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THE CAPE YORK RAINFOREST

WHERE OLD AUSTRALIA MEETS NEW GUINEA

When walking through a Cape York rainforest it is easy to imagine oneself in the lowlands of New Guinea rather than in Australia. Perhaps most striking is the exciting range of animals not found further south, but shared instead with our northern neighbour. This sharing of wildlife happened because Australia and New Guinea have not always been separated. The tip of Cape York is only separated from New Guinea by a narrow and shallow channel of water, Torres Strait, and in the not-so-distant past the two landmasses have been joined by massive land bridges whenever sea levels have been lower. These bridges extended our land area considerably and provided vast tracts of habitat, including entire river systems, swamps, woodlands, heaths and forests, linking the wildlife of the two regions. Even today we maintain our northern connections via the many birds that use the bridges' old high points, now vestigial islands, as stepping stones during their annual migration.

The Cape York rainforests have a dynamic and fascinating history. They have not always been limited to their present distribution and have undergone major expansions and contractions over the millennia. Today they cover only five per cent of the peninsula,

Top: Fan palm (*Licuala ramsayi*).

Opposite: Striped possum
(*Dactylopsila trivirgata*).