. (It was certainly a challenge to take photos from it.) Most wild animals have a 'comfort zone'. Approach more closely, and they scamper off or fly away. Yellow Water teems with wildlife, especially birds. They are quite used to a crowd of boats, usually loaded with tourists, and almost inevitably noisy. This was fortunate for us. We approached our subjects in our dinghy, regularly discarding even our oars and using an old piece of bamboo to push ourselves along. By using slow, deliberate movements and letting the boat flow towards the birds, we could glide in unobtrusively and often watch them continue to preen, bathe or feed.

## Magical moments

For both Glen and me, the comb-crested jacana, or lotus bird, is a favourite, so it was no surprise that we spent quite a bit of time trying to capture them on film. They are such tiny birds, but can travel around wetlands and lagoons with little effort. Their huge toes enable them to balance evenly over a large area, so even a lily or lotus leaf can support them. These birds are polygamous – a female will mate, lay her clutch of eggs and leave the male to incubate the eggs and care for the chicks while she ventures off to find another male with which to repeat the process.

At the end of July, the breeding season was still in full swing. We were fortunate to find a number of nests with eggs but one proved to be extra special. We checked each nest several times each day from a distance, hoping

to see some hatchlings. One morning we noticed the male seemed quite active and excited. Closer inspection revealed he was fussing over a newly hatched chick. When he headed off in search of food, we took the opportunity to go in for a real close-up. To our absolute delight, we could see another chick in the process of hatching.

### Rainbow lightning

Rainbow bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*) are aptly named: their colouring encompasses most of the rainbow. They are also a delight to watch while feeding. Their acrobatics defy belief as they catch a variety of insects, including bees, on the wing. Delicate yet lightning fast when striking, they rarely miss. The problem with photographing them is that they are rarely still – nor was the boat from which we were shooting. Eventually we found a spot where the birds often landed, placed our tripods over the boat's edge and pushed them into the mud to anchor our rocking craft, positioned our cameras and lenses – and waited. Our patience was at last rewarded with some nice photos.

### The big reptile

With its abundance of food Kakadu National Park as a whole boasts an amazing diversity of wildlife, many of which have adapted to specific habitats. It is a breeding site for many species, and in the dry season, as many of the smaller wetlands and waterways dry up, massive flocks of birds congregate at the large expanse of water that makes up Yellow Water. About 280 bird species, 60 mammal species and 117 reptile species call Kakadu home. Of the reptiles, the estuarine or saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) is one of the most well-known. We could not leave Kakadu without one – the image, that is.

Early one morning, towards the end of our trip, Glen suggested we go and try to 'take a pic or two of some crocs'. A nerve-racking suggestion – but with Glen's previous experience as well as his astute ability to observe animal behaviour, I was more than willing to take the risk.

The crocodiles often seemed to rest in the morning sun, so morning seemed like a good time to try. We motored out to a spot where we had seen crocodiles wallowing on the mud flats every day. Observing their movements, or should I say, lack thereof, we hatched our plan. As one of us slowly manoeuvred the boat towards the crocodile the other would click away with the camera; then we would change places. At the least hint of crocodilian movement, the boat driver would motor out of there at great speed, taking care not to topple the avid photographer at the other end of the vessel. Fortunately, the crocodiles 'behaved' impeccably.

### Light through the petals

At first light on our last day at Yellow Water we headed straight for an area known as the 'paperbark swamp' to do some landscape photography. Our aim was to find a fully opened water lily or lotus plant and use it as a foreground feature when photographing the paperbark trees, or melaleucas, in the background.

It took us quite a while to find a suitable plant. Then, in a moving boat, with the glaring sun behind us, we needed to position the camera and lens in such a way that would capture the flower at an appropriate angle and convey the beauty of the area in the best possible way.

After much jostling, we decided to take turns in leaning as far over the edge of the boat as possible with our cameras and wide angled lenses. To keep from falling in (bad for equipment and not a smart idea for the photographer in water teeming with barramundi, saltwater crocodiles and the rest of the previously mentioned abundance of wildlife), the person not taking pictures held the photographer's belt to keep him aloft. And then, just as the shot was lined up – the boat would shift slightly. This was one of the most frustrating, awkward and uncomfortable shoots I have ever done.

And yet – what an unforgettable experience the overall trip was. Many thanks to my friend and photographic mentor Glen Threlfo for his generosity and the opportunity to enjoy one thing we share above all else: a passion for our environment and its natural inhabitants.

**MICHAEL SNEDIC** shares his time between working as a nature photographer, a part-time Quarantine Officer and as a casual guide in Lamington National Park. His aim is to share the wonder and beauty of Australia's natural world with as many people as possible!

**GLEN THRELFO** is one of Australia's foremost wildlife photographers and documentary makers and is also a casual guide in Lamington National Park.



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Basic strategies for photographing wildlife: if a saltwater crocodile (**above**) moves, get out fast; if a rainbow bee-eater (**right**) holds still, have your camera ready. **Below:** The rich and diverse beauty of Yellow Water includes plants and invertebrates. **Below right:** Sunrise, a cool start to another stunning day.



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