

Animal PLANET

WORDS AND PHOTOS EWEN BELL

The Northern Territory (NT) is home to the greatest wildlife show in Australia. While the ratio of crocodiles to humans in the NT is almost one-to-one, it isn't the region's only star. Look closer and you'll see magpie geese forage in the shallow wetlands getting fat on the roots of their favourite reeds, and frogs blending in the foliage to evade kingfishers and kites, among the colourful flora and fauna. The diversity of wildlife is, in large part, due to the region's vast environmental range, which covers deserts to monsoon tropics. New species of reptiles, frogs, fish, plants and invertebrates are continuously being discovered, nudging up current numbers: 400 species of birds, 150 species of mammals, 300 species of reptiles, 50 species of frogs, and 60 species of freshwater fish. Wetlands birds gather in huge numbers here as the water levels recede in March. The rivers run low as the dry season progresses, leaving behind billabongs that may not see fresh rain for another six months. Attuned to Mother Nature's rhythms, the indigenous aborigines keep a keen watch for the appearance of the colourful Leichhardt grasshopper, a sign that the big rains are coming to drench the landscape in floods once again, and renew the cycle of life in the wetlands.





Opening spread: The scales of a saltwater croc are as unique as any fingerprint. The ventral scales on the tail often reveal battle scars from encounters with bigger crocs. The enlarged tail plates boost swimming efficiency and relieves body heat

This page, clockwise from top left: Leichhardt's grasshoppers go through several phases of maturation before adorning the full spectacle of rich orange and blue colours; a pied cormorant lands on the tree tops. Grass fires set alight by indigenous communities to clear patches of scrub greatly enhance the winter sunsets; seed pods of *Pandanus spiralis* are edible but they're hard to crack, not even the tenacious sulphur-crested cockatoo will touch them; dozens of species of grevillea thrive in the harsh climate of the NT. This golden grevillea is a rich source of food for honey-eating birds and a very small marsupial family



Pied herons usually stalk their prey from the shoreline, but this juvenile is still small enough to utilise the lily pads to extend his hunting range



Facing page: Green tree frogs have a habit of making themselves at home around caravan parks, especially in amenity blocks where fresh water is "on tap" year round. In the day, they are reluctant to move far or quickly


This page, clockwise from top: Despite their small size, green ants will react quickly to any perceived intruder approaching the nest. They raise their glassy green abdomen high into the air and stand tall, sometimes climbing on top of each other to maximise the show of ferocity towards their intended enemy; the short-eared rock wallaby prefers the cover of darkness when venturing out to feed on grass. By day, they take shelter from the sun and hunters by scaling difficult rocks and concealing themselves beneath overhangs; butterflies gather en masse in cool shady gullies where there is shelter from both wind and direct light



A guide from Davidson's Safari Camp paddles a flat-bottomed boat into shallow waters to help visitors get a very close look at some large crocodiles sunning themselves on the rocks



Clockwise from top: The rainbow bee-eater can be found all through the Top End and are extraordinary flyers, able to change direction at high speed and chase down insects in mid-flight; the female comb-crested jacana leaves the male in charge of eggs to incubate, while she heads off to start her next clutch. They nest on the lily pads and rely on quiet rivers for suitable hatching sites; there are over two dozen species of frogs in NT's forests and waters. This species is a kind of "wood frog", which lives mostly amongst the fallen leaves and grass

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