



PROLOGUE

THE SMUGGLER'S TREE

Deep in the Iron Range rainforest stands an old green fig tree (*Ficus albipila*) with rusted metal spikes sticking from its smooth white trunk. Hammered in place by some intrepid parrot collector after the Second World War, the spikes once protruded over 40 centimetres. Collectors would climb to dizzying heights (up to 35 metres!) without ropes or harnesses, in their quest for the eggs and chicks of the beautiful but elusive *Eclectus* parrot (*Eclectus roratus*). Decades later, the tree has grown out around the spikes, they only emerge half as far, and rust and tropical corrosion have rendered them unusable. Although such activities are now frowned upon, no-one can deny the audacity of these early collectors in their efforts to defy gravity and invade the parrots' world.

The Smuggler's Tree (also called the 'Spike Tree') continues to offer a unique wildlife odyssey for those who venture into the Cape York rainforests. Its largest hollows are home to *Eclectus* parrots, sulphur-crested cockatoos (*Cacatua galerita*) and various bats, while the crown of the tree is decorated by a multitude of fibrous nests made by a colony of (native) metallic starlings (*Aplonis metallica*). Diminutive double-eyed fig parrots (*Cyclopsitta diophthalma marshalli*) may also be seen excavating small nest holes in the soft wood of upper dead branches. Preying on all these creatures is a resident pair of grey goshawks (*Accipiter novaehollandiae*), while a large slatey-grey snake (*Stegonotus cucullatus*) haunts the ground below, waiting for the starling chicks to fall.

Top: Male and female *Eclectus* parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) look so different they were long thought to be different species (see Chapter 5). The gorgeous red females occupy their nest hollows for up to 11 months each year and rely on the males to bring them all their food. The Smuggler's Tree has four *Eclectus* parrot nest hollows, and in some cases neighbouring females may nest only 2–3 metres apart. However, DNA studies have shown that the different females in the same tree are not related to each other and only co-exist in uneasy truces.

Opposite: Rising above the surrounding trees, the Smuggler's Tree provides a safe haven for nesting birds. Its height provides a good vantage point for spotting incoming aerial predators such as goshawks, whereas the fat trunk and smooth bark make it difficult for snakes and goannas to climb to the nests.