

CNFN

the

Natural News

August - Sept 2000

Patron - Dennis Morris

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Walks

August 13, A walk and Barbeque on the Hayward's new property at Weegena. This property has numerous wonderful niches, and several rare species. There is a cabin with barbeque facilities, so BYO and join other field nats in a relaxing day in a spectacular spot. Meet in front of Jim's at 68 Dynan's Bridge Rd. at 10 am.

September 3, A walk along the Hawley Reserve track along the coast. Drive through Hawley until you come to the parking area. Meet there at 10 am.

October 1, The Winifred Curtis Reserve just before Scamander via St Marys to Scamander route. Meet at entrance at 11 am. If you wish to stay overnight the night before in the Archer Cottage for field naturalists, talk to Jim on 6369 1313.

This is an incredibly rich heathland area, with a number of rare plants, and usually lots of orchids. October is THE month to see it.

Postcard from Queensland

by Ron Nagorcka

I write from the shade of a Queensland verandah where we have become almost blasé about the Wedge-tailed Eagles that soar overhead. Except when they are very close – as four of them are at the moment. We have camped for a week in the shearers quarters at Penaroo – part of an amalgamated property totalling about 800 square kilometres (phew!) just west of Eulo in SW Queensland and not far from the banks of the Paroo.

We finally found a place far enough north to be dry, if still pretty cold on occasion. We shower with water straight from an artesian bore where it emerges at 80 degrees at considerable pressure.

Even here we have had some rain. It has chased us all the way. We left Black Sugarloaf with a room full of partly identified local fungi collected and sorted by Sarah in the weeks before we left. Every day we'd find several new species – the variety was amazing. So we have been particularly interested in the fungi encountered on our journey so far. At Tower Hill in Western Victoria after morning rain we picked some fresh *Macrolepiota konradii* which my relatives all agreed was a fine tasting mushroom when fried. At each lunch stop or camping spot interesting new fungal species were encountered.

It was interesting to see Portland again where we visited my sister whose house is in some beautiful coastal bush and has a healthy population of birds, orchids and ringtail possums amongst other things. My nephew proudly showed us an area of his land that he has fenced off to protect the habitat of our old friend *Rattus lutreolus* (the native "swamp rat" or "bush rat" which invades our garden on Black Sugarloaf). He said he had never actually seen one – and I can believe it, as they are very shy and quick. They are hence probably much more common than most people realise. The tell-tale runways through the grass were very familiar, but seemed to Sarah and I to be larger than those in our garden – who knows how much carrot they could eat?! The area also had burrows with small chimneys that probably indicate the presence of an *Engaeus* species. There were also wallabies in the area.

We sheltered from a hail storm on our first nights camping in some fascinating mallee country on our way to Lake Mungo. We stopped for lunch somewhere and there were birds everywhere, so we camped for 3 nights. Here we first sighted the fascinating *Podaxis pistillaris* - a fungi of arid areas which only appears after deep penetrating rain. This fungi is related to puff balls and *geastrum* species of which we also saw many. They rely on wind, rain or the chance encounter with an animal for the dispersal of their spores. The highlight of our stay was the visit by three Chestnut Quail-thrush – one sat perched on top of the tent for some time! The owner of the property dropped by for a chat, and informed us that we were camped in the Willandra lakes system (a massive area of wetlands that dried up 15,000 years ago) and that the main drainage line – only a few hundred metres from our campsite – was part of the Willandra World Heritage area.

Mungo National Park is in the centre of this fascinating area. (We drove through the remainder on our way from Lake Mungo to Ivanhoe – dry lakes galore!). Most visitors go to view the "Walls of China", the massively eroded lunette which forms the east bank of the lake and where the famous archaeological discoveries have been made

(first evidence of human cremation in the world for instance at 35,000 years BP if I remember rightly!) We had a look and somehow it reminded us a bit of Queenstown – a dramatic landscape resulting from total mismanagement and disregard for the environment. In this case the damage was due to the the introduction of sheep in an all too fragile eco-system.

We drove on further into the park to camp for 3 nights at a remote camping area where no fires were allowed. Hence we had the place pretty much to ourselves – a wonderful chance to explore mallee country dominated by Belah (*Casuarina cristata*). The camping area is very well sheltered as attested by the nearby Wedge-tailed Eagle's nest. Here we had our first glimpse of a White-winged Fairy-wren, and were regularly harassed by a gang of Apostlebirds (so named because they usually get around in groups of twelve), who managed to steal a fair chunk of bread which then got squabbled over for some time. One night I had a microphone set up outside the tent in the hope of catching the sounds of a passing emu in the very wee hours, and by default was able to record a Boobook that called from the tree above in the middle of the night. The deep booms emitted by the emu however still elude the tape recorder, although we have seen them everywhere we have been. We have twice come across emu nests with eggs here at Penaroo.

Our next camp was at Gundabooka National Park just south of Bourke. Gundabooka is a recent acquisition by the NSW government – largely because of its significance to the Ngemba people and management of the park is being carried out in association with them. We camped within view of the Gundabooka Range in "mulga" (*Acacia aneura*) country. This was a wonderful spot to do some birding, as the recent rains have meant an explosion of wildlife in these parts. On the first evening we heard all sorts of unexplained vocalisations, most of which were identified after a day with binoculars, but a mysterious set of sounds kept us intrigued for some time. We finally figured that they were all the emissions of the local Spotted Bowerbird. I have a recording of a bloodthirsty

screech on a still evening which we can only attribute to this bird, which does have a remarkable range of sounds in its repertoire.

We left Gundabooka for a night at the Bourke

Spotted Bowerbird



Caravan park. It was a timely move as there followed a day and night of rain and a morning of thick fog. It was time to go yet further north to escape the influence of the Southern ocean! We had a contact in the Eulo area - near Lake Bindegolly National Park - who offered us the use of these quarters. So we drove straight here via Cunnamulla.

We've recorded 71 bird species here. The highlight has to have been the two occasions when Peregrine Falcons have flown by very close to warn us away from the top of their mesas (of which there are a few scattered through the area). It really is something to see these birds from only a few metres away, and on the second occasion I got a good recording. Other noteworthy bird observations include the cryptic and beautifully coloured Bourke's Parrot, contrasting with the almost iridescent Red winged Parrot and the rare Hall's Babbler, which like other Babbler is usually seen with several others of its species. We've seen 3 reptile species and 2 frogs - one species of frog discovered underneath corrugated iron on a sunny afternoon!

On one of our morning walks we followed what seems to be the last operating drainage channel. (The borehead is situated on a hill, and

until the advent of PVC pipe, simply belched vast volumes of water into long channels cut into the landscape - these have now been replaced with a system of pipes and dams.) The attraction of this mini "creek" to the wildlife in such an arid landscape can be imagined, and plenty was happening - there is enormous plant diversity here and all sorts of plants are flowering. Amongst them the various *Acacias* and the *Eremophila* spp. (6 different species, all flowering) of the Myoporaceae family are particularly attractive. There are multitudes of Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters around; also 3 types of Wren. But the nicest surprise one morning along a swampy section of the drain was a Red-backed Kingfisher - curious enough to perch close to have a look at us while Sarah ood and ahhed.

The fungi discoveries also continue. Sarah has found a "birds-nest fungus" (probably *Cyathus* sp.) on a piece of kangaroo dung. After a few days *Podaxis pistillaris* turned up. Again, there are several species of bracket fungi on both live and dead trees and *Tulostoma* species (puffballs on stalks).

What has largely disappeared from these remote and arid places is of course the native mammalian life that Tasmanians take so much for granted. We have seen plenty of kangaroos - there are both reds and greys here - and we've heard bats in the evening. But all other mammals are introduced rabbits, foxes, cats, goats, pigs, cows, and sheep.

Tomorrow we pack up and move to Lake Bindegolly, whose ornithological reputation beckons, then on to the Paroo River for a while. Then maybe we will stay at Currawinya National Park - which was our original intent - but the roads have been closed due to (you guessed it) rain!

Unnatural Justice in Tasmania

By John Hayward

Two years ago a notice appeared in the Examiner announcing that the Planning Commission had directed the Meander Valley Council to amend their planning scheme, changing the forestry use on two properties from "prohibited" to "discretionary". It looked pretty innocuous, as it bore no location or landowner names. However, a remark by a Council employee to a Weeena resident revealed that both properties were in the rural residential zone at Weeena. Residents scrambled and bombarded the Council with objections. The Council objected too, despite the conspicuous reluctance of its then town planner, who turned out to own both a plantation and a large parcel of shares in North Ltd.

The Commission's explanation was that these two landowners had been denied the natural justice right to be heard on the alteration of the draft planning scheme's "discretionary" use to the proclaimed scheme's "prohibited", and that this procedural fault could be the basis of legal action that would invalidate the scheme. This was true, but they neglected to add that this denial extended to everyone in the municipality. In breach of the Planning Act, the Commission had failed to offer its alterations for public comment. There was no legal distinction between these two and everyone else; they were simply the only landowners in the zone who had been talked into plantations.

Having received objections, the Commission was obliged to conduct a hearing, which it delegated to two non-members, with the chair being a former planning officer from Wynyard-Waratah well known for forestry enthusiasms. The hearing delegates were curiously uninterested in questioning witnesses. The man from Private Forests enthused on how the rest of the zone would "go like dominoes" if the amendment was approved. The real jaw-droppers, though, were citations by the Forest Protection Society and the Private Forests' man of the state's "Draft Planning Strategy" to the effect that everyone not primarily dependent on primary industry would be expected to live in urban areas. None of us had heard of this Great Leap Forward.

The decision was not announced for several months. Residents were softened up however, when the Commission twice posted to all parties a thirteen-page copy of the Forest Protection Society's inane slide show and commentary complete with Barry Chipman's cover letter referring to the Commission's request for the stuff. In breach of their own act, the Commission did not distribute any other submission. At the hearing it was revealed that the delegates had not even read mine.

The amendment's approval in February 99 was greatly in debt to Chipman, accepting as fact his arguments that all small bush properties required "intensive landscape management", i.e. logging, and that pulpwood plantations inhibit erosion and can encourage plant biodiversity. The delegates concluded that forestry satisfied the Planning Act's objective that planning decisions must encourage public participation in the planning system, despite the fact that it completely removes the subject land from planning jurisdiction. Inconvenient evidence, such as forestry's effect on property values, did not rate a mention.

Because the Commission's procedural breach applied to everyone, the decision serves as a legal Trojan Horse, creating in any present or future landowners in the zone the right to demand a plantation. Retrospective legislation passed by the incumbent Laborals stripped councils of their discretionary planning powers, leaving them with only the power to say only "yes" with such conditions that do not materially hinder the discretionary use. "Discretionary" now means "permitted". It is no accident that the entire rural residential zone has been opened up to forestry. Before and after the hearing I repeatedly pointed out to the Commission what was a matter of record, that everyone had been denied natural justice and that their claimed protection of the planning scheme was a nonsense. They simply refused to respond.

The one consolation from all this was that the Commission, having done everything wrong,

was a legal sitting duck. I took it to the Supreme Court supremely confident, being supremely unfamiliar with the Tassie legal culture.

In his decision the judge relied on the assertions of the Commission, repeatedly citing their own correspondence as evidence of fact while simply ignoring the contradictory matters of record. Despite the Commission's repeated express statements that they had ordered the amendment to avoid court action, a legally improper purpose, he ruled that they had not acted for this purpose. He ruled that no reasonable person would perceive bias in the Commission's decision (despite the fact that all objectors did) because natural justice, hence the threat to the planning scheme had been satisfied by the hearing. The Commission was given the benefit of its own breach of the Archives Act in failing to preserve an adequate record of the hearing. He reversed his own ruling on the Commission's delegations power made the year before to find that they could not have achieved an appearance of impartiality by appointing non-member delegates, unaware that both hearing delegates were non-members. This thereby invalidated the Commission's decision in this and numerous earlier cases, prompting Bacon and Co. to again save forestry's bacon through retrospective legislation.

The matter is now in its final and possibly most absurd phase, with residents appealing to the Forest Practices Tribunal against approval of Private Timber Reserves on the two properties. The Tribunal consists of two retired foresters, including one from the prospective plantation managers for the two properties, plus a barrister who replied "not if I can help it" to my question as to whether transcripts of the proceedings would be available to the parties. Two hours apiece had been allowed for the FPT hearings on the survival of our neighbourhood, but unexpected resistance has caused them to run on and be adjourned, permitting the Planning Appeals Tribunal hearings on the Council's denial of approval for the Timber

Harvesting Plan to go ahead. Initially, both tribunals were to be chaired by the same person before some legal and ethical fundamentals were raised.

There is still a theoretical shot in the resident's locker in that the Commission has a still bigger procedural skeleton in the closet in that all rural land in the draft planning scheme was exhibited with a forestry use of "discretionary" before it was changed to "permitted", again without the required public consultation. This should be sufficient to invalidate the planning scheme, allowing a new scheme to be drawn up with planning power restored to councils. But the gamble on striking a neutral judge, however, is compounded by the likelihood that the chipper's government would again be hitched to the goal posts.

Why do the chippers so want this little oasis? The references to the "Draft Planning Strategy" and increasingly frequent comments from loggers to non-farming rural residents that "you shouldn't be here" suggest they have serious and radical plans for huge areas of countryside free of those who value it. They do have a great deal they would prefer to go unobserved. Last year the less than 1% of Australia's land mass that is Tasmania contributed about 60% of the country's 6.5m tonnes of woodchip exports, with this massive market share sure to rise after a staggering 1.3 million tonnes left the isle in the first quarter of this year. It has recently been revealed that Tasmania leads even the frenzied Queensland, and hence the developed world, in the percentage rate of native vegetation clearance, which even in real terms last year exceeded the combined cleared areas in WA, SA, and Victoria. They are spraying dangerous and persistent herbicides like Simazine from helicopters, contrary to label specifications and without systematic water monitoring. Their otherwise motherhoodish "Good Neighbour Agreement" envisions that 'vermin' will be dealt with on a regional rather than a local level.

We may not be the first line of Tasmanians to be wiped out, but we would have to be unique in achieving this through a democratic vote. Our memorial may be a new entry in the thesaurus, right beside "dodo".

Book Review

by Jim Nelson

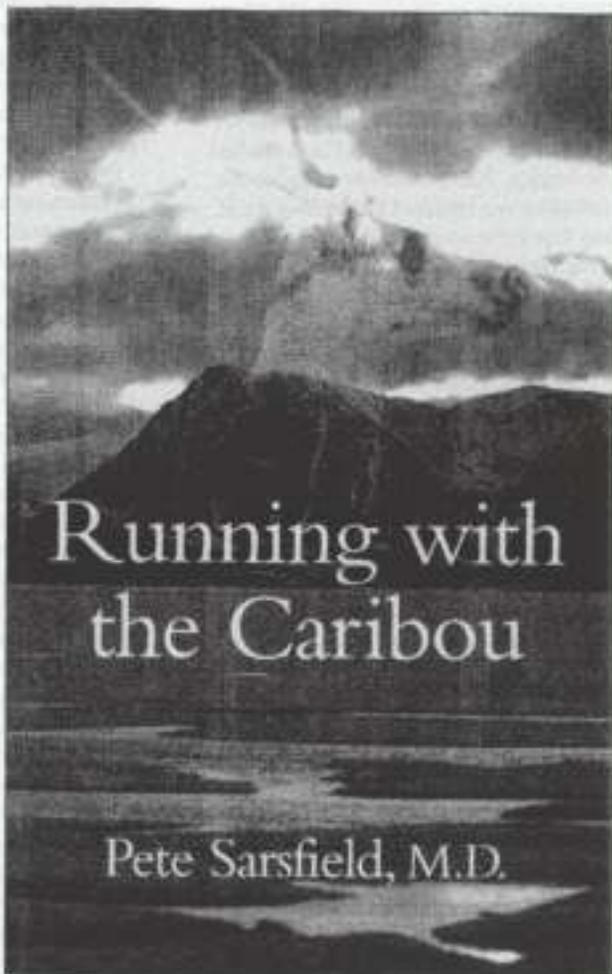
Peter Sarsfield's book **Running with the Caribou** consists of a collection of seemingly casual observations made during journeys as a community physician in far northern Canada. Sarsfield is able to capture these journeys with a nice sense of economy along with a musing, laid-back style. He refers to the pieces as "mental maps" in his preface, with the aim "to observe the patterns, if any, of the ground drift". This approach sets the stage for certain special moments to arrive with the crisp clarity of arctic air that provides the reader with a strong sense of sharing his experiences. Sarsfield's searching gaze probes carefully and ever towards a centre - always subtly questioning and gathering glimpses of what it is to be human; always seeking out the warm pulse within the vastness of his frozen environment.

The first piece titled "Running with the Caribou" describes a wild herd of these animals as they run in fear from the unknown, in this case an airplane. Perhaps Sarsfield identifies with these Caribou through his own flights into the unknown of remote locations. Or perhaps the innate fear of the Caribou herd is meant to be a larger metaphor for life's journey. The "patterns of the ground drift" will represent something different for each of us.

I'm told that one mis-guided reviewer decided this book indulged in "tedious pseudo-philosophising". It does nothing of the kind, and is in fact a

privileged glimpse of how a sensitive man observes and is informed by the interesting and the beautiful in his journey through life. As such, it has the capacity to speak powerfully to us about appreciating and latching onto the significant moments while exploring the patterns and meanings of our own 'mental maps'.

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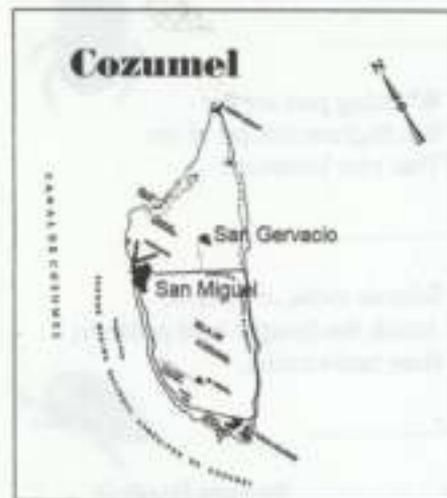


Cozumel Mexico, Island of Intrigue

by Jim Nelson

In June this year I visited Mexico's eastern most territory, the island of Cozumel. The island has become a major tourist destination, and particularly a premier dive destination (scuba has become a big yuppie activity) due to a reef full of spectacular marine life. The entire reef has been made a Marine National Park, and the flat calm waters make for great snorkelling (which is more appropriate to my own social position than scuba).

Cozumel is located in the Mexican Caribbean, separated from the Yucatan Peninsula by 18 kilometres. It is 52 K long from north to south an 14 K across. It emerged from the sea during the Tertiary period and its rocky foundation is made up of marine sediment. It lies a little over 20° latitude north



in the heart of the tropical zone.

The name Cozumel is derived from a Mayan word meaning "land of the swallows". It was a religious centre with the principle temple for worship of the Mayan goddess of fertility. Women from all over the Mayan world made pilgrimages to this temple at least once in their lifetime. This zone is currently

known as the San Gervasio Ruins, a name taken from the 19th century cattle ranch there and unfortunately replacing the original Mayan name.

In the early 1950's the publicity generated by Jacques Cousteau's enthusiastic description of the local reefs changed the economic focus of the island, and indeed the whole Mexican Caribbean, from agriculture to tourism. The reefs are part of the coral barrier known as the Great Maya Reef—the second longest in the world. The transparent waters, the enormous and colourful array of marine life and LIVE corals are startlingly beautiful.

San Miguel is the only town on the island, but with 4 piers it is host to over 800 cruise ships a year, and is consequently very tourist orientated. There is a narrow band of hotels spread along the western side of the island near the water. There is a good road that circles the southern end from San Miguel, and then cuts across the middle passing near the ruins of San Gervasio. (see map) Otherwise, most of the island is impenetrable jungle of moderate height with considerable shrubby species between low trees and palms. The jungle vegetation is classified as semi-deciduous, and has species with names such as zapote, nimon, ceiba, chit, and jabón.

There are several coastal lagoons and swamplands containing crocodiles, as well as many species of birds such as herons, avocets, spoonbills, bitterns, ibis and numerous ducks. Judging by the bird songs, the jungle hides a large avian fauna which is almost impossible to view. It includes parrots, pheasants, doves, honeycreepers, hummingbirds warblers and a host of colourful small birds I was unable to identify. Near the hotels only a few birds are found such as grackles, and large Melodious Blackbirds. There are 3 species of vultures: the Black, the King, and the Turkey. At any moment it is difficult not to see a vulture circling somewhere. Several raptors also frequent the sky.

The eastern coast is a nesting site for several species of marine turtles: hawksbill, loggerhead and green. There are iguanas everywhere, and several species of other lizards. Tree frogs call

from the safety of trees, especially when it rains. Two small, brightly coloured snakes turned up as road kills, and despite menacing looking heads, they did not seem to have fangs.

Aside from the abundant marine invertebrates, I saw little of interest with the terrestrial invertebrates. There were a couple of annoying biting flies, the odd mossie, a few fleeting glimpses of butterflies, a few species of ants and not much else. Not exactly what you might expect in the tropics, and I can only conclude that all those birds, lizards and frogs must be eating a lot of insects.

In spite of frequent rain, there are no rivers or superficial freshwater deposits. The calcareous rock covered with a thin layer of soil creates an exceedingly permeable ground that means water gathers in subterranean deposits. Numerous wells supply the domestic water. Visitors are advised not to drink it, and bottled water is supplied everywhere.

None of the Central American felines are on the island; other animals apparently include hares, badgers, raccoons, armadillos and deer.

One of the most fascinating sights to me was watching the Magnificent Frigate birds along the coast. These birds possess the greatest wingspread in proportion to their body weight of any bird, and have fantastic powers of flight. They measure about a metre, and are black above and below—the female is white and dark brown—the male has a naked red throat which he can inflate like a balloon during the breeding season. The bill is long with a hooked tip, the wings are quite thin looking, angled and pointed. The tail is long, slim and deeply forked. The dramatic flight of this bird is quite arresting. It can sail effortlessly, or seem to hang motionless, and then suddenly tuck its wings into a lightning dive. It snatches fish from the water, or else attacks other birds in mid-air forcing them to drop their catch which it snatches before it reaches the water. Hence it is often called Man-O-War.

The Mexican people were friendly and forgiving of my poor Spanish. The biggest disadvantage for Australians is having a currency approaching third world values.

DUNG BEETLE QUINTET

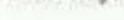
A hundred beetles
Cross-cut the evening calm.
Whirring scarabesque.



Two-pack blacks rocket,
Dung-seeking missiles. Unguided.
Impaled on barbed wire.



Flat on your back, Jack?
Mates munching meadow-muffins?
I'll turn you over.



Whizzing past my ear
You frighten shit out of me.
That your intention?



Seismic mobs, in patches,
Attack the drought-hard paddocks.
Busy turd-turning.



By Peter Bamford

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