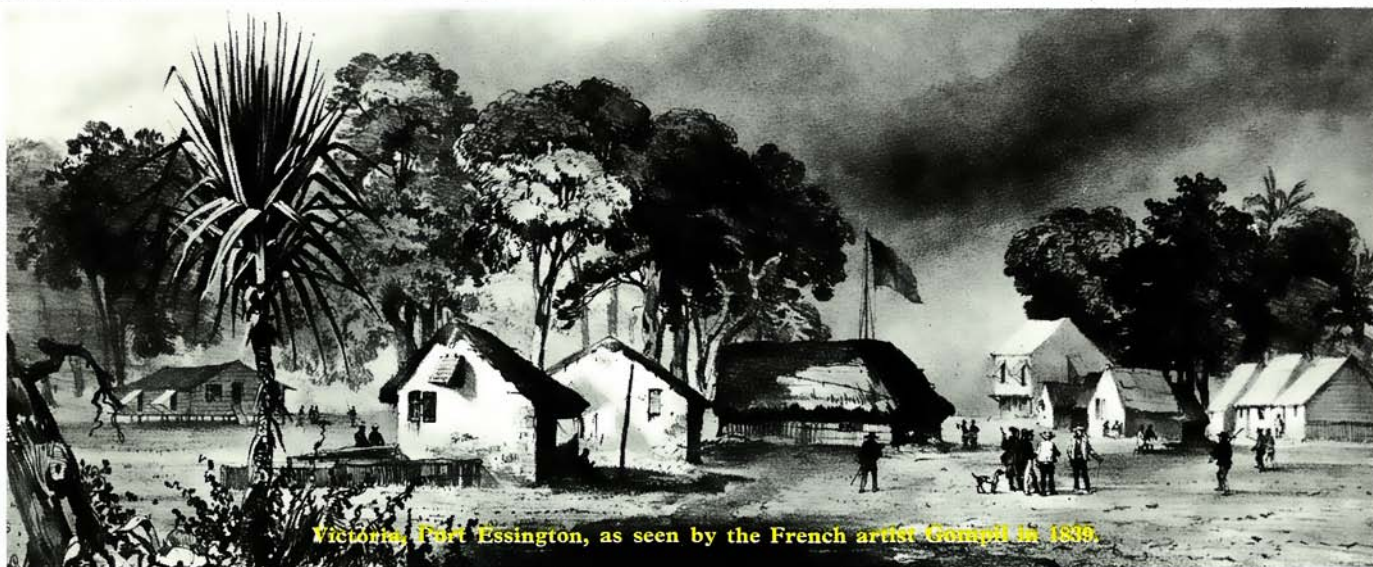


Port Essington revisited



Victoria, Port Essington, as seen by the French artist Gaspard in 1838.

Most people probably haven't heard of Port Essington: it's a remote but magnificent natural harbour located on the north side of the Cobourg Peninsula in Arnhem Land. But for 11 years—between 1838 and 1849—a British military settlement named Victoria struggled there.

Biologists regard the area as important—those were important years for natural historians in Australia. John Gould (the famous naturalist, publisher, and businessman) visited Australia from 1838 to 1840, and his associate John Gilbert, who travelled out on the same ship, lived at Victoria for 8 months between July 1840 and March 1841. Gilbert made an extensive collection of birds, animals, and plants, which he sent back to Gould in England.

In addition, the survey ships *H.M.S. Beagle*, *Fly*, and *Rattlesnake*, all with naturalists aboard, called at the settlement—the *Rattlesnake* in 1848 with the not-



yet-famous T. H. Huxley aboard as assistant surgeon. Also, in 1845, Ludwig Leichhardt ended his overland trek from Brisbane there. (Gilbert, who accompanied him, was killed during this trek.) So the wildlife of the Port Essington area at that time is well documented.

Incidentally, Charles Darwin's visit to Australia aboard the *Beagle* was early in 1836.

The Cobourg Peninsula has remained practically untouched by Europeans other than for occasional use for pastoral purposes since the settlement of Victoria was abandoned. Feral buffalo, banteng cattle, Timor ponies, pigs, and Sambar deer still

roam there—a legacy from Victoria and another earlier settlement on Raffles Bay. There is no evidence that any lessees of the Peninsula ever imported new stock to the area.

Because of this lack of interference, the Peninsula is an excellent reference area for the wildlife of northern Arnhem Land. It was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1962. Biologists from the Northern Territory Administration visited it in 1960 and 1961, and the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research carried out a systematic survey over 3 years from 1965.

Wildlife biologists designed the survey to:

- ▶ identify the fauna of the sanctuary to allow formulation of appropriate management plans
- ▶ build up a good reference collection that would remain in Australia
- ▶ compare the birds and animals found with the notes of Gilbert and the other early collectors

In fact only 36 bird species out of the 153 recorded between 1960 and 1968 were not attributed by Gould to the Cobourg Peninsula; so Gilbert was remarkably thorough in spite of difficult working conditions. Gould reported 18 species not seen during the more recent survey.

Fauna survey of the Port Essington district, Cobourg Peninsula, Northern Territory of Australia. Ed. H. J. Firth and J. H. Calaby. *CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research Technical Paper No. 28*, 1974.