

Whiskers in the rainforest

Three eco-lodges in
north Queensland
— from budget
to five-star —
offer incredible
opportunities to see
wildlife, and their
owners are doing
their bit to preserve
the rainforest

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At 3am I'm woken by the sound of a creature blundering around the branches outside our cabin, but by the feeble light of the shake-activated torch I can't see anything.

The rustling of leaves continues, so I turn on the bathroom light and the forest is illuminated through the glass wall of the shower. There it is! Clambering up a sapling is a rarely seen striped possum.

In seconds this specialist grub eater has disappeared into the leaves. But I'm delighted to have spotted one of the most furtive rainforest inhabitants of far north Queensland. It's the creature I most wanted to see at Sanctuary Retreat, an eco-lodge set atop a steep hillside in 18 hectares of rainforest near Mission Beach.

More than 95 per cent of the land at

the Sanctuary Retreat is protected by a conservation agreement. The reserve forms a "critical habitat" for endangered southern cassowaries and these blue-casqued birds play a vital role in helping propagate rainforest trees. Visitors regularly encounter the resident pair, Barbara and Stewart, and occasionally the new leading lady, Bella.

The retreat, named a "slice of heaven" by *Lonely Planet*, is owned by former foreign exchange trader Paul Verity. He says while the cassowaries are commonly seen, he last spotted a striped possum about two years ago. He explains that these possums have an elongated middle finger and tap the wood of the trees to uncover insects.

Verity returned to Australia from London in the late 1990s with his then girlfriend to find some unspoiled land where he could establish a sustainable business.

Opposite page: Shading the shore, the rainforests of Mission Beach are a vital habitat for endangered cassowaries. This page clockwise from top left: A coppery brushtail possum with bulging pouch grooms her paws. A majestic flightless cassowary. Glistening blue quandong berries. The red glow of new leaves. Flames of orange bracket fungus.



"The reason I like Mission Beach is that it is one of only two places in Australia where the rainforest comes right down to the beach front," he says. "For me, that is wildly attractive. When we saw this piece of land, we fell in love with it. It had this wonderfully high canopy and you couldn't see the sky."

Wanting to make the slightest impact on the rainforest environment, Verity initially built low-cost, mesh-sided huts. Subsequently he added a few deluxe cabins with jungle views, polished wooden floors and hand-hewn furniture.

We are staying in one of the deluxe cabins and from the balcony watch orange-footed scrub fowl rooting through leaf litter and glimpse swizzling yellow-breasted sunbirds.

Because the land is incredibly steep, guests must leave their cars at the foot of the hill. Their bags are taken to and from the

retreat by staff in a four-wheel drive. Guests are encouraged to walk up and down the 600m mountain-goat path that leads to the retreat and explore the other walking tracks. The only drawback is a \$5.50 charge for each subsequent four-wheel-drive trip.

We relax in the airy Longhouse lounge, with its huge glass windows and views through emerald trees festooned with ferns and heart-leaved vines, down to a silvery ocean. Here we find a friendly young staff and a convivial atmosphere.

Some guests use the downstairs kitchen to prepare their food, while others buy meals at the restaurant upstairs. A two-course dinner costs from \$20 to \$30 each and we try a subtle Indonesian vegetable curry and grilled barramundi crusted in almond and yoghurt with a coriander cream sauce.

When the buildings were damaged and

trees ripped apart by tropical cyclone Larry in 2006, Verity was heartened when previous guests contacted him and offered to help rebuild the retreat and replant trees.

From our eyrie we stroll down to the secluded Brooks Beach below. With trips to the reef cancelled due to strong winds, we picnic on nearby Dunk Island and visit the thundering Murray Falls, where we are lucky to see brilliant turquoise Ulysses butterflies.

Our next stop is the Canopy Rainforest Treehouses, which offers carbon-neutral accommodation in a 40-hectare nature reserve in the Atherton Tablelands. The unlogged rainforest has unusual creatures, including six species of possum and Lumholtz's tree kangaroos.

Our self-catered cabin is surrounded by tree ferns on the banks of the olive green Ithaca stream. The high-ceilinged building



Clockwise from top: Guests dine above the treetops at Sanctuary Retreat. Rainbow lorikeets perch on the bough of a pale poplar gum while the Coral Sea laps the secluded beach at Thala Beach Lodge. The native forests that envelop the bungalows at Thala (bottom right) and The Canopy Rainforest Treehouses are rich in wildlife. Far right: Oak Beach at Thala Beach Lodge.



AFTER DARK WE WATCH ABOUT 30 PADEMELONS BEING FED ON VEGETABLES AT THE RECEPTION CENTRE. BACK AT THE CABIN WE LIGHT A FIRE, MAKE SUPPER AND WAIT FOR OUR GUESTS.

has a glass-walled spa, a wood-burning fireplace and containers of food to attract birds, possums and turtles.

As soon as we put seeds and ripe banana into the bird feeder on the balcony, a flock of tiny red-browed finches lands. Soon a jet-black and iridescent blue Victoria's riflebird flutters in to eat banana, only to be ousted by greedy spotted cat birds.

After dark we watch about 30 skittish pademelons being fed on vegetables at the reception centre. Back at the cabin we light a fire, make supper and wait for our guests.

The first to arrive is a coppery brushtail possum, its reddish-brown coat spattered with drops of rain. A sub-species of the common brushtail possum, it tucks greedily into the fruit. It is soon displaced by other coppery brushtails, including one that saunters past my feet, a joey spreadeagled

across her back. The next day, we wake to whistles, warbles and more rain. We take the turtle food down a short path to the stream, attracting sawtooth turtles from all directions.

That afternoon, former schoolteacher and naturalist Alan Gillanders takes my husband and me on a private tour to see more wildlife. A half-day tour costs \$170. We tell him exactly what we want to see and he comes along in our rented car, taking us to the spots where we are most likely to find specific animals and birds.

At the nearby Smokehouse Cafe, we dine on succulent red claw crayfish and view platypus paddling vigorously around the pond. "You can recognise the males by their blond eyebrows," Gillanders says.

At Lake Barrine he points out a hurtling musky rat kangaroo and identifies numerous



THE LOWDOWN

→ SANCTUARY RETREAT

Huts with shared bathrooms cost \$65 a night and deluxe ensuite cabins, \$165 a night. The restaurant serves a light lunch for \$6 to \$13 and a two-course dinner, excluding drinks, for \$20-\$30. There is also a communal kitchen for self-catering.

07 4088 6064 sanctuaryretreat.com.au

→ CANOPY RAINFOREST TREEHOUSES

Treehouses cost \$349 a night and there is a two-night minimum stay. Each house has a well-equipped kitchen. There is a supermarket, butcher and bakery at Malanda and a range of restaurants at nearby villages such as Yungaburra.

07 4096 5364 canopytreehouses.com.au

→ THALA BEACH LODGE

Prices are from \$249 a night for room only. Restaurant meals cost \$20 to \$30 per person for a one-course lunch and about \$60 a person for a two-course dinner, excluding drinks.

07 4098 5700 thalabeach.com.au

→ WILDLIFE TOURS

Alan Gillander's tours cost \$170 for a half day and \$280 for a full day, which includes 90 minutes of night spotting. If you have limited time and want to see a range of wildlife, the tablelands offer better opportunities than the coastal areas. 07 4095 3784

www.alanswildlifetours.com.au

birds and plants. At one stage, this animated raconteur demonstrates the spectacular courtship dance of Victoria's rifle bird, telling us its wings sound like silk rippling as they are drawn over its gaping yellow bill. We search a river bank for tree kangaroos, but all we find is the musky smell left by one that had been feeding on a tree the night before.

Our final destination is Thala Beach Lodge, a five-star resort on a wooded peninsula near Port Douglas. Thala's open lounge and restaurant are set among ivory-trunked poplar gums with views across the Coral Sea all the way to the blue mountains of Cape Tribulation. The restaurant is an excellent vantage point for photographing honeyeaters and parrots as they splash in a tree trunk bird bath. The restaurant also serves excellent meals.

For dinner we have delicate brandied

lobster bisque with bug tails and king prawn tempura as starters followed by satisfying grilled Muscovy duck breast with black bean and orange sauce plus a green curry of bugs, scallops and prawns. Dinner costs about \$60 for two courses plus drinks.

This resort has secluded beaches and 10 kilometres of walking tracks where you might see anything from dingoes to wallabies. Among experiences offered are kayak tours to spot sea turtles and an evening learning about bush tucker from Kuku Yalanji elders. It's also a natural base for trips to the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree rainforests.

Over 30 years, owners Oonah and John Prettejohn have rehabilitated the agricultural land that previously covered two-thirds of this 59ha property and replanted wonderfully complex forests.

On our last morning, we do a bird tour with one of the staff, a keen birdwatcher. He shows us ospreys nesting on a telephone pole, explaining that these raptors seem to prefer the artificial roosts. Our strangest sighting is a pair of Papuan frogmouths that resemble logs of wood. It's only when I look at one through binoculars that I spot a baleful red eye and a bristly beak, like that of a hairy maiden aunt.

I long to stay on for a first glimpse of fig parrots or a better night sighting of a striped possum. Finding Queensland's wildlife is harder than seeing the big five in Africa, but it's certainly rewarding tracking down the furtive inhabitants of these ancient rainforests. ♦

The writer stayed at The Canopy and went on Alan Gillander's Wildlife Tours courtesy of Tourism Queensland.