

## TASMANIAN NATURE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

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It was a typical sunshine-and-showers spring afternoon in Tasmania and I was out for a walk, looking for inspiration for an article for *The Tasmanian Naturalist*. The wind had recently picked up from the south-west, and rain-clouds scudded across the sky, threatening to drop their cargo at any moment. Intent on dodging the impending squall, I sought the shelter of the great blue-gum tree in the park. I laid my coat out on the leaf-litter and curled up on it, hoping that the pause in my perambulations might help me compose my thoughts. What makes Tasmania such a special place to live, especially for a naturalist? Was it something to do with the four seasons, or this changeable weather? The slow pace of life? The insularity? The unique wildlife? The sense of being on the edge of the world? Or was this romantic view all just a delusion, with 21<sup>st</sup>-century Tasmania being just as much a product of humanity's inroads into the natural world as elsewhere?

My mind wasn't in a particularly cooperative mood, and my thoughts began to wander hither and thither. Maybe it was the sudden cold, or the ever-increasing drip-drip-drip of raindrops falling all around me, or the crashing of waves whipped up on the shore nearby. Rolling over to face the tree only a metre or so in front of me, my eyes focused on a straw-brown Tasmanian tree-trunk snail inching its way purposefully down the gum-tree's massive bole, leaving a trail of glistening slime in its wake. Its slow-motion deliberations were strangely mesmerising, and I felt myself sinking into a stupor.

The snail must have been reading my thoughts.

'Ask not what nature means for living here, ask what living here means for nature'.

Well now, I thought, that could have come straight out of *Alice Through the Looking-glass*, but far be it for me to interrupt a pontificating snail in its stride. It continued, somewhat obtusely in the circumstances:

'I'm not sure I'm the best one to answer that question. All I know is what you can see in front of you here – this tree, essentially. But I've been long enough in this world – a couple of years now – to know my way around this place and to know that it offers all of life's necessities. That's all your average snail wants in life'.

Intrigued by the possibilities of communing with nature in this way, I asked the snail about his-her likes and dislikes (snails being hermaphrodites).

‘What I really like is living so close to the sea that you can smell the salt on the breeze. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Also, this spring weather. I *love* it when it’s warm and sunny one minute and cool and wet the next. Just great for getting the juices flowing – you feel so *alive*. And it’s on days like this that I’m in with a chance of a romantic encounter with another girl-boy, though the best action happens after dark of course. In fact I’ve been putting my feelers out and...’



I considered it best to forestall this line of enquiry.

‘And what about dislikes?’ I asked.

‘That’s a hard one, but hey, no question’s too curly for a snail. If I had to pick one thing, it would be drought. Luckily, we don’t get many really bad ones around here, but when they hit, they can be deadly. We tree-trunk snails can readily seal ourselves into our shells to while away a few dry days, but if it stays that way for weeks we’re in real trouble. My dad was broken by the last drought – ended up a mere empty shell of his former self. When the rains finally came, we found his hollow remains at the foot of the tree, cast callously aside like all those seashells along the strand-line over there’.

‘That sounds grim’, I said, although I secretly preferred to think of beached seashells as symbols of the natural world’s richness and beauty rather than of death.

‘More generally, we prefer to live life at, er, a snail’s pace, so we find it hard to keep up to speed with the rate at which things change around here. Take this tree-trunk for example. Last week this bit was all flaky and covered in tiny little moist blue and green blobs of algae and lichen, enough for several night’s binge-dining for me and my mates. But then the wind got up and the whole lot peeled off in one big long strip, leaving this bare, shiny surface that’s so clean you could...’

‘eat your dinner off it?’ I suggested.

‘...fall to your death just trying to crawl across it’.

The sun was coming out now, and the snail was clearly too busy retracting into his-her shell and gluing him-herself to the bark for further conversation. A strange thought occurred to me. If I really was watching this snail through a looking-glass, then surely its shell should be coiled sinistrally and not dextrally.

Glancing up, I spotted a noisy group of New Holland honeyeaters in the crown of the great gum-tree. They seemed agitated, on edge, as though alert to some hidden threat like an arboreal tiger-snake.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

‘I’ll tell you what’s up’, one of them replied, somewhat aggressively I thought. ‘We are no longer alone up here. There are interlopers. You may not be able to discern them, but we certainly can. Suffice to say’, he continued conspiratorially, ‘that not everything green up here is a gum-leaf. And we’re going to keep up this cacophony until the enemy is flushed out’.



At that point, a ringing cry of protest broke out overhead, as one by one, ten swift parrots made themselves both seen and heard. With a vivid crimson patch of feathers now starkly visible above the beak of every bird, it’s a wonder I hadn’t spotted them earlier.

‘Those honeyeaters are so rude’, one of them peeped indignantly. ‘Whenever we come down here for the summer, you can guarantee that they’ll be here too, spoiling our picnic’.

‘But there’s plenty of flowering gums to go around’, implored the honeyeater. ‘If only you’d find your own tree to feed in then we’d all get along just sweet as honey. We birds all like a nice tune don’t we? Well, for us, life’s just like in that song – “*share it fairly but don’t take a slice of my pie*”.’

‘You’re missing the point’, retorted Swiftie, and the rest of his party clearly agreed. ‘It’s like a birth-right thing. Blue-gum blossom *belongs* to us – it makes us who we are. It makes Tasmania what it is – it’s why we bother making the perilous journey down here every year. There’s something just not right about being knocked off one’s perch just for the crime of trying to tongue-brush up a bit of pollen for your tea. It’s not as though you honeyeaters even *eat* much pollen. You’re just part of the nectar-sipping set and being very dog-in-the-manger about it, given that you could equally get your sugar fix from all those garden bottlebrushes and grevilleas over there’.

At this, the honeyeaters fluffed up their humbug plumes and stuck out their long, flexible tongues. I couldn’t tell whether it was a purposeful act of rudeness towards the parrots, or perhaps they were just tucking into the nectar while they could. The parrots clearly sensed that they weren’t going to get anywhere with this line of argument. A change of tactic was called for.

‘Well you must admit that, when it comes to aerodynamics and manoeuvrability, we swift parrots leave you honeyeaters standing. In fact, if we can ever get away from you, that’s one of our great joys in life. One minute we’re having a nice sing-song gossip amongst ourselves, hidden in the foliage; and the next, we’re dashing through the canopy, swift as parrots, if not swifter. It’s so exhilarating you’ve just got to trill with the thrill! A decent bit of bush makes the perfect setting for our antics’.

Turning to me now, he continued: ‘This park’s tame by comparison, but sometimes we just can’t help ourselves. It drives the honeyeaters mad – not that that’s hard to do’.

‘Isn’t it rather dangerous?’ I asked.

‘I’ve never had any trouble. Having said that, there used to be another mob of swift parrots around here but I haven’t seen them this year. They loved living life in the fast lane, and would careen through the streets at breakneck speed, dodging the overhead wires, cars and reflective windows. Perhaps their luck ran out and they’re now ex-parrots, to coin a phrase’.

‘You ask me what else is good about living in Tasmania’, said Swiftie.

I hadn’t, but decided to let that pass.

‘For me it’s the day-length. Whenever we’re on the mainland, the days seem horribly short. By the time you’ve had breakfast it’s almost time for lunch and then dinner – if you can find anywhere to stop for something to eat in that wide, brown land. But down here, there’s time in the day not only for feeding – I just love those psyllid bugs you get here – but for raising a family too. And for messing around with your mates, as I just described’.



‘What about the weather?’ I asked, feeling a little cool and damp myself.

‘Yes, it can be a bit ordinary, can’t it? Four seasons in a day and all that. The unpredictability certainly makes it challenging, especially when you’ve got kids. That’s why we always try and find a good nest-hole that’s sheltered from the elements. We couldn’t find the right spot last year – the blue-gums weren’t flowering in our usual haunts. We lost our entire brood to the weather. The year before it was the sugar-gliders. Don’t believe anyone who says they’re cute and innocent – they’re born killers’.

Swiftie’s inner pain was palpable, but swift parrots are born conversationalists and the silence only lasted a moment.

‘But talking of raising a family, when we come here, we do expect to find decent places to nest. Not too much to ask, is it? I was told that trees tend to get older and older over time, like the rest of us. But my experience is that in our old haunts they’re getting younger and younger on average – and young trees just don’t have the same nesting appeal. What’s more, some of the holes you find in those paddock trees, you wouldn’t want to stick your head in them, let alone settle down to nest. Why? Starlings. Horrible, loutish, uncouth birds and very messy. I hate ferals. What gives them the right to take up residence in *our* land?’

I had always had a soft spot for swift parrots, and hadn’t expected them to display this level of vehemence and antipathy towards their feathered congeners. Swiftie continued his tirade:

‘See that swanky gang of them loitering over there by the car-park? Looking for trouble, no doubt. You should hear them trying to parrot our calls. It’s pathetic. They may impress each

other, but that's as far as it goes. They should go somewhere else as far as we're concerned, like back to wherever it is they came from. It's a wonder they were ever let in to the country in the first place'.

'You're a fine one to talk: you swift parrots are just blow-ins too'.

Hmm, more avian xenophobia. This time it was emanating from one member of a party of green rosellas that I had hitherto overlooked, as they strolled unassumingly amongst the mosses and bark-litter beneath the tree, pecking nonchalantly at grass-shoots and oxalis. In that setting, their muted, marbled green, blue and yellow plumage served to keep them almost invisible to the untrained eye.

'You come over to enjoy our long summer days, our wild, forested landscapes and our fine local foods. But you're not prepared to put down roots here – it's as though for you the trees are always greener on the other side. Have you ever stopped to wonder what life's like for the rest of us who have never ever left? Not that I would know what to do with myself if I did – I know what I like and I like what I know and I can find it all right here'.

'Go on', I said, intrigued.

'Well, for us it's a matter of having a little bit of everything at hand – trees for nesting, bushes for foraging for berries and seeds, and some open ground so we can do what we're doing now'.



The rosellas continued their apparently rather unfocused pecking at the grasses, waddling along and chortling amiably amongst themselves as they did so.

'You can find spots like this all over the place – rainforest glades, gullies, even parks and gardens. The main thing is that there has to be enough rain to bring a decent bit of cover'.

I could only agree with them that ample rainfall lay behind much of the clean, green image of Tasmania.

'We're not the sort to make a fuss – fussing just brings you notoriety around here, where everyone knows each other. But we're no pushover either. Come the autumn, we'll be in there gorging ourselves amongst the garden fruit trees with the Easterns and muskies. Luckily, they tend to get all the blame, while we just melt quietly into the background'.

Talking of melting into the background, a slight movement caught my eye amongst the strips of fallen bark – the same strips whose detachment from the tree-trunk had so bothered the snail. Realising that his cover had been blown, the mountain-dragon stepped forward.

'Took you a while to spot me though, didn't it?' he taunted, with a twinkle in his eye and a slight twitch of his tail. 'That's one of my favourite tricks, and not just for eavesdropping. You can use this technique to creep up on crunchy crickets and nab them before they leg it.'

With camouflage like mine, you can even hide among the leaf-litter from the beady eye of a hungry butcher-bird’.

The dragon glanced around warily.

‘But there are limits. Deep shade and damp may be good for green rosellas, but it’s no good for us – we need a bit of sun to warm up. Real dragons don’t breathe fire unfortunately. That makes it hard to keep going through the winter here. At the same time, we don’t like it too open either. I have rellies who tried their luck hunting for crickets just over there in that garden, but there wasn’t enough cover and they never returned. I’ve got a feeling it was a cat that got them in the end – lots more of those around these days’.

‘But don’t cats just eat cat-food?’ I asked.

‘That’s what they’d like you to think, I’m sure. But the moment your back’s turned they’ll be out here looking to demonstrate their hunting prowess. Don’t get me wrong, everyone’s got to live – but there are always winners and losers in nature, and in this sort of place, the cats – and the starlings and New Holland honeyeaters, for that matter – are increasingly the winners. I worry for my kids because it looks as though there are going to be more and more tidied-up parks and gardens and rather less bush where we can just be who we want to be’.

This dragon was clearly wise beyond its age and looks, I mused. Then, before I could probe its mind further, it fixed its gaze on a strip of bark, from beneath which protruded two waving filamentous antennae. In an instant, it had dashed off – in hot pursuit, I assumed, of a crunchy cricket.



I was really quite enjoying these strange encounters. It was always good to get fresh perspectives on life. What was it that snail had said? ‘*Ask not what nature means for living here, ask what living here means for nature*’. But thinking about it, they were very strange encounters, weren’t they? Chatting honeyeaters? Talking lizards? At that moment, I became dimly aware of a fly probing the moist skin around my lips – and it wasn’t a talking fly. I flicked it away and sat up. Through bleary eyes I noticed that the ground was now dry and the great gum-tree’s long shadows stretched out across the park in front of me. My back ached and one of my legs had gone to sleep.

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[images: blue gum, New Holland honeyeater, green rosella, dragon lizard – Mark Wapstra; swift parrot – Mick Brown; snail – Simon Grove]