REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Reptiles, Amphibians, and Other Fauna of Australia's Sunshine Coast

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Southeastern Queensland is a biodiversity hotspot, with its subtropical climate and range of landscapes stretching from seashores to hinterland forests. The Sunshine Coast, situated 100 km north of Queensland's capital city, Brisbane, is particularly popular for residents and tourists (Gursoy et al. 2010; Pike and Mason 2011). With developed metropolitan areas, the region is highly accessible to anyone wanting to explore its rich geography and wildlife.

In October 2024, a wildlife management conference held over three days on the Sunshine Coast experienced varied weather conditions. On the first day, light rain fell while sunshine shone through scattered clouds, combining for a humid afternoon. Landing at the Sunshine Coast Airport in Marcoola, three predators of herpetofauna were immediately observed, the Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*), Torresian Crow (*Corvus orru*), and Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*). These bird species were abundant throughout natural areas and suburbia (Fig. 1).

My accommodation was on a large property among hectares of natural bushland in the coastal suburb of Twin Waters. On the walk over, I passed expanses of tea-tree swamps (Fig. 2) from which the calls of Striped Marsh Frogs (*Limnodynastes peronii*), a common anuran throughout Australia's eastern coast (Schell and Burgin 2003; Drury and Patterson 2010), could be heard. The calls were accompanied by a chorus of diverse birds, including the Australasian Figbird (*Sphecotheres vieilloti*), Noisy Miner (*Manorina melanocephala*), Brown Honeyeater (*Lichmera indistincta*), Blue-faced Honeyeater (*Entomyzon cyanotis*), Little Wattlebird (*Anthochaera chrysoptera*), Noisy Friarbird (*Philemon corniculatus*), Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), Eastern Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*), Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*), Variegated Fairy-wren (*Malurus lamberti*), Rainbow Lorikeet (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*), and Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*).

Passing by a pond, an Eastern Snake-necked Turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*) approached the edge of the water whenever people were present (Fig. 3). Based on this behavior, this individual likely was either a former captive or one that had become habituated to feeding. The latter possibility brought to mind a similar case documented in marine turtles (Smulders et al. 2021).

Not far away, an Eastern Blue-tongued Skink (*Tiliqua scincoides*), one of the largest skinks in this region, was basking in the intermittent rays of sunlight in a naturalistic garden (Fig. 4). Despite growing to SVLs of 30 cm (Cogger 2018), this lizard is commonly encountered in urban and suburban

Figure 1. Three of the most abundant predators of herpetofauna on Australia's Sunshine Coast: Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*) (left), Torresian Crow (*Corvus orru*) (center), and Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) (right).

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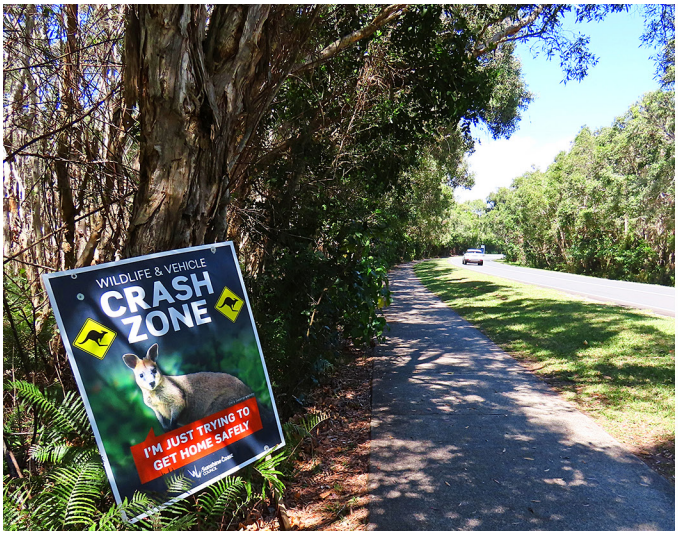

Figure 2. Tea-tree swamps on both sides of a road on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

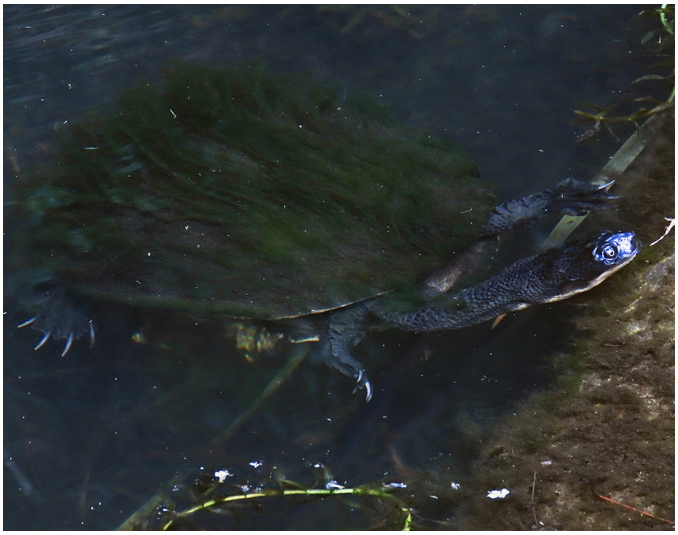

Figure 3. An Eastern Snake-necked Turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*) showing an interest in humans on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 4. An Eastern Blue-tongued Skink (*Tiliqua scincoides*) seeking sunlight on a mostly cloudy day on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 5. A Smooth-handed Ghost Crab (*Ocypode cordimanus*) in its retreat in the sand on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

areas, especially when compared to other lizards of similar size (Koenig et al. 2002; Shea 2010), earning it an iconic status in Australian communities (Koenig et al. 2001).

Before sunset, I explored Mudjimba Beach, where Smooth-handed Ghost Crabs (*Ocypode cordimanus*) darted and retreated into burrows dug in the sand (Fig. 5). This area is a Loggerhead Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) nesting site (Fig. 6). Australian Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon macrotarsa*) flew up and down the wash zone, coming to land on the beach for only seconds at a time. Near a body of water fed by the high tide, a White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*) wandered over a stretch of sand (Fig. 7), patrolling the edges of some grassy dunes in a fashion similar to what I have observed when watching these birds hunt skinks (Mo 2019). In a tree overlooking the dunes, a Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) was directing its attention to the ground (Fig. 8). Searching the area, I found a stationary adult Robust Striped Skink (*Ctenotus robustus*) (Fig. 8) after seeing several others quickly dart away. They had reason to be wary in the vicinity of so many predators.

As the sun set, a familiar chirping coming from the buildings got louder the closer I approached. The chirps came from an invasive Asian House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) that perched high on a wall near a ceiling light, to which its prey is attracted (Fig. 9). As its chirps became increasingly fainter the closer I got to the surrounding forest, I reflected on how this gecko favors anthropogenic structures (Vanderduys and Kutt 2013), although in some areas these geckos are known to invade natural areas (Hoskin 2011).

Before reaching the forest, I was surrounded by dozens of another invasive species. Shining my headlamp in an arc revealed an abundance of eyeshines of Cane Toads (*Rhinella marina*) of all sizes across the lawns and surrounding scrub (Turvey 2013; Fig. 9). These toads have been listed among the "100 of the world's worst invasive alien species" compiled by the IUCN's Invasive Species Specialist Group (Lowe et al. 2004), which is clearly evident when so many are visible as far as one can see.

Fortunately, I did find some native animals, including a diversity of anurans (Fig. 10), in my headlamp beam. Striped

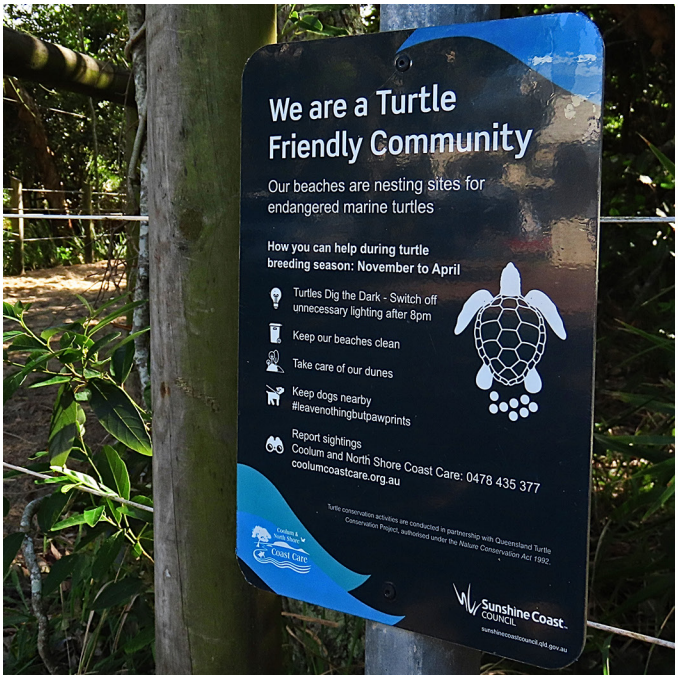

Figure 6. A signpost on Australia's Sunshine Coast advising beach users that the site is also a nesting area for threatened species of marine turtles.

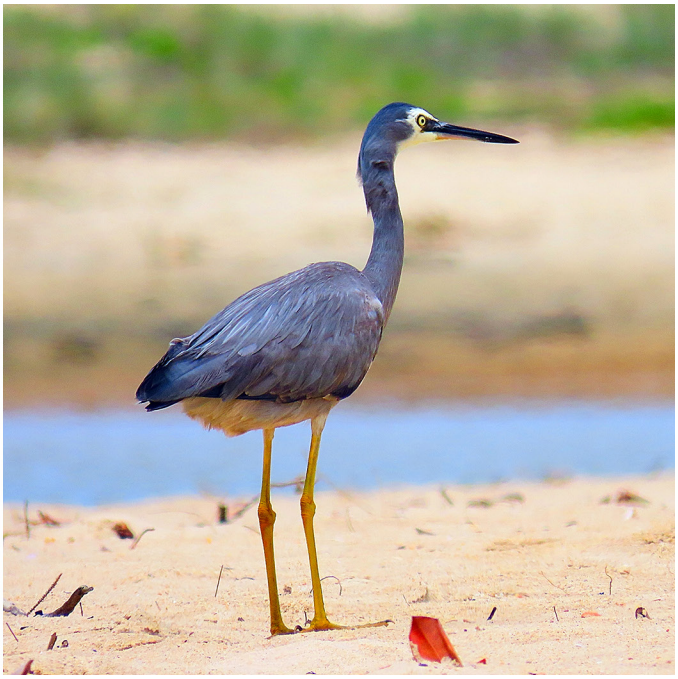

Figure 7. A White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*) on the prowl on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

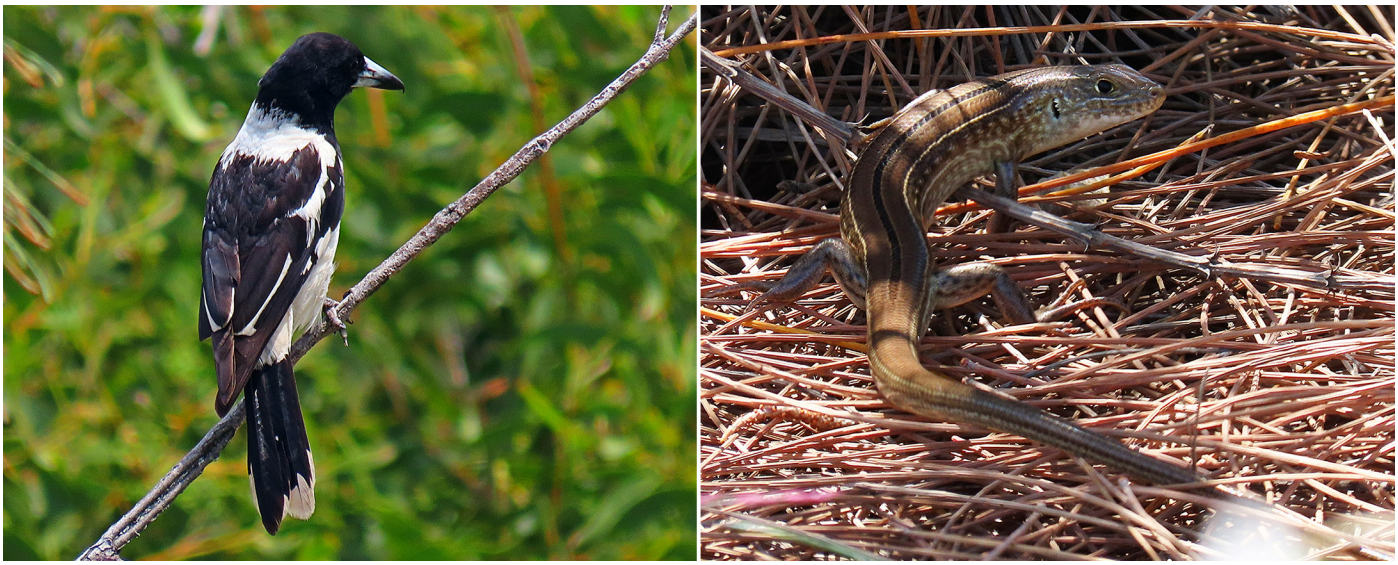

Figure 8. A Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) on Australia's Sunshine Coast scanning for prey (left) and one of many Robust Striped Skinks (*Ctenotus robustus*) it might have been eyeing (right).

Figure 9. Two invasive species on Australia's Sunshine Coast, an Asian House Gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) staying out of reach (left) and Cane Toads (*Rhinella marina*), a juvenile on a road (center), and at least two adults in water in the hollow section of a tree base (right).

Figure 10. Abundant native anurans on Australia's Sunshine Coast, a Striped Marsh Frog (*Limnodynastes peronii*) (top left), Eastern Dwarf Treefrog (*Litoria fallax*) (top right), Southern Laughing Treefrog (*L. tyleri*) (bottom left), Common Green Treefrog (*Ranoidea caerulea*) (bottom center), and Scarlet-sided Banjo Frog (*Limnodynastes grayi*) (bottom right).

Marsh Frogs, which were heard calling and not seen during the day, were now seen but not heard. The soundscape instead featured a distinctive two-part call, which helped reveal the locations of Eastern Dwarf Treefrogs (*Litoria fallax*), which are amazingly variable in coloration (Cogger 2018). Those seen on this particular night were all bright greenish-yellow. Also vocalizing was a congener that earned itself the name of Southern Laughing Treefrog (*L. tyleri*), although the individuals I detected that night were silent.

I encountered three other species of anurans that night, Common Green Treefrogs (*Ranoidea caerulea*) in the foliage, Scarlet-sided Banjo Frogs (*Limnodynastes grayi*) on the ground (Fig. 10), and then an unexpected find. This final anuran of the night had the distinctive combination of a brown dorsum with broad, black bands extending from the snout onto the flanks and a white upper lip (Cogger 2018). The only species it could have been was an endangered Green-thighed Frog (*Litoria brevipalmata*). Apart from its threatened status, this species is considered quite difficult to find because breeding activity is limited to short windows of time during periods of heavy rainfall (Lemckert et al. 2006; Newell 2018). To be confident of its identity, I ideally would have been able to see the light blue, blue-green, or green coloration in the groin and on the backs of the thighs, but those areas were largely concealed by the frog's resting position before its hasty escape. In the photograph I managed to take, however, one can just make out a very slight amount of green coloration behind the frog's right hindleg (Fig. 11).

Before the night concluded, I also saw a Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*), a nightjar with a vernacular name based on its anuran-like mouth, in a tree (Fig. 12). The vernacular name perhaps has a double meaning because, although the species' diet consists primarily of insects and other invertebrates (Higgins 1999), they eat frogs as well (Kaplan 2018). Farther along a concrete path, I was fortunate to see but not step on a native snail tentatively identified as a Scarred Camaena (*Camaena cicatricosa*) (Fig. 13).

The following morning, I straight-away saw wildlife. Eastern Gray Kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus*) grazed on the lawn, paying little attention to people in the vicinity (Fig. 14), which is not uncommon in many parts of Australia (Inwood et al. 2008; Coulson et al. 2014; Mo 2022). The

Figure 11. The first of many fortunate sightings of Green-thighed Frogs (*Litoria brevipalmata*) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

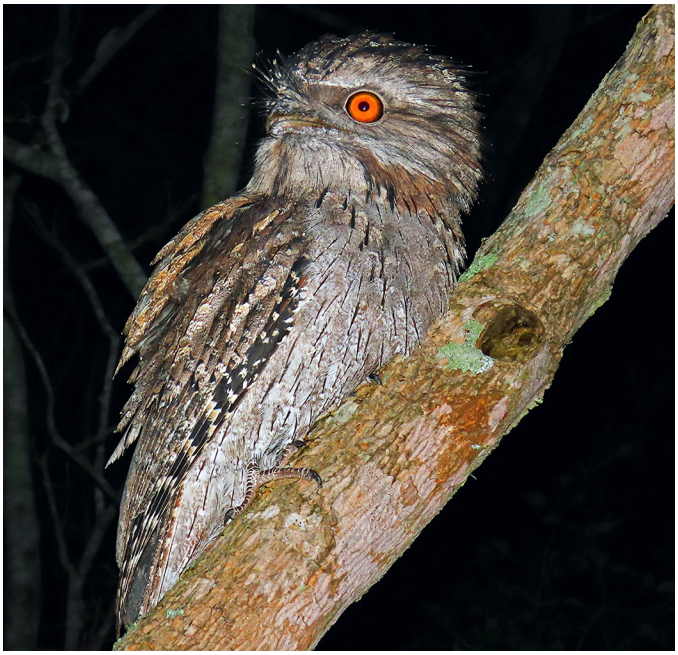

Figure 12. A Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) perched in a tree on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 13. A native species of snail on Australia's Sunshine Coast I believe was a Scarred Camaena (*Camaena cicatricosa*).

Figure 14. Eastern Grey Kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus*) habituated to an anthropogenic setting on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

dawn chorus comprised Gray Fantails (*Rhipidura albiscapa*), Lewin's Honeyeaters (*Meliphaga lewinii*), Little Wattlebirds, Noisy Friarbirds, Olive-backed Orioles (*Oriolus sagittatus*), and Magpie-larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*). Birds in the foliage included Rainbow Bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*), Rufous Fantails (*Rhipidura rufifrons*), Gray Shrike-thrushes (*Colluricincla harmonica*), Leaden Flycatchers (*Myiagra rubecula*), Variegated Fairy-wrens, and Dollarbirds (*Eurystomus orientalis*). The first herpetofauna I spotted were Eastern Water Dragons (*Intellagama lesueurii lesueurii*) that were abundant along the edge of a large man-made lake (Fig. 15). A Fiery Skimmer Dragonfly (*Orthetrum villosovittatum*) was being watched and avoided being eaten by one of the dragons by taking off quickly (Fig. 15). Other notable inhabitants of the lake were a Little Pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*) perched on an exposed rock island and a flock of vocalizing Masked Lapwings (*Vanellus miles*) (Fig. 16).

The commute to the conference venue rounded out my morning exploration, during which the weather alternated between heavy rains and peering sunshine. A flock of Australasian Figbirds provided a stunning silhouette against the clouds (Fig. 17). Farther along, towering over the canopy was an artificial nest platform used by a breeding pair of Eastern Ospreys (*Pandion cristatus*) (Fig. 17). On this occasion, one of them was finishing off a fish, but they also have been known to take sea snakes (Leach 1928). On the herpetofaunal front, this commute was a walk of extremes. One of the smallest reptiles found in the region, a Friendly Sunskink

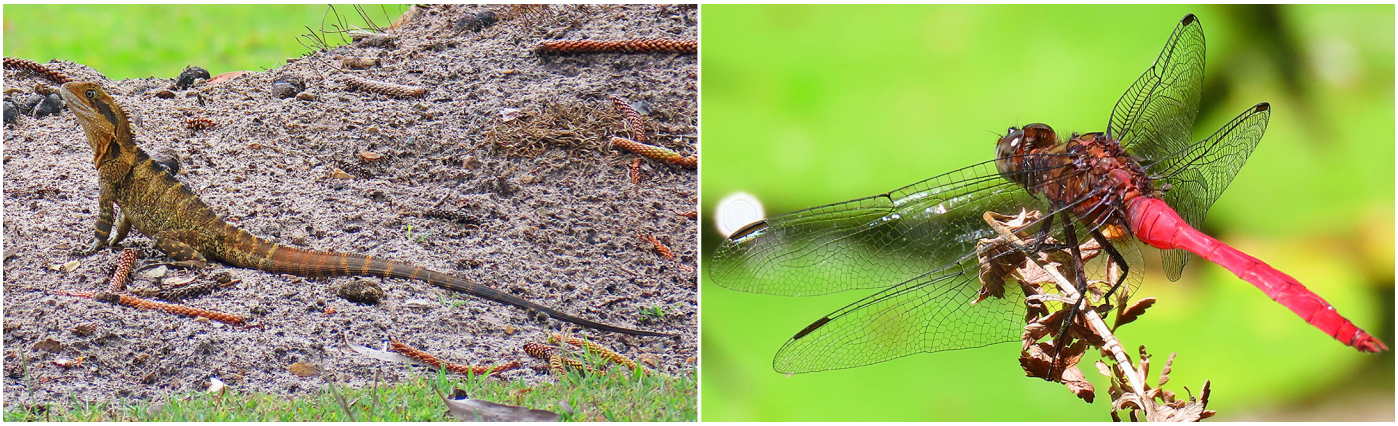

Figure 15. An Eastern Water Dragon (*Intellagama lesueurii lesueurii*) (left) and a Fiery Skimmer (*Orthetrum villosovittatum*) that narrowly avoided predation by a dragon (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

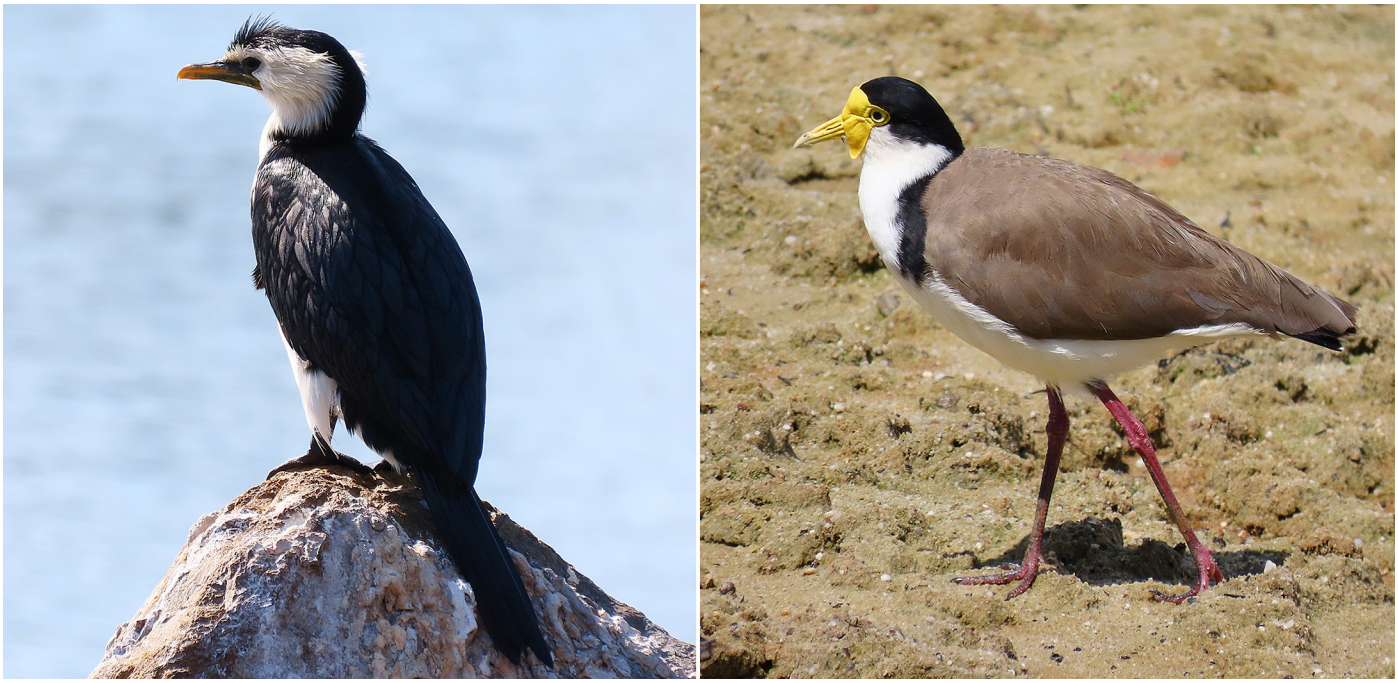

Figure 16. A Little Pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*) (left) and a Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles*) (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

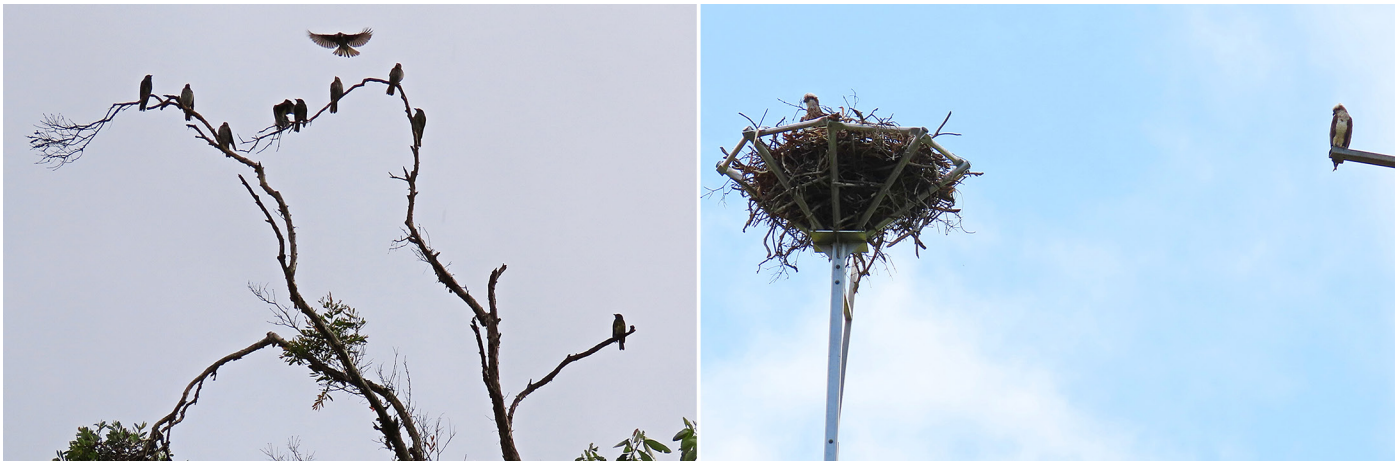

Figure 17. A flock of Australasian Figbirds (*Sphecotheres vieilloti*) (left) and a pair of Eastern Ospreys (*Pandion cristatus*) (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

(*Lampropholis amicula*), paused before scuttling off through the undergrowth, while the largest locally occurring reptile, an imposing Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*) stood still and tongue-flicked (Fig. 18). The latter in fact is the second largest lizard in Australia, exceeded only by another monitor, the Perentie (*Varanus giganteus*) that occurs much farther inland.

Wildlife encounters lasted until the moment I left the outdoors. As I approached the conference venue, outside was a male Australian Brush-turkey (*Alectura lathami*) scratching together a nest mound in a garden bed (Fig. 19). These nest mounds are impressive and are an amazing wildlife spectacle that communities have unfortunately trivialized because these birds are so abundant in many urban areas (Göth et al. 2006; Hall et al. 2024).

By the end of the first day of the conference, the sun had set and spotlighting became the tool of choice. Wildlife was abundant, even in suburbia, although I estimated that Cane Toads comprised some four-fifths of the vertebrate biomass. They were so plentiful that it was easy to become relaxed about whether to examine each set of eyeshines illuminated

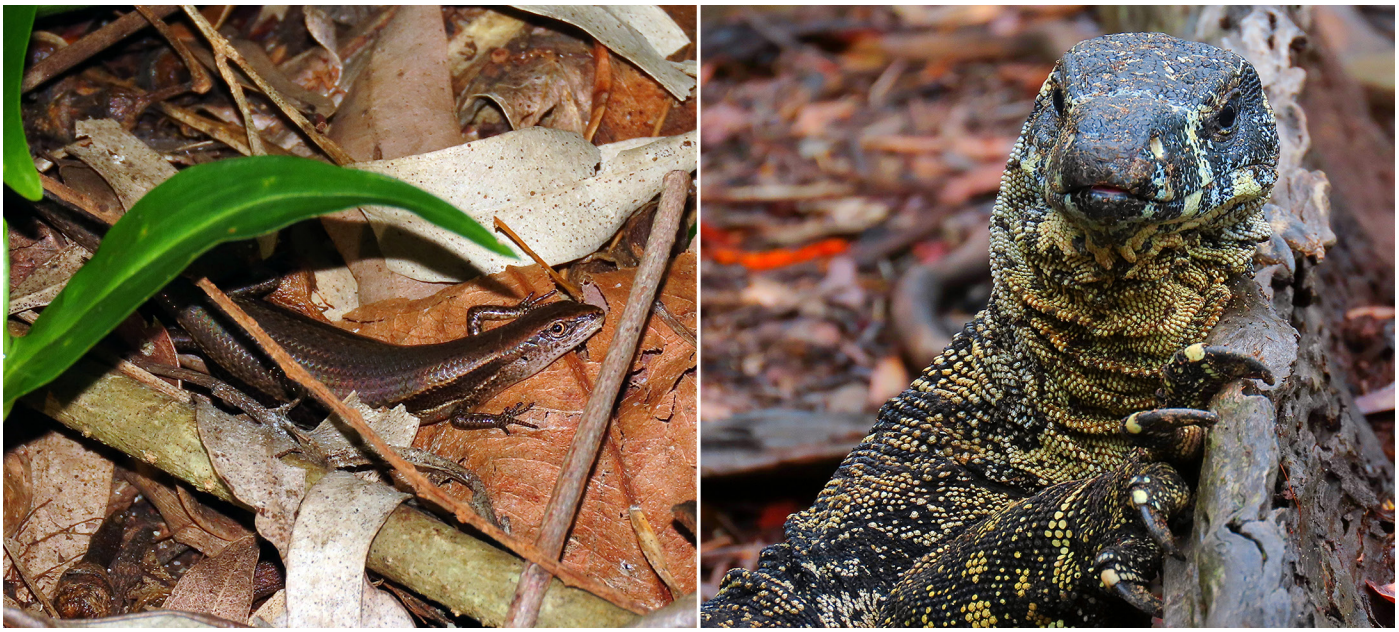

Figure 18. From one of the smallest to the largest: A Friendly Sunskink (*Lampropholis amicula*) making the most of the sparse sunlight (left) and a Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*) surveying its surroundings (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

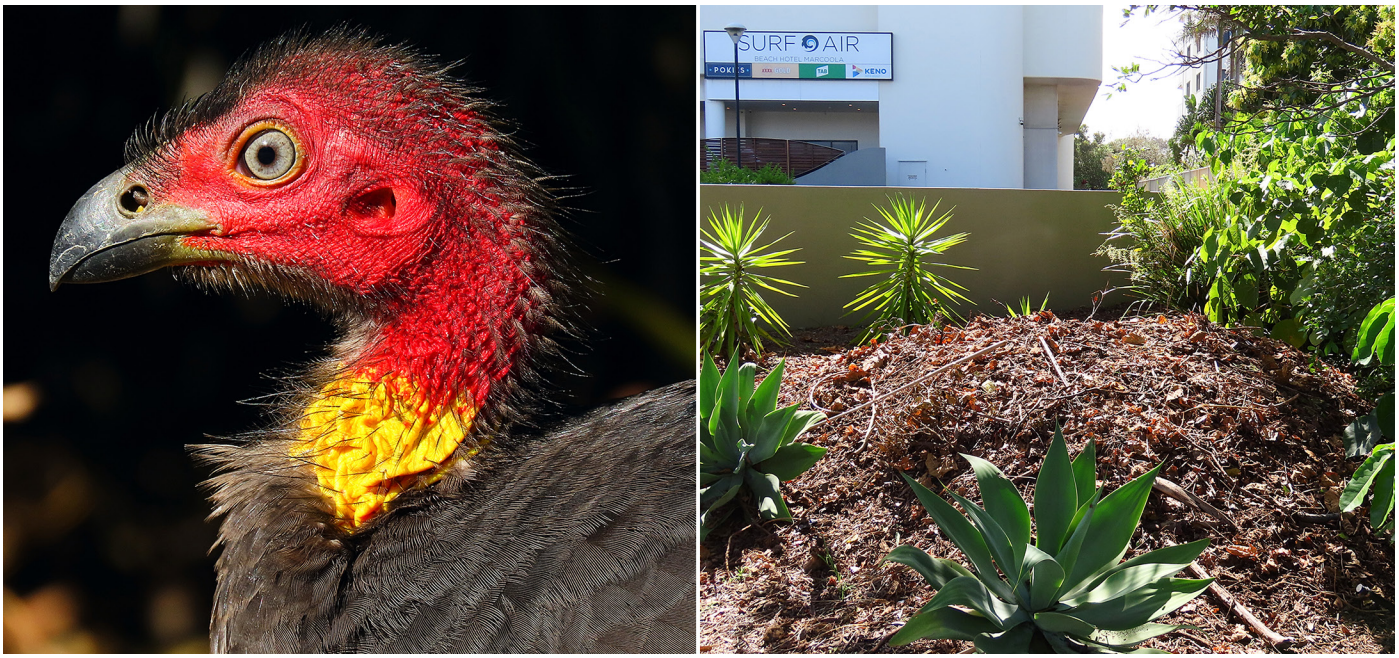

Figure 19. A male Australian Brush-turkey (*Alectura lathami*) (left) and its nest mound (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 20. A native anuran, a Dainty Green Treefrog (*Litoria gracilenta*), among the invasive toads on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

by the headlamp. Fortunately, I did examine each set, because one of them belonged to the first of many Dainty Green Treefrogs (*Litoria gracilenta*) found on this trip (Fig. 20). This individual was on a lawn outside residential apartments.

Not all of the fauna illuminated by the headlamp was nocturnal. Caper White Butterflies (*Belenois java*) and Common Grass-yellow Butterflies (*Terias hecabe*) were sleeping in the foliage, and a Noisy Miner was roosting high in a tree (Fig. 21). While I was photographing one of the Common Grass-yellows, I heard a rustling sound in the trees above and sighted a Common Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*) that had paused in response to my presence (Fig. 22). Only later did I become aware of a potential predator, a Coastal Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota mcdowelli*), a few trees away (Fig. 22). Especially in light of their size, finding these snakes and other subspecies in suburban environments is not uncommon (Fearn et al. 2002; Parkin et al. 2021; Lettoof et al. 2023).

I heard and saw the same species of anurans as during the previous night, although this time Green-thighed Frogs were abundant and confirming identification of the species was possible (Fig. 23). Heavy rains the previous night and during the day apparently had trigged the activity of this usually difficult-to-detect species. Also of interest, Eastern Dwarf Treefrogs encountered this night featured brown-colored individuals (Fig. 24).

As during the previous night, the walk to my accommodation involved an encounter with a native snail. This time it was an individual I tentatively identified as a Fraser's Banded Snail (*Sphaerospira fraseri*), which had a shell almost 6 cm in diameter (Fig. 25).

The following morning, creatures of the night like Grey-headed Flying-foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) had gathered to roost (Fig. 26). Also in the vicinity were Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes (*Coracina novaehollandiae*), White-browed Woodswallows (*Artamus superciliosus*), and non-native Spotted Turtle-doves (*Streptopelia chinensis*). I found myself on a track running parallel to a mangrove-lined creek (Fig. 27) in which I could see that people had set crab traps, especially for the prized Giant Mud Crabs (*Scylla serrata*). Australian Brush-turkeys were abundant, often the species sighted after hearing rustling on the forest floor.

The vocalizations of Striped Marsh Frogs were unmistakable. In one of the areas where I heard them, I encountered a Red-bellied Blacksnake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) on the bank (Fig. 28). This species is perhaps the largest venomous snake found in the region, easily distinguished from other locally occurring elapids by its large size and distinctive coloration. Ascending up the food web, an Eastern Great Egret (*Ardea modesta*), a potential predator of juvenile blacksnakes, was patrolling the nearby shallow water (Fig. 28).

That evening after the conference again concluded after sunset, the first fauna observed during spotlighting were invertebrates, including a Northern Wattle Moth (*Dasypodia*

Figure 21. Sleeping diurnal species: A Caper White (*Belenois java*) (left), a Common Grass-yellow (*Terias hecabe*) (center), and a Noisy Miner (*Manorina melanocephala*) (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

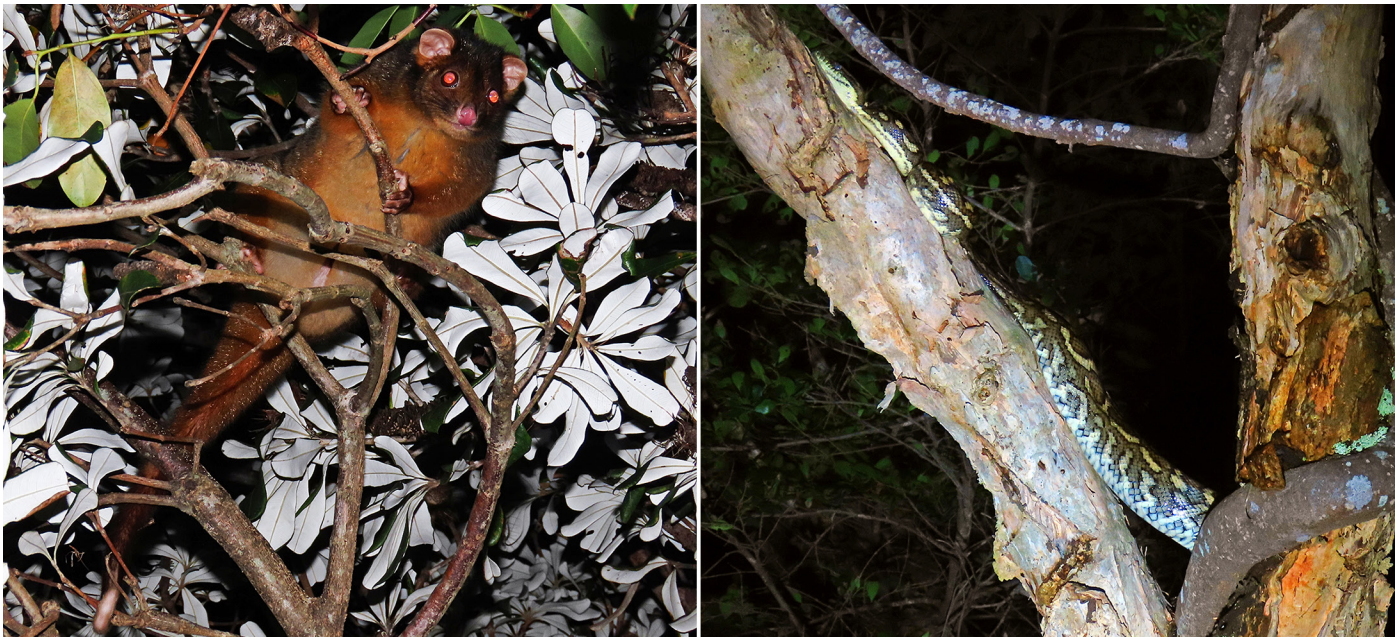

Figure 22. Prey and predator: A Common Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*) (left) and a Coastal Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota mcdowelli*) not far away (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

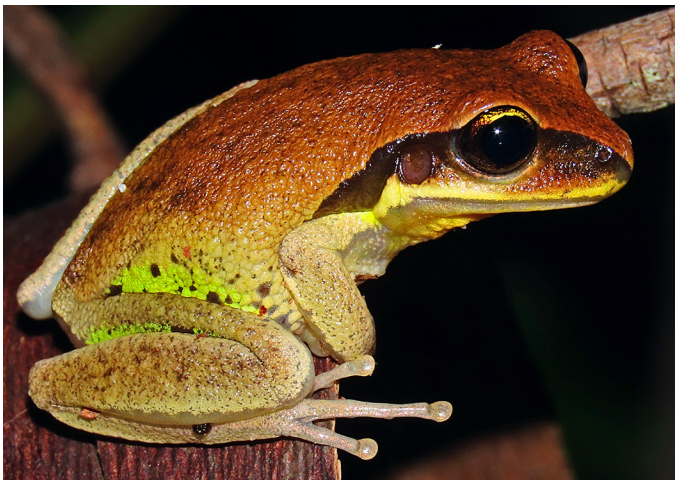

Figure 23. One of the subsequently encountered Green-thighed Frogs (*Litoria brevipalmata*) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 24. A brown Eastern Dwarf Treefrog (*Litoria fallax*) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

cymatodes), a type of Hawk Moth (*Nephele subvaria*), a Lychee Stink Bug (*Lyramorpha rosea*), a Olive-green Coastal Katydid (*Austrosalomona falcata*), and a Paperbark Cicada (*Telmapsalta hackeri*), all potential prey of nocturnal reptiles and anurans (Fig. 29). This night, the boom in Green-thighed Frog activity apparently had diminished with drier conditions. However, good numbers of the other anuran species observed during previous nights were evident. From one vantage point at one particular swamp, I could see as many 20 Dainty Green Treefrogs vocalizing.

The highlight of this particular night was an encounter with a White-crowned Snake (*Cacophis harriettae*) crossing a sandy path. Its movement was so fluid and silent that, if not for the iridescent scales reflecting the beam of the headlamp (Fig. 30), I might not have seen it at all. Cane Toads, which could easily make a meal of this small snake (Reed et al. 2007), were abundant at this site.

One locally occurring mammal that had eluded me was the Short-eared Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus caninus*). However, the next morning, a dead individual that had been struck by a motor vehicle the previous night was in plain sight on the side of the road (Fig. 31). I wondered whether at some point during the day, a scavenger like a Lace Monitor might appear and devour the carcass.

Inspired by my observations on the previous day's morning walk, I returned to the mangrove-lined creek. This time, the prize observation was a Gray Goshawk (*Accipiter novaehollandiae*) (Fig. 32). While I observed it, it did not move from

Figure 25. A Fraser's Banded Snail (*Sphaerospira fraseri*) active at night on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 26. Part of a communal roost of Gray-headed Flying-foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*), one of Australia's largest bat species, on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

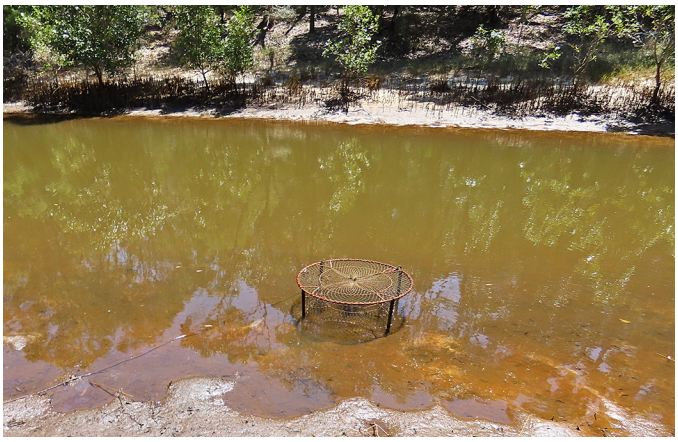

Figure 27. A stretch of a mangrove-lined creek on Australia's Sunshine Coast with a clearly visible crab trap.

its perch in a dead tree overlooking the creek, but its gaze was continually darting between subjects, most likely surveying for potential prey, which could be medium-sized mammals, reptiles, birds, and invertebrates (Burton and Olsen 1997).

During my last walk through the forest, the sight of scales in a tree drew my attention to a resting Coastal Carpet Python (Fig. 33). Because it was coiled, I could not estimate its length, but it obviously was a large individual. This was a memorable conclusion of my trip to the Sunshine Coast, where the broad spectrum of weather conditions apparently brought out a variety of reptiles, anurans, and other fauna.

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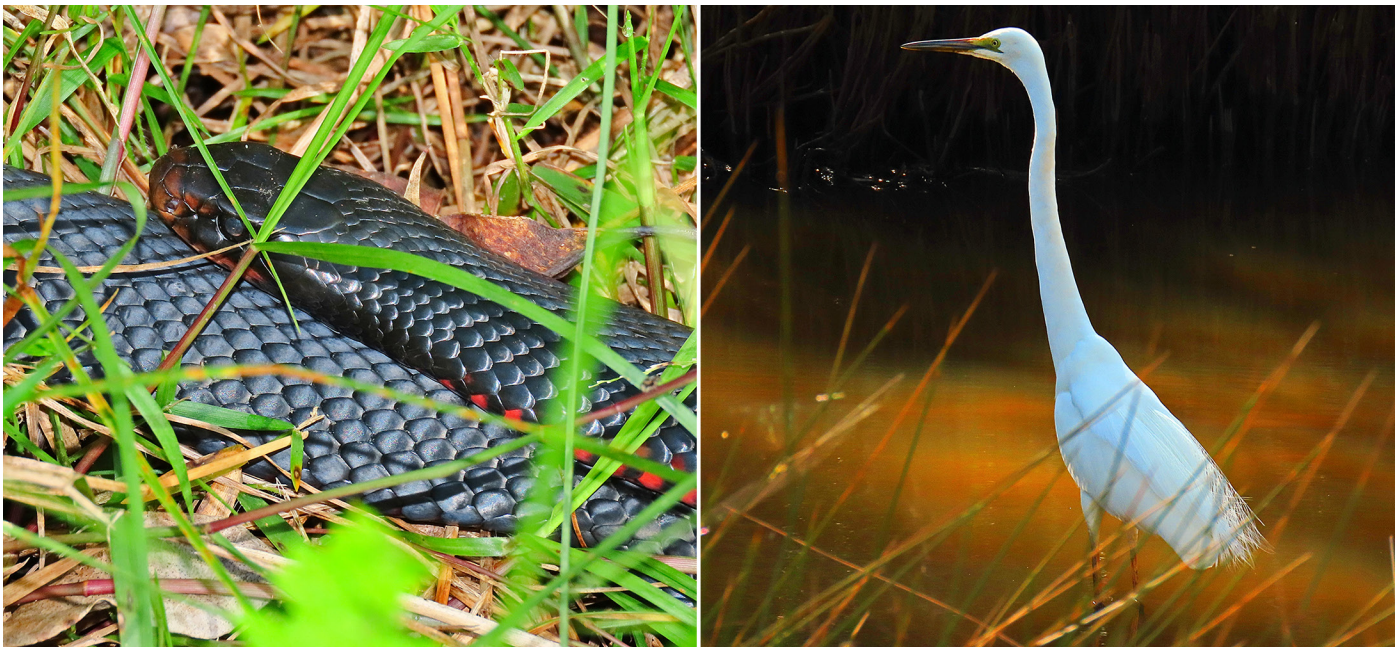

Figure 28. Predator and a predator of that predator: A Red-bellied Blacksnake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) (left) and an Eastern Great Egret (*Ardea modesta*) (right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

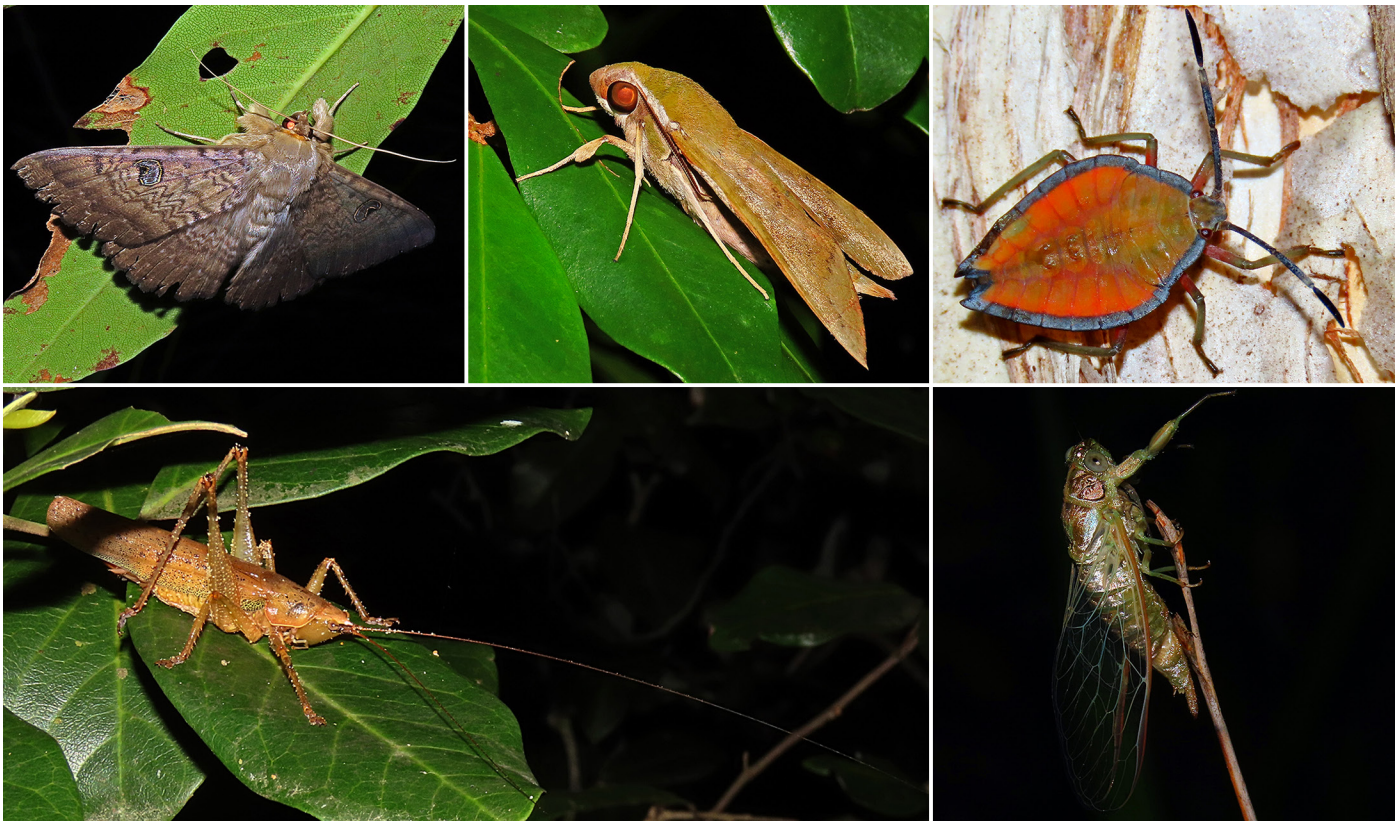

Figure 29. A Northern Wattle Moth (*Dasypodia cymatodes*) (top left), a species of Hawk Moth (*Nephele subvaria*) (top center), Lychee Stink Bug (*Lyramorpha rosea*) (top right), Olive-green Coastal Katydid (*Austrosalomona falcata*) (bottom left), and Paperbark Cicada (*Telmapsalta hackeri*) (bottom right) on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

Figure 30. A White-crowned Snake (*Cacophis harriettae*) on Australia's Sunshine Coast with the headlamp beam reflecting in its iridescent scales.

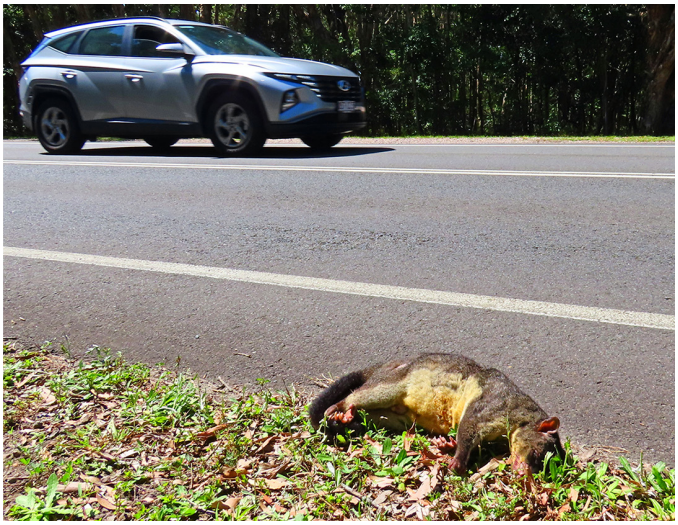

Figure 31. A Short-eared Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus caninus*) killed on the road on Australia's Sunshine Coast during the previous night.

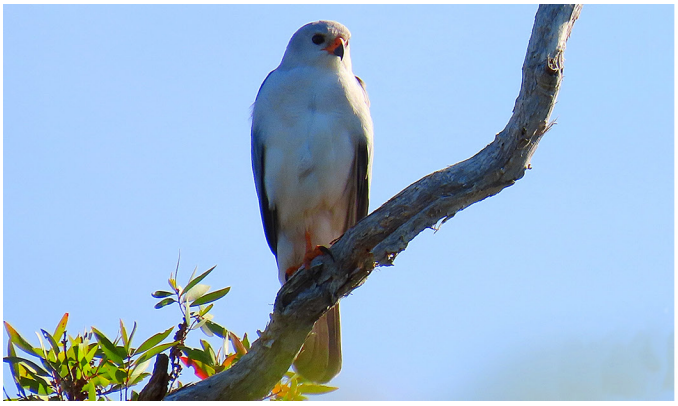

Figure 32. A Gray Goshawk (*Accipiter novaehollandiae*) in a dead tree on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

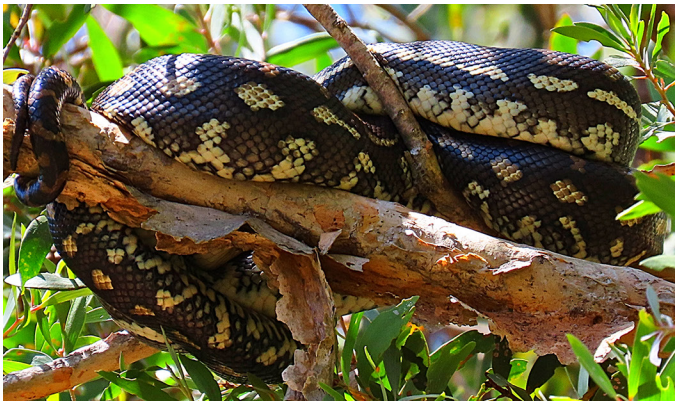

Figure 33. A Coastal Carpet Python (*Morelia spilota mcdowelli*) resting during the day on Australia's Sunshine Coast.

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