

THE QUARRY

Parkland

Melissa Bartel

My lens twinkles as it takes in the unfolding scene before me. Never before had it seen such a vast array of creatures huddled so closely together in nature.

A 7x20 ought to do the trick.

I observe my favourite to start off my parkland excursion. *Corvus coronoides* – known by its English name as the ‘Australian Raven’, though no one calls it this of course. In this sun-scorched country we simply call it ‘crow’. Its cawing was a sure sign of rain – my parents frequently reiterated this old wives tale. This magnificent creature is known in Australian Aboriginal culture as a trickster and of course it is known worldwide as a bringer of death and bad luck. My lens presumed a different aspect of this sleek Aves.

KAW!

Oh, look at him strutting back and forth, his brilliant feathers glow in the sun. What gives them their shine? Rafael Maia and Liliana D’Alba (2010)ⁱ would agree that these ‘black’ birds are of a different feather. According to their research, the lustre stems from a unique arrangement of nanometer-scale parts. Their feathers harbour such a distinctive nano-structural form that is similar to the iridescent feathers found in a pigeon’s neck.

But wait, what is he doing?

His white all-seeing eyes are keenly focusing – I follow his line of sight. The abrupt movements of some feasting humans make him cautious as he approaches. Some unwanted

crust from an ill-favoured sandwich – the texture of which is least desired. Its taste is similar to the centre of the bread, though the texture slightly ‘chewier’. It surely is a curious thing to which some humans despise. With a flap of the arm, the human warned the approaching crow that this was their temporary picnic territory. To what end did they ward off the persistent creature. This was his home after all – your unwanted scraps can surely be his. Alas their movements left him unperturbed, for they had not sung to him of their intention to stay. In one striking movement he lunged forward and hauled away his crust victoriously.

What next should I observe? My lens wonders left and right, up and down. A-ha! The pesky rock dove waddles about with his stumpy legs and stout body. His scientific name would appear much too fancy – *Columba Livia*. Such a name does injustice to the great Livia Drusilla – wife of Roman Emperor Augustus, mother of Tiberius, grandmother of Claudius and great-grandmother of Caligula.ⁱⁱ These disease ridden swine known simply as ‘pigeon’ are regarded as a feral pests and of course for good reason, for they are not simply transmitters of avian flu. No, these dull coloured fiends with their boring grey backs come bearing many nasty gifts in the shape of ugly white splatters on windshields and sidewalks.

What diseases do they carry? Of course, you are curious.

Histoplasmosis, to name one for starters. A rather nasty respiratory disease caused by the fungus in their leavings. This nasty bugger can definitely be fatal.

Candidiasis, since we are on the topic of fungus, or rather yeast, is well known, for it affects many areas of the body from the skin to the mouth, to the respiratory system, even to the vagina.

Cryptococcosis, another yeast of course, which can affect the central nervous system.

The list could surely go on, given that they are carriers of over sixty known diseases, though I’d rather not continue for want of not causing myself depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

Enough of their issues, but what is he doing? Is that some browning apple piece, discarded for its bruising? I watch as he pecks tirelessly, absorbing the sweet nectar of this mushed mess. Which human had it come from? I couldn’t help but wonder, for I could not see a soul who had just consumed this cheap fruit. Perhaps it had been a young child, whose parents would insist that eating one a day could help keep the doctor away? Perhaps it was an adult who didn’t want to pay extra for the mango?

A flash of white and my attention moves elsewhere. What had flown past just now? My binoculars move, searching for the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. There he is! Hanging upside down from the branch above.

His name is ugly – *Cacatua Galerita* – but his appearance screams ‘beauty’! These old buggers can live for eighty years – almost as long as humans nowadays. His screech is nasty as he informs his nearby friends that the picking is vast and the bounty is glorious below. His favourite are berries and seeds, though if we are being honest, he won’t mind.^{iv} He will take anything, so long as it is edible.

Movement ensues as he swoops back to the surface, his elegant white feathers strut forward with too much confidence. Crest up, he approaches the perched humans who are enjoying their mix of his favourite nuts on the greying park bench. Gym clothes on, their food is most suitable, for they are trying to have a ‘healthy’ snack. His big black beak moves as he approaches their feet, then flutters up to the back of their seat. Overly-friendly, their advantage is clear. A certain ‘hello’ in bird talk, he imposes on their snack practically asking if they can spare a bite.

‘Aaahhh!’

One screams almost as uglily as he had, though the other girls laughs. The seeds spill as she jolted back. He’ll have those, he abandons his post. A friend comes to join as he munches away at the ground. Silly clumsy human, say goodbye to your morning tea, for the dirt has tainted it but not for he. My attention shifts as I look for his mates. Surely at least one is keeping watch to ensure no danger is present and pending. I search from tree to tree, hoping to spot this guardian, though I have no luck, that is until I hear—

“Aaahhh!”

Where did it come from? I see him above. Nestled in the gum tree he warns to his friends of the incoming dog bounding forward despite his restraints. His owner is jolted as he pills at the lead, sniffer to the ground, tail wagging furiously. To him it is a game, to them it is danger, so off they go to join their friend in the safety of the trees. It is funny really how they see us as harmless. Perhaps it is the lack of sharp teeth and the ever-fading ‘predator instinct’? With their crackle^v flying away, I observe another species.

Oh my, what is this? Is that a rooster? A red junglefowl? His name is boring and appears to be given little thought – *Gallus Gallus*, oh what a drag. His feathers on the other hand, are far more impressive. With fourteen tail feathers that can reach twenty-eight centimetres in length, he is surely a sight to behold. His body harbours many colours, such as the deep orange on

his neck, reminiscent of a fiery sunset. These feathers contrast nicely with the cool metallic green covering his tail and chest. His little white patches create interest and his brilliant red crest creates visual perfection. The way he struts forward demonstrates his lack of fear. He halts for no human, scouting for food is more important. A herbivore and insectivore, his favourites are worms, grass and grains. His sense of taste is funny though, as he cannot detect sweetness, however he hates the taste of salt.^{vi} He spots a human with a treat in their hand. He is drawn to the strawberry tops – the part where red meets white. Here the sweetness one tasted before turns bitter and disappears. The human discards this part, for it has no value. His sharp claws propel him forward as he approaches his lunch. He digs in swiftly, feasting on his salt-free nutrients before another bird dare take it. Vitamin C, Calcium, Magnesium and Potassium – they are all his now.^{vii}

To the left, I observe once again, the overly-excited Labrador and his owner sipping her coffee. ‘Sit for your treat,’ She insisted ever so casually, though his attention span caved and he sniffed the ground excessively. The smell of something forbidden was much more tantalizing than his generic kibble he gets every night. The first mistake of dog-training is to not entice with something yummy and of course something with strong smell as this is *always* the dog’s favourite.

What has he found?

My lens follows his nose as I spot the upturned can of tuna oozing its contents all over the grass. Who would leave that there? How carelessly rude. The dog pulls to the length of his lead, though it is not quite far enough, and the Myna bird swoops in on enemy territory.

The *Acridotheres Tristis* has an agility that is unmatched here. The ever-increasing population of this omnivorous woodland bird means that he has learnt to be ballsy, given the increasingly ‘urban’ landscape with which he works. He is listed in the world’s most invasive species list and threatens native biodiversity. He has nasty territorial behaviour, which increases his inherent dauntless nature.^{viii}

With more tuna still left, the dog bounds more, hoping to reach it and perhaps catch a bird for lunch. The crafty Myna swoops back and forth, snatching this feast not far from the great jaws of the longing dog.

‘Ugh, stop pulling!’ Her coffee had spilt and was now dripping down her hand.

‘What is your problem?’ She stands with anger, pulling the golden dog away from the scene, leaving the Myna uninterrupted to feast.

What have we here? A lingering creature who hangs back in the tree line I spot up ahead. Ah the Alectura Lathami, or Australian Brush Turkey – I would recognize that ugly mug a mile away.^{ix} Its long, sharp claws are something to behold, though its oddly proportioned body and wrinkled neck and head leave the eyes wanting to turn. His big size doesn't seem to matter to him, for he fears that dog who just left, knowing too well how tasty he would be in its jaws.

Scavenge or flight? I could see him question, though the dog's disappearance did somewhat help provide him with an answer. He crept slowly forward, looking for some spat out flavour that had left some miserable aftertaste in a picky human's mouth. Perhaps that banana would do the trick? He pecked at the little browned stub left in the banana peel – yuck, it was far too bruised. *Delicious.* I suppose one man's trash is another birds treasure. He feasted on his mouth-watering meal then cautiously crept away, drawing no attention from the self-absorbed teens behind him who were too preoccupied with taking selfies to notice all the wildlife.

The Australian Magpie sticks close to the humans, though he remains cautious of the already gathered muscle of other birds. This Cracticus Tibicen is a medium-large songbird who prefers open habitats. Its beautiful melody of carolling is the common reminder of the Australian bush in which I sit.^x His black and white patterns are drained of all colour, save for his glowing red eyes. Their colour stares intently at the ground, dancing in and around the feasting people. A piece of un-popped popcorn – *Yes please.* A half-munched cracker – *Yes please.* This crafty creature sure knows how to beg, though only the suckers toss him a bite.^{xi}

I could think of only one who was missing this epic party. The Dacelo, or as it is more commonly known, the Kookaburra. Surely there had to be some, for the number of suitable trees surrounding this park would make a fine habitat for these laughing beauties. I searched the trees, hoping my lens' might spy one. Oh, where are you hiding, my favourite little friend? Perhaps they are too busy, bashing the heads of small snakes against the ground or a tree branch in the depths of the bushland before me?^{xii}

Koo-koo-koo-koo-koo-kaa-kaa-kaa!

Alas, I spoke too soon!

The mighty laugh of the kookaburra resonated throughout the treetops above. My lens' search and spotted his off-white and brown feathers. He had a beautiful splash of blue down his wings, and his beak was keen to feast. Below him he spotted some unattended sausages,

from the group of friends who were barbecuing on the public grill. Oh, big mistake silly humans, for this friendly creature has no boundaries. The man's back was turned and without any warning, the crafty joker had snatched his tasty meat. The women laughed as he turned around all angry-like.

'Why didn't you shoo it away?!' He blamed the girls, though it was doubtful they had noticed the clever little guy waiting for such an opportunity in the first place.

My lens' followed the kookaburra, as he aggressively bashed the sausage against the tree. Bits flew off and fell to the ground, though he still managed to get a good taste of the meat. *Delicious*. I could see the satisfaction on his face. Well done my favourite, well done. Enjoy your feast, you crafty bugger.

ⁱ Endnote

"Researchers Discover How Feathers Get Their Shine, Inspire Ideas For Creating Gloss". *Phys.Org*, 2010, <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-feathers-ideas-gloss.html>. Accessed 3 Oct 2019.

ⁱⁱ Wasson, Donald. "Livia Drusilla". *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 2016, https://www.ancient.eu/Livia_Drusilla/. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Birds And Their Droppings Can Carry Over 60 Diseases". *Medical News Today*, 2014, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/61646.php>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{iv} "Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo". *The Australian Museum*, 2019, <https://australianmuseum.net.au/learn/animals/birds/sulphur-crested-cockatoo/>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^v "Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo - Whatbird.Com". *Identify.Whatbird.Com*, 2019, http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/1232/_/Sulphur-crested_Cockatoo.aspx. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{vi} Gautier, Zoe. "Gallus Gallus (Red Junglefowl)". *Animal Diversity Web*, 2019, https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Gallus_gallus/. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{vii} Cherney, Kristeen. "Strawberries A-Z: Nutrition Facts, Health Benefits, Recipes, And More | Everyday Health". *Everydayhealth.Com*, 2019, <https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/diet/strawberries-nutrition-facts-health-benefits-recipes-more/>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{viii} "Fact-Sheet: Common (Indian) Myna - Pestsmart Connect". *Pestsmart Connect*, 2014, <https://www.pestsmart.org.au/pestsmart-common-indian-myna/>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{ix} "Australian Brush-Turkey". *The Australian Museum*, 2018, <https://australianmuseum.net.au/learn/animals/birds/australian-brush-turkey/>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^x "Australian Magpie - Song & Calls | Wildlife Sounds By Wild Ambience". *Wild Ambience*, <https://wildambience.com/wildlife-sounds/australian-magpie/>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{xi} "Australian Magpie | Birdlife Australia". *Birdlife.Org.Au*, <http://birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/australian-magpie>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.

^{xii} "Laughing Kookaburra | BIRDS In BACKYARDS". *Birdsinbackyards.Net*, <http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Dacelo-novaeguineae>. Accessed 6 Oct 2019.