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AUSTRALIA

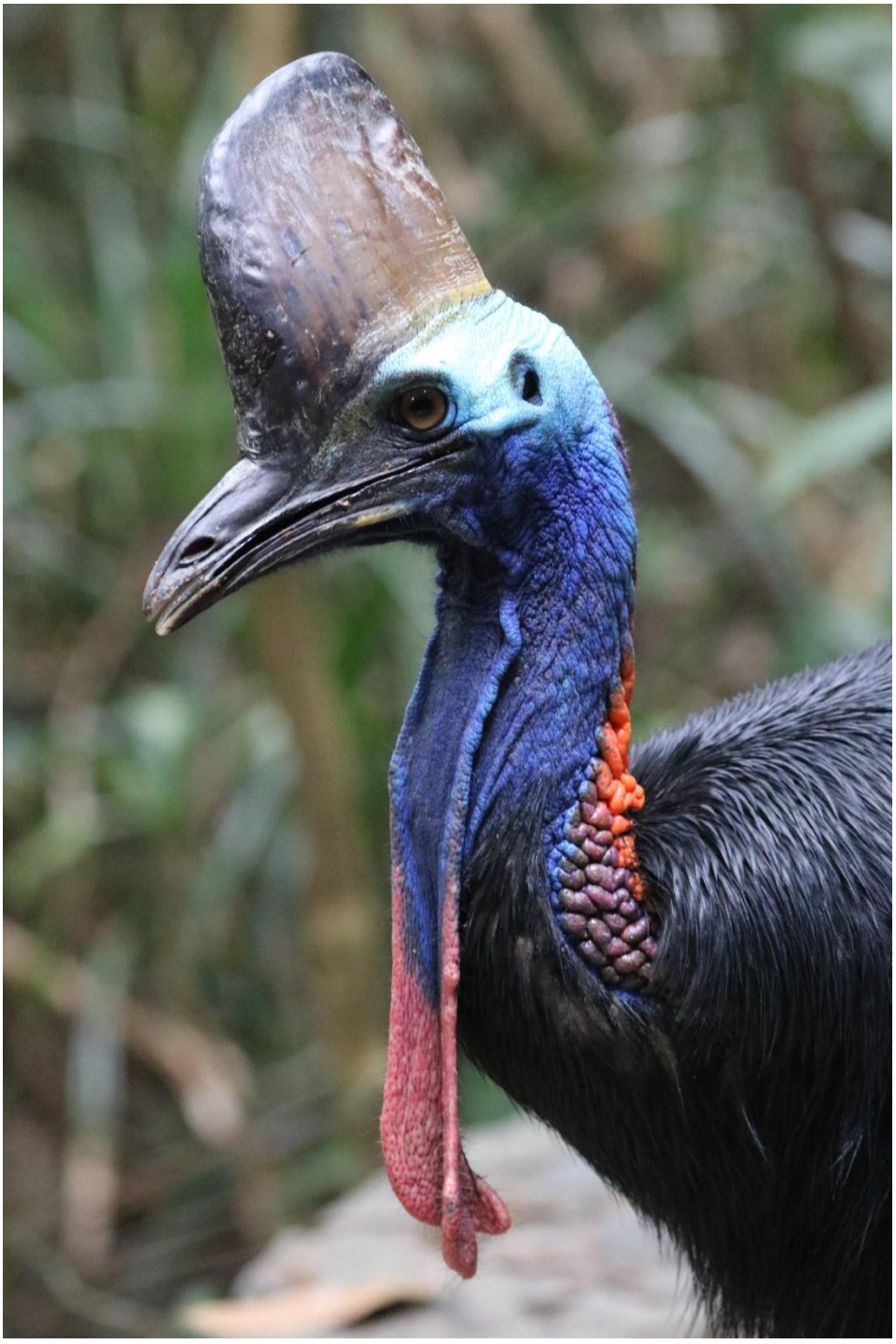
Date - November 2016

Duration - 49 Days

Destinations
Hong Kong - Cairns - Great Barrier Reef Marine Park - Green Island National Park - Daintree National Park - Mount Lewis National Park - Kuranda National Park - Mareeba - Atherton Tablelands - Atherton - Yungaburra - Malanda - Crater Lakes National Park - Lake Eacham - Tinaroo - Davies Creek National Park - Mount Hypipamee National Park - Ravenshoe - Undara Volcanic National Park - Townsville - Magnetic Island - Eungella National Park - Winton - Bladensburg National Park - Carnarvon National Park - Carnarvon Gorge - Lamington National Park - Cullendore Creek - Brisbane - Moreton Island National Park - Noosa National Park - Hobart - Mount Field National Park - Narawntapu National Park - Loongana - Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park - Cradle Mountain - St Marys - St Helens - Binalong Bay - Bay of Fires - Mount William National Park - Freycinet National Park - Maria Island - Bruny Island - Port Arthur - Melbourne

Trip Overview - Queensland

Having spent seven weeks in Alaska earlier in the year, my second mammoth trip of 2016 was even more exciting in many ways, as I had not been to Australia previously and had arranged another similarly lengthy spectacular to explore Queensland and Tasmania. I cannot really exaggerate just how thrilled I was to be finally touring such a fascinating country after so many years of extensive travel and it has always been difficult to fully explain why I had never visited a location that most people, particularly wildlife enthusiasts, regard as one of the premium holiday destinations on earth. The easy answer is that I had always wanted to explore, what is almost an entire continent, in great depth and that I was consequently delaying until I could take a year or so out and devote sufficient time to the not inconsiderable task. With hindsight, and in reality I guess given my schedule and commitments, this was never likely to happen and over the years more people than I can remember have asked when I was going to start running trips to such a glamorous and obviously productive destination. My trigger to finally do so was my son James, who has assisted me on these trips for a number of years now and has become completely indispensible, particularly at night when his spotlighting talents have produced numerous outstanding sightings. I realised that if James and I were to see Australia together, certainly in terms of a longish initial research tour, we would need to arrange something before he is due to begin university, which will probably be towards the end of 2018. Aside from the fact that I love travelling with him, I was undoubtedly going to need his help, as most of the mammals that I knew my guests were going to hope to see in Australia are nocturnal and it is more or less impossible to find and photograph animals on your own at night. This assessment was even more accurate than I could have predicted, as James produced exceptional sighting after exceptional sighting and most of the night-time photographs on this report are almost entirely due to his sterling efforts with a spotlight. On one occasion he found four different possum species within an hour and was also solely responsible for the only feathertail glider encounter of the tour, which he somehow spotted at the very top of a tall tree on movement alone and without eyeshine. When you consider that, at about seven or eight centimetres long, these tiny marsupials are roughly the size of a small mouse, it was a pretty remarkable effort and I am unquestionably going to miss this level of expertise when James can no longer travel with me, not to mention his wonderful company. I am hoping that he will be able to accompany me on at least one further antipodean expedition, as I knew that we were never going to cover much of this vast land in one single trip. Indeed, when I sat down to plan the original itinerary and included every destination that I had always dreamt of seeing in Australia, the trip came to the small matter of 44 weeks. Even having excluded sites that were unlikely to be of as much interest to prospective guests, I was still looking at around 25 weeks and quickly realised that in order to maintain the fundamental policy of not sending clients anywhere that I had not visited personally, I would need to split my research into specific regions over the course of several manageable expeditions. The first would involve a reasonably detailed, although by no means comprehensive, tour of Queensland and Tasmania, followed by a trip to Western Australia in December 2017. Other areas would ensue as and when they could be scheduled, but for now I would concentrate my efforts on the varied ecosystems and equally diverse wildlife of these three magnificent states, all of which are superb holiday destinations in their own right, almost regardless of whether you are particularly keen on searching for animals or not. In some respects it was fortunate that I had such a momentous personal event to look forward to, as the period between my return from Alaska and our planned departure in late November was an unsettling one, during which I had an entire tour cancelled for the first time in more than a decade. Given the remote places that I visit, coupled sadly with the inescapable foibles of human nature, it is inevitable that trips are affected from time to time and on this occasion the ill-fated destination just happened to be India, where I was due to visit Dachigam National Park to photograph Asiatic black bears for my website. Nestled in the western Himalayas in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir, just over twenty kilometres from Srinagar,



Dachigam is probably the best site to see these attractive bears within their extensive range and the trip was going to be a particularly special one for James, as the Asiatic variety is the only bear species, excluding giant panda, that he has not yet observed in the wild. Unfortunately, Kashmir is notoriously unstable and yet another outbreak of violence and civil unrest claimed almost 100 civilian lives just before we were due to depart. Whilst I was still willing to travel as the situation appeared to calm, the national park was closed to visitors and we had to accept defeat and postpone. Our thoughts are of course more with the relatives of the people killed, than they are on lamenting a cancelled tour, but it was still a great shame and depressingly indicative of an ailing planet where so many groups of people find it impossible to live in peace with one another. On a more intimate level, in a year that had already claimed musical icon David Bowie and the beloved British actor Alan Rickman within four desperate days of each other, I lost two of the men who I

admired most in the world, legendary boxer and civil rights activist Muhammad Ali and the singer, songwriter Leonard Cohen, whom I consider to be only marginally less gifted than the most talented songwriter the world has ever known, Bob Dylan. Muhammad Ali was the greatest heavyweight fighter of his or any other generation and he dominated a division that included the brutal ferocity of Sonny Liston, Ken Norton, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, despite losing three and a half years of his career for refusing to serve in the United States armed forces and possibly fight in Vietnam. At the time Ali famously declared *'I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong'* and whilst I do not share any of his religious beliefs, I greatly admire the principles and steadfast conviction of a man who won a gold medal for his country at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, but was not allowed to eat in a restaurant with white people when he returned home. Having first met the human rights activist Malcolm X in 1962, Ali joined the Nation of Islam less than two years later and changed what he referred to as his 'slave name' Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. Unlike many who tried to avoid conscription, or 'the draft' as it was known, during the Vietnam War, Ali made no attempt to hide his views or flee the country and was fully prepared to give up his career and go to prison for what he believed in. Shortly before his boxing licence was revoked and he was convicted of draft evasion, Ali made his feelings abundantly clear in one of several passionate speeches defending his anti-war

ideology and highlighting the plight of his people: *'My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother or some darker people or some poor, hungry people in the mud for big, powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people? Poor little black people and babies and children and women. How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail'.* Whilst generally a man of immense humour and tolerance, Muhammad Ali had an edge to him during his younger years, an edge that refused to meekly accept the racial prejudice that he had been exposed to from an early age or any perceived insults from anyone, white or black. The African American Ernie Terrell discovered this to his cost when he insisted on calling Ali by his former name Cassius Clay prior to their heavyweight title bout in Texas in 1967, Ali's penultimate fight before his lengthy ban. Muhammad Ali was visibly shaken by this lack of respect in a pre-fight press conference that almost came to blows and when the two men entered the ring he clearly intended to exact the most chastening revenge. For fifteen largely one-sided rounds, Ali mercilessly punished Terrell, refusing to put him away and screaming between barrages 'What's my name?' After consigning the former champion Terrell to history, Ali's professional boxing career record stood at 28-0, which he would later improve to 31 consecutive victories, and he would not suffer defeat prior to the contrived ban that lasted until he was almost 29 and would have finished most fighters, but which ultimately only spurred Ali on to greater heights and two more world titles. As an athlete Muhammad Ali was the perfect blend of power, grace and speed, but beyond the ring people began to realise, as the hate slowly subsided and the American people gradually became aware of the true horror of Vietnam, that this arrogant black upstart was actually a compassionate human being with an inherent sense of justice for all. Ali practiced the religious tolerance that he preached throughout his life and his unwavering pursuit of freedom and profound humanity transcended the sport that he dominated for more than twenty years. For those who want to learn more about this remarkable and highly influential figure, I would recommend the 1996 academy award winning documentary 'When We Were Kings', which tells the compelling story of the 1974 'Rumble in the Jungle', the epic title fight between the undefeated heavyweight champion George Foreman and the challenger Muhammad Ali, who at 32, was seven years older than Foreman and was given little hope of victory. Foreman had won all 40 of his professional fights to date, an incredible 37 by knock out, including a two-round demolition of the undisputed heavyweight champion Joe Frazier, in which the then undefeated Frazier was knocked down a staggering six times before the referee finally stopped the contest, such as it was. It was thought that no man could beat Foreman and some even feared that by travelling to Kinshasa in Zaire for the bout, Ali was putting his life in real jeopardy. In public Ali was his usual confident self before the fight, taunting his opponent and planting the seeds for one of the greatest sporting hijacks of all time. *'I've seen George Foreman shadow boxing and the shadow won'* he declared and by the time the two men climbed into the ring in front of 60,000 adoring African fans, Foreman had a point to prove. As the younger, stronger man attacked, Ali covered up and held on, allowing the ropes, which legend suggests were deliberately loosened by Ali's trainer Angelo Dundee, to absorb much of the impact of Foreman's fury. For seven rounds Ali mocked the champion, admonishing him to punch harder as he soaked up the punishment, often on his arms and side, but on the head and body as well. After Foreman had landed a right hand squarely on his adversary's jaw, Ali whispered chillingly in his ear *'That all you got, George?'* Foreman threw hundreds

of punches throughout an epic contest, but 'rope-a-dope' was being unveiled to an admiring world, as the champion simply punched himself out and was too exhausted to defend when Ali launched his own ferocious assault towards the end of round eight. Knocked down for the first time in his career, Foreman hauled himself off the canvas at a count of nine, but the referee ruled him out and Muhammad Ali had finally regained the heavyweight title that the authorities had so unjustly stripped him of seven years earlier. Ali's comeback and unlikely victory was a triumph of the human spirit more even than an extraordinary boxing success and it was this

indomitable spirit that his friend Billy Crystal so lovingly evoked at the memorial service for Ali after his death in June 2016. In a deeply moving and thought provoking eulogy that will certainly make you laugh and will probably make you cry, Ali's Jewish *'little brother'* remembered his enduring friend with great affection and humour and went on to describe the human being that Muhammad Ali grew to be, for in Ali's own words: *'A man who views the world the same at 50 as he did at 20, has wasted 30 years of his life'*. For anyone who either admires Ali or wants to learn a little more about the man behind the myth, Billy Crystal's heartfelt tribute is essential viewing and his perceptive and timely observation that Ali *'taught us that life is best when you build bridges between people, not walls'* of course resonates as significantly in today's political climate, as it ever did. I last watched Ali at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, when the crowd roared at the very mention of his name. Having suffered from Parkinson's disease for almost 30 years, Ali looked a shadow of his former magnificent self, but away from the stadium, with his sunglasses removed, those bright eyes still twinkled and you could still glimpse the young man who danced so eloquently and shook the world. Whilst it is tempting to try and create an insightful link between them, perhaps in terms of their contrasting but profound religious beliefs, the truth is that I can find very little in common between Muhammad Ali and Leonard Cohen, who I heard had passed away a couple of days after Donald Trump became the president of the United States, when I was already in mourning. Ali would have no doubt argued that both men were poets and it is true that Cohen was a published poet and novelist before he turned his incomparable gifts to song writing in the mid-sixties. What followed was a collection of emotionally charged masterpieces exploring, or possibly confronting, love, sex, religion, death and all facets of what we like to call the human condition. Cohen was already 33 when his first album 'Songs of Leonard Cohen' was released and here was a man who had clearly tasted a little of what life had to offer and was as bewildered as he was thrilled and intrigued by it all. The opening track, the evocative and dreamlike 'Suzanne', was a first assured step on a musical journey that would explore the darkest recesses of Cohen's at times tortured inner psyche and produce moments of such exquisite tenderness and sorrow, it became almost impossible to distinguish between the two. Befuddled critics dismissed his genius as music to slash your wrists to, but Cohen's palpable self-doubt and often mournful outpourings, touched a nerve with many and he quickly established a rapt following across the globe. A complex and contradictory figure, Cohen was plagued by a deep-rooted insecurity for much of his career and the severe depression that he suffered throughout his life, belied the supremely confident performer he portrayed to enthralled audiences all over the world. To some he even appeared self-obsessed and thought little, at least until late in life when he did express some regret, of sharing his brief sexual liaison with the legendary singer/songwriter Janis Joplin in his intimate ballad 'Chelsea Hotel #2'. Like many great writers, Cohen would draw on personal experiences and relationships for inspiration and one of his most renowned songs, 'So Long Marianne', recalls his passionate and somewhat turbulent relationship with the striking Norwegian blonde Marianne Ihlen, who has been described as Cohen's muse by others and as *'the most beautiful woman'* he had ever seen, by Cohen himself. A lyrical haunting exploration of an ultimately doomed union, 'So Long Marianne' was released on Cohen's first album in 1967 and is one of his most poetic and personal songs. As

immensely beautiful as it is bleakly brutal, Cohen's evident love for his partner is simultaneously betrayed not only by his own seductive imagery, but by the fact that he was already seeing other women long before the couple finally split, including, in later years, the mother of his two children Suzanne Elrod. Despite his endless fear of commitment, there was clearly a touching bond between the two and Marianne, who had previously been married to the writer Axel Jensen, also inspired another of Cohen's finest ballads, 'Bird on the Wire', which perfectly captures his constant and often destructive need to remain unrestrained.

Like a bird on the wire,
Like a drunk in a midnight choir,
I have tried in my way to be free.

Cohen's second album 'Songs from a Room', features a rather fetching Marianne on the back sleeve, sitting at Cohen's typewriter in only a towel, and when he was informed that his lifelong friend was dying of Leukaemia in 2016, he sent her this final touching farewell: *'Well Marianne, it's come to this time when we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon. Know that I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine'*, which friends who were present when Cohen's letter was read, said she did. By the time that he wrote these loving words, Cohen had largely escaped the incapacitating depression that had plagued much of his life and in his later years was able to recall a sense of what he endured: *'I speak of a clinical depression that is the background of your entire life, a background of anguish and anxiety, a sense that nothing goes well, that pleasure is unavailable'*. Although Cohen endured this debilitating veil of darkness for the majority of his career, many observers believe that he would not have been the same artist without these relentless mental health issues and would not have been

able to conjure the intense suffering and poetic despair so fundamental to his creative process. Certainly his inner turmoil influenced his work as acutely as his life and when an artist of Cohen's depth can embrace both Judaism and Zen Buddhism, he lived in a monastery in California for five years and went on to become a fully ordained monk, you suspect that not only was he searching for answers, but that he probably never truly knew what the questions were. At one point Cohen explained*: 'I don't consider myself a pessimist. I think of a pessimist as someone who is waiting for it to rain. And I feel soaked to the skin'*. After a few marginally less creative years, Cohen returned to form in the 1980s with two outstanding albums 'Various Positions' in late 1984 and his most successful release, 'I'm Your Man' just over three years later, both of which included some of his finest writing and most inspired songs. Among others, 'Various Positions' featured 'Dance Me to the End of Love', 'If It Be Your Will' and the spellbindingly poignant 'Hallelujah', the song for which he will always be remembered. On 'I'm Your Man', Cohen portrayed himself as the world weary wordsmith with the acerbic wit on such classics as the thrillingly despondent 'Everybody Knows', the titular 'I'm Your Man',

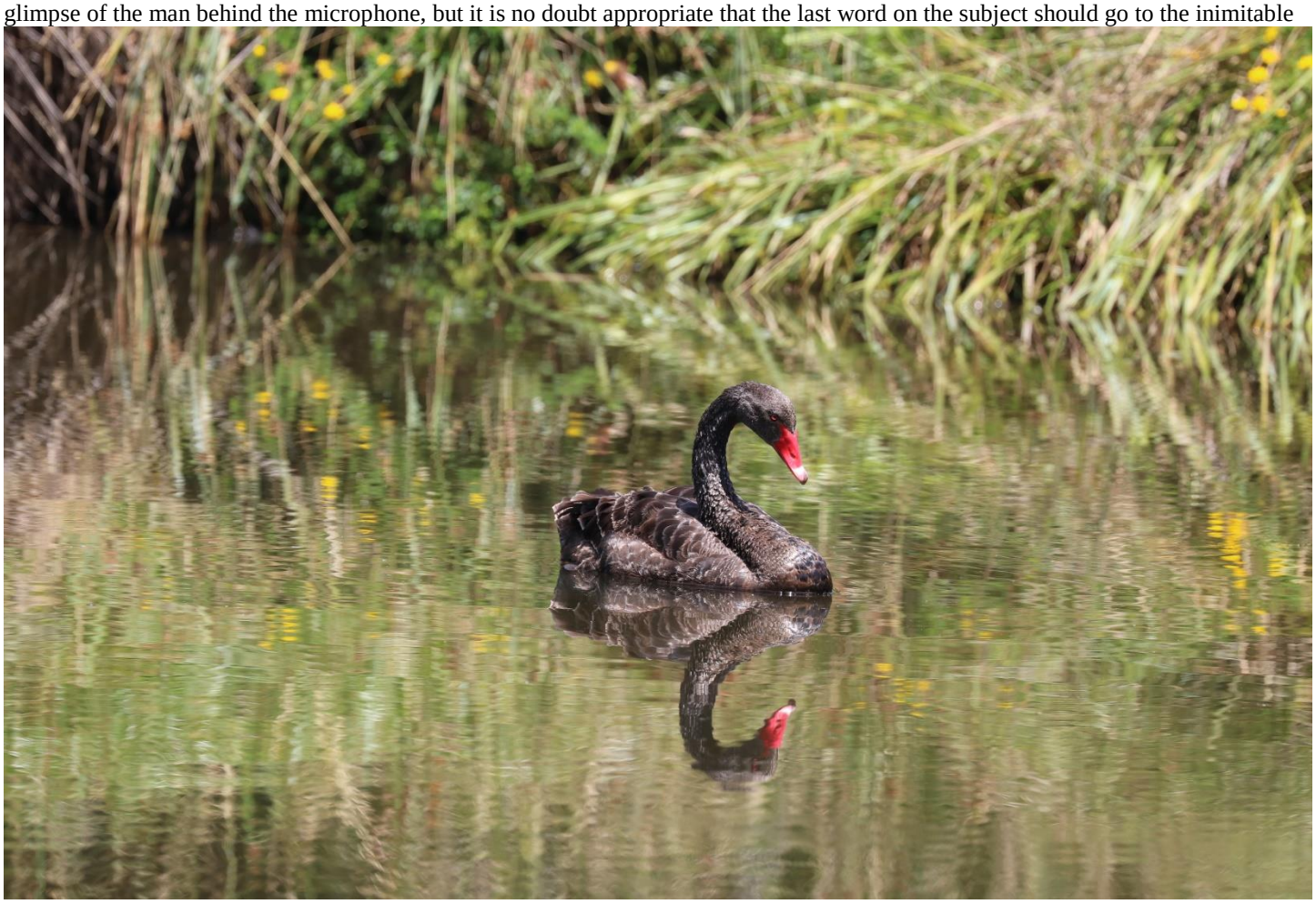
'First We Take Manhattan' and the unforgettable 'Tower of Song', which Cohen recited almost in full as his acceptance speech when he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008. In that same year he made his debut at Glastonbury, the iconic music festival that takes place in Somerset and has attracted most of the top singers and bands from all over the world. At almost 74, Cohen delivered one of the greatest performances in the history of this influential festival, wowing a whole new generation of fans and producing a spellbinding rendition of Hallelujah as the sun set across the Pyramid stage and the captivated crowd roared every chorus in rapt appreciation of a true musical giant. At the end of his set, as the warm night air reverberated to the rapturous applause, Cohen simply removed his hat and bowed humbly to his enthralled audience, who seemed to appreciate that they had been part of something magical. They understood that Cohen had shared a little of himself that day, just as he had always sacrificed a tiny part of his fragile soul to each perfect song. The announcement of Cohen's death on the 7th of November had been delayed for a few days and he had thankfully not lived to see almost 63 million supposedly right minded people vote that Donald Trump should become the 45th President of the United States and thereby hold the key to the greatest array of nuclear weapons ever stockpiled. I had previously thought that by electing George W. Bush as their president, a man so stupid he could barely form a coherent sentence, the American people had taken that highest of offices as low as it could possibly go, but in electing Trump they abandoned any last semblance of both political credibility and ethical responsibility. Unlike the Republican puppet Bush, Trump is not a stupid man and by concentrating on and undoubtedly exaggerating the effects of immigration, terrorism and racial and religious tension, he deliberately targets the concerns, legitimate or otherwise, of his core supporters, the majority of whom are staunch conservatives. He is an absolute master at playing to this largely white, right wing audience and feeding on the bigotry and genuine fear that exists in this time of uncertainty and global unrest. I do not generally become involved in politics beyond my own shores, but have often highlighted Republican extremism within the United States, as the hard core right have so little regard for the planet that we should be conserving

for future generations or even their own outstandingly beautiful country. Although we hear the word espoused so often, most Republicans have no real understanding of patriotism in the true sense and have no real affinity for the actual land they have been so blessed with or the defenceless wildlife they are charged to protect. They refuse to pass even moderate gun control laws to safeguard their own children and Trump went much further during his presidential battle with Democratic rival Hillary Clinton by denying the reality of climate change and actively campaigning against the environment. Despite the fact that America is the worst polluter in world history and is currently the second largest annual producer of carbon dioxide emissions behind China, Trump informed anyone who would listen that he would withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord, an almost universally ratified agreement to limit the impact of global warming by ensuring that the average temperature increases at well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. That he duly carried out his calamitous threat shortly after becoming president, means that only Syria and America will have refused to accept this critical global treaty and that the so called leaders of the free world are now international renegades who will ultimately cause far more harm to our precious planet than terrorists ever could. Whilst that position may actually appeal to Trump's feeble-minded supporters, as the ice caps and glaciers melt beyond the point of return, there will eventually be a reckoning and it will not be a biblical one, it will just be of biblical proportions. Just about the only good news during the entire sorry period involved another artist I greatly admire, Bob Dylan, who became the first songwriter and musician to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature *'for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition'*. Although I was thrilled that Dylan's exceptional talent and cultural influence had been recognised in this way, as soon as I became aware of the decision, I knew that it was going to be a controversial choice, as many people, largely elitist academics and mediocre novelists, will never accept popular songs as art or lyrics, however profound, as poetry. As far as I am concerned, this is entirely missing the point, as whether Dylan's lyrics are authentic poetry in the classical form is irrelevant to me and my only interest is whether he is an artist in the way that Byron, Shelley and Keats were in their day, which of course he undoubtedly is. As a spokesperson for his generation and a cultural icon, Dylan is clearly the contemporary equivalent of those celebrated figures and his music is as significant now as their poetry was then. More so in many ways, as civil rights activist and anti-war campaigner Dylan recorded some of the most influential and revered protest songs

of all time during the 1960s and has continued to challenge social and racial injustice throughout a career lasting over 50 years and encompassing more than 60 albums and 500 original songs. Dylan's lyrics pervade the public consciousness like no other and although the literary cognoscenti refuse to accept folk or rock music as art, I consider him to be one of the few artistic geniuses of the 20th century and beyond. As with his high profile and somewhat notorious transition from an acoustic to electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1965, Dylan has never allowed himself to be confined to one musical style or genre and has instead spent his entire career confounding expectations, regardless of the reaction of his more than occasionally apoplectic followers or the fellow musicians he had to leave behind in order to evolve creatively. Whilst I have digressed for far too long already and do not have sufficient time to further explore his inestimable artistic impact and significance in this format, I have listed below a few of my favourite Bob Dylan songs as a starting point for anyone interested in learning more about the life and art of this extraordinarily gifted and innovative songwriter. All of these songs were selected from the first two decades of Dylan's remarkable career, including the moving and melodic 'Abandoned Love', which was originally written for 'Desire' in 1976, but was replaced by 'Joey' and eventually released on the 'Biograph' collection in 1985.

A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall - The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963)
Don't Think Twice, It's All Right - The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963)
To Ramona - Another Side of Bob Dylan (1964)
The Times They Are a-Changin' - The Times They Are a-Changin' (1964)
Ballad of Hollis Brown - The Times They Are a-Changin' (1964)
Mr. Tambourine Man - Bringing it all Back Home (1965)
It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding) - Bringing it all Back Home (1965)
It's All Over Now Baby Blue - Bringing it all Back Home (1965)
Like a Rolling Stone - Highway 61 Revisited (1965)
Just Like a Woman - Blonde on Blonde (1966)
Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I'll Go Mine) - Blonde on Blonde (1966)
All Along the Watchtower - John Wesley Harding (1967)
Lay Lady Lay - Nashville Skyline (1969)
Knockin' on Heaven's Door - Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)
Tangled Up in Blue - Blood on the Tracks (1975)
Simple Twist of Fate - Blood on the Tracks (1975)
Idiot Wind - Blood on the Tracks (1975)
This Wheel's on Fire - The Basement Tapes (1975)
Senor (Tales of Yankee Power) - Street Legal (1978)
Abandoned Love - Biograph (1985)

I can also highly recommend the two documentaries 'Dont Look Back', directed by D.A.Pennebaker and released in 1967, and Martin Scorsese's 'No Direction Home', which covers Dylan's rise to fame from the early sixties when he first arrived in New York to his motorcycle accident in July 1966, at which point he stopped touring for the best part of eight years. Both films provide an insightful glimpse of the man behind the microphone, but it is no doubt appropriate that the last word on the subject should go to the inimitable

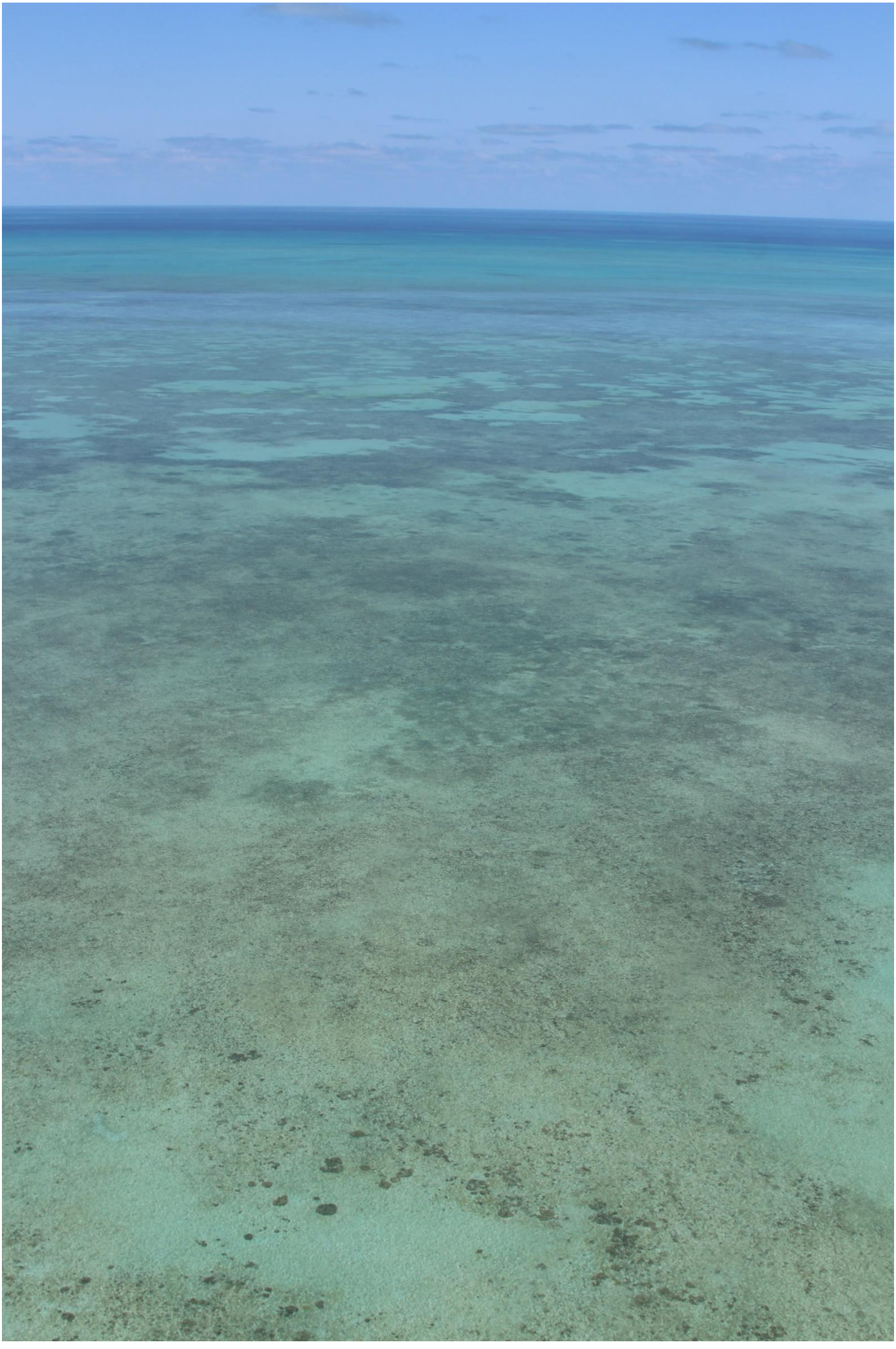


Leonard Cohen, who very rarely wasted a single sentence and stated that awarding the Nobel Prize to Bob *Dylan 'is like pinning a medal on Mount Everest for being the highest mountain'*, which sums up a rather meaningless debate far better than I ever could. So in all, it was not a great few months between tours, but at least I was finally going to see a land that I had wanted to visit since I was a young boy listening to the Ashes secretly under the covers all night to avoid waking my parents, who would have been less than impressed given that I had to go straight from the clandestine cricket commentary to school. I have always loved cricket and for me the ultimate sporting contest will always be the eternal battle between England and Australia for the Ashes, a mythical prize conceived when Australia beat England at the Oval in 1882 and the Sporting Times published a mock obituary that concluded: '*The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia'*. Ever since, one or other of these two cricketing giants strive to regain the Ashes and the teams play for a small urn that is said to contain the remains of a bail that was burnt following England's revenge victory during the 1882/83 return series in Australia. The wonderful tradition is all part of a sophisticated and incredibly nuanced game that, in its full 'Test Match' glory, takes place over five days and is contested in the mind as much as on the pitch. As chess is to draughts, or checkers if you prefer, so cricket is to football, which has none of the intricacy or skill of our summer game, a game initially spread largely by colonialism, which has since been adopted and improved all over the world. During our dreary winter months of dark mornings, darker evenings and less than eight hours of daylight during the bleakest and shortest of our winter days, the cricket from exotic Australia was a massive event in my young life, even if I was not able to actually watch it and had to make do with the radio, as there was no television coverage of overseas cricket tours when I was a boy. That came later when Sky revolutionised cricket coverage and meanwhile, when gremlins disrupted the radio commentary during a particularly tense test, I sat up all night just to watch the score update every ten minutes on Ceefax, the now defunct BBC teletext service. I was that devoted, or perhaps fanatical, and there was something electrifying about listening to Lillee and Thomson steaming in to terrorise the English batsmen, with Boycott obdurately blunting their attack for all he was worth and Botham counterattacking in thrilling fashion. Neither nation were the best in the world in cricketing terms at that stage, that honour would rest with the mighty West Indies for almost twenty years, but the clashes between the two were no less intense and the longstanding rivalry remains to this day. To Australian cricket supporters the English will always be whinging poms and although the term pom is thought to possibly derive from pomegranate, being an old slang expression for immigrant, I prefer another variant of the myth, that pom is an acronym of 'Prisoner of His Majesty', which, as Australia was established by the British as a penal colony, would make the Australians the poms and not us. It was a nice thought that partially sustained me during years of humiliation at the hands of gloating Aussies, as their cricket team transcended the 'Windies' as the finest on earth, but, having now visited this astounding country, I can only wish that one of my ancestors had stolen a sheep or two and had been among the 160,000 or so convicts transported here from towards the end of the eighteenth century. Around 20% of non-indigenous Australians descend from these convicts, most of whom were petty criminals by today's standards, and whilst life was extremely harsh for some, others fared better and served considerably less than their standard sentences of usually seven or fourteen years and were able to earn their freedom and a parcel of land among the free settlers. I would be visiting penal colonies at Port Arthur and Maria Island during the Tasmania leg of the tour, but for now my attention was focused on our initial destination Cairns and a first view of the famous Great Barrier Reef. The largest coral reef system on the planet, the Great Barrier Reef includes over 3,000 individual reefs and stretches

2,300 kilometres south from the northernmost tip of Australia to Fraser Island. It is home to a staggering variety of marine life, including 600 different types of coral and thousands of fish, jellyfish, molluscs, crustaceans and worms, as well as more than 200 species of birds, which roost and nest on the hundreds of islands and coral cays in vast numbers. Around one and a half million birds are thought to breed on these islands each year and the clear temperate waters support an unparalleled marine ecosystem that has taken around 8,000 years to evolve and is roughly the same size as Japan or Germany. The basic facts are impressive enough of course, but they do little to convey the majesty and splendour of one of nature's true wonders. For a boy who grew up in central London, the Great Barrier Reef was almost beyond my comprehension and it still thrills me that after all these years of travel to some

of the most exotic places on earth, a new destination can take my breath away in this fashion. This was actually true of the entire trip, as the scenery along the east coast of Australia is astonishingly beautiful and if anything Tasmania was even more spectacular. To really appreciate the full magnificence and immense scale of this living masterpiece, you have to take to the air and we marvelled at a seemingly infinite turquoise horizon on a breathtaking scenic flight that went all the way up from Cairns to Port Douglas and still covered only a tiny percentage of the entire reef. The individual reefs, some of which are vast, were clearly visible in the relatively shallow waters in which coral thrives and we were also able to distinguish a variety of wildlife against the stunning kaleidoscope of vivid blues and radiant greens far below. We spotted several manta rays as we soared above the outer reefs and even a large tiger shark, which we circled for a better view as it glided effortlessly between the coral like a shadow across the sky. Ordinarily I would have chosen the solitude of one of these distant reefs as our base, as you can spend long lazy days snorkelling and diving peacefully on your own, with just your boat crew for company each evening. Unfortunately, I only have a certain amount of time available to research each region on these trips and although Green Island was far too touristy for my liking, and probably for most of my guests, it did provide an easy introduction to the reef and an opportunity to snorkel and dive with my son. I rarely dive these days, but having a chance to do so with James on the iconic Great Barrier Reef was too good to miss and we enjoyed a couple of fabulous dives together, as well as several hours

snorkelling. In addition to the dazzling green and hawksbill turtles, we encountered whitetip reef sharks, stingrays, giant clams and a confounding array of colourful fish, many of which I had never previously seen. Surrounded by such vibrant, diverse life, at times it was difficult to conceive that this mega ecosystem is in such desperate trouble, but 2016 had been a disastrous year for the Great Barrier Reef with a third major bleaching event since 1998, which had severely damaged a vast amount of coral, particularly in the northern section beyond Port Douglas. For those who are not aware, bleaching is basically a stress response that causes coral to expel algae, their primary source of food and the source of their vivid colours. In stable conditions coral and algae have a symbiotic relationship and although coral thrives in warm water, when ocean temperatures rise too high, the algae produces a toxic compound which the coral cannot tolerate. The coral subsequently expels the algae, which had been living within its tissue, leaving the coral bleached white and facing eventual starvation. This would normally take years, during which time the coral could conceivably recover, but as Professor Terry Hughes, a coral reef scientist at James Cook University, pointed out during his lecture in November 2016, this is no longer the case and the coral is dying at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. Professor Hughes and his specialist team spent much of 2016 monitoring the effects of the recent prolonged increase in ocean temperatures and he observed: *'They are supposed to die slowly of starvation, but this time round, as well as that slow starvation mortality, we also saw much quicker almost instantaneous mortality at the height of the marine heat wave, these corals didn't starve to death in March, they actually cooked'*. Of the 522 reefs studied in that northern section, 81% had suffered severe bleaching and only 1% had experienced no bleaching at all. It was later confirmed that approximately two thirds of the coral in that 700 kilometre stretch had been lost forever and, as inconceivable as this sounds, the news was to grow even worse in early 2017 when it became clear that for the first time in recorded history there were consecutive years of higher sea temperatures in the area and the Great Barrier Reef would endure an unparalleled second successive year of bleaching. With no time to recover between these catastrophic events, the reef suffered irreparable damage and this time the main tourist section fared the worst, less than four months after James and I had dived there. In April 2017 Professor Hughes reported that every single reef between Cairns and Townsville had undergone some degree of bleaching and that the vast majority of these reefs had experienced severe bleaching of more than 80%, which basically meant that most of the coral along this extensive section of coastline was either dying or already dead. Hughes estimates that approximately half of the coral on the Great Barrier Reef died within an eighteen-month period from towards the end of 2015 and this calamitous devastation is by no means restricted to the east coast of Australia. Coral reefs are dying all over the world at terrifyingly accelerated rates and when you consider that these reefs support around a third of all marine life at some stage of their existence, we are clearly on the verge of an ecological disaster. The serious, non-politically motivated scientists working in this field all agree that global warming is producing this increase in ocean temperatures and that until we significantly reduce the amount of carbon dioxide that we continue to pump into the atmosphere, the problem, and of course the dire resulting consequences, can only escalate. As Professor Hughes made clear: *'Climate change is not a future threat. On the Great Barrier Reef, it's been happening for eighteen years'*. but despite the irrefutable evidence that the scientific community has gathered regarding global warming, there does not appear to be much will within the country to change things. The Australian government and local politicians have recently approved a massive expansion of the coal mining industry in Queensland and Australia is already the fourth largest producer of coal on the planet and by far the largest exporter of a fossil fuel that we continue to burn at untenable levels in order to generate electricity. Given that they are on the verge of losing a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the 'Seven Natural Wonders of the World', not to mention a national landmark that is known and recognised throughout the world, I find it astounding that so few Australians appear to be concerned by, or even aware of, this impending and almost incomprehensible environmental disaster. I understand that many Australians are known to be apathetic regarding a wide range of ecological issues, but even if they



have no interest in conservation or indeed the future of their own children, they should perhaps be aware that two and a half million tourists visit the Great Barrier Reef each year, which generates annual revenue of $6.4 billion and sustains over 70,000 Australian jobs. Whilst there are literally thousands of generally worthwhile books and articles explaining the tangible effects of global warming and other species and planet-threatening environmental issues, as a starting point, I would suggest that people read 'The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History', for which the American journalist Elizabeth Kolbert won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. Kolbert favours a different approach to a subject that is simply not being taken seriously by governments or the people and by examining previous extinction events and other critical ecological issues, including the rapidly increasing acidity that is also destroying coral reefs across the globe, she concludes that the catalyst for this 'sixth' extinction will be a very human affair. Kolbert's insightful and informative book does not make pleasant reading at times and I am only glad that I was able to explore the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef with my own son, as this is not a privilege that future generations of fathers are going to be able to enjoy. Having discovered our first mammals of the trip on Green Island, a small colony of spectacled flying foxes and a larger population of

introduced black rats, we moved north from Cairns to an area between the Mount Lewis and Daintree national parks, from where we would explore both parks and a number of other promising sites. As I desperately do not want these trip reports to read as crushingly dull travelogues, where I simply list what we saw and where, I do not intend to describe each area in great detail and will instead concentrate on the animals and subjects that either interest, delight or infuriate me. However, I can of course provide additional information if anyone is interested in visiting any of the areas that I mention. Our first inland destination is a case in point, as we explored more locations around Mount Lewis and Daintree than I can realistically describe and although the first batch of mammals encountered were as exciting and fascinating as you would expect for a new country, the real highlight for me was a first view of a wild macropod, which actually occurred just after we left Cairns to begin the drive north. Macropods are basically members of the kangaroo family, which includes, among others, kangaroos, wallabies, pademelons and tree kangaroos, which I can clearly remember laughing about as a child, as nothing sounded quite as silly to a ten-year-old than a kangaroo hopping about in the branches of a tree like some sort of monkey. Kangaroos were one of those unusual animals that initially attracted me to wildlife when I was young, like camels, llamas and giraffes, and whilst I had seen these famous marsupials all over the world in various zoos and collections, I of

course had never observed one in the wild, as they only occur in Australia and Papua New Guinea, which I am yet to visit. It was therefore quite a thrill to spot a small group of agile wallabies grazing at the edge of the Captain Cook Highway and belated apologies to the vehicles behind me for that impromptu U-turn. We were to encounter eighteen different species of macropod throughout the trip, some in very large numbers, but I will never forget that first wallaby sighting and on the same day we also spent time with our first pademelons, the red-legged variety, which were common at our accommodation, albeit shy and difficult to photograph. I have to say that this was not an issue we experienced that often, for although some species were extremely elusive, particularly the small carnivorous marsupials, the vast majority were easy to find and even easier to photograph. As I knew would be the case before I travelled, there was far more to see at night than during the day, certainly in terms of mammals, and most of the nocturnal animals that we discovered simply sat there and, rather considerately given the intrusion, allowed us to photograph and film them more or less at

will. There were obviously exceptions, as I spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to photograph overly industrious eastern quolls in Tasmania, but basically almost everything surrendered as soon as we pointed a spotlight in even its general direction, which made a delightful change given the challenging photographic conditions that we customarily face in the field. The fact that so many Australians appear to love feeding more or less anything that moves was probably a contributory factor and we encountered a large number of at least semi-habituated mammals, more than a few of which were also somewhat portly. From the usual birds on garden feeders to wallabies, possums, gliders and even quolls and Tasmanian devils, we witnessed feeding of some kind in most areas and whilst some of this involved obviously kind hearted individuals, if misguided in some cases, more was clearly to attract tourists and make money. I am pleased to say that although we did see mammals fed on several occasions, we also observed every single species naturally in the wild and sometimes the free meals were simply a consequence of bird feeding. This was the case at our accommodation near Mount Lewis, where the northern brown bandicoot and fawn-footed melomys would furtively appear at night to forage under the bird tables. Both species were seen elsewhere in the vicinity, as was another type of bandicoot, the long-nosed bandicoot, and a pleasant cruise on the Daintree River produced an array of birdlife and a couple of formidable saltwater crocodiles, which was fortunate, as the Australian summer is not the best time to spot these persecuted prehistoric reptiles. Daintree was as far north as we ventured on this tour and as we journeyed back south, inland this time and not directly along the coast, we had three important stops to make before we reached our next major destination, the Atherton Tablelands. The first was at Kuranda National Park, one of several major reserves within the 'Wet Tropics of Queensland', another UNESCO World Heritage Site extending 450 kilometres along the northeast coast of Australia from Cooktown to Townsville and incorporating almost 9,000 km² of primarily tropical rainforest. The main reason for our stop was to hopefully see a southern cassowary, as these huge flightless birds have been visiting the same small lodge for well over 30 years. They are difficult to see elsewhere and whilst we were fortunate to spot a father and two chicks on a forest walk near Malanda a few days later, that was a brief glimpse as they crossed a trail and disappeared into the dense undergrowth. In comparison, our view at Kuranda was outstanding and we were able to spend over half an hour with a male and female pair at extremely close quarters. The second largest bird in terms of weight behind the ostrich and the third largest in terms of

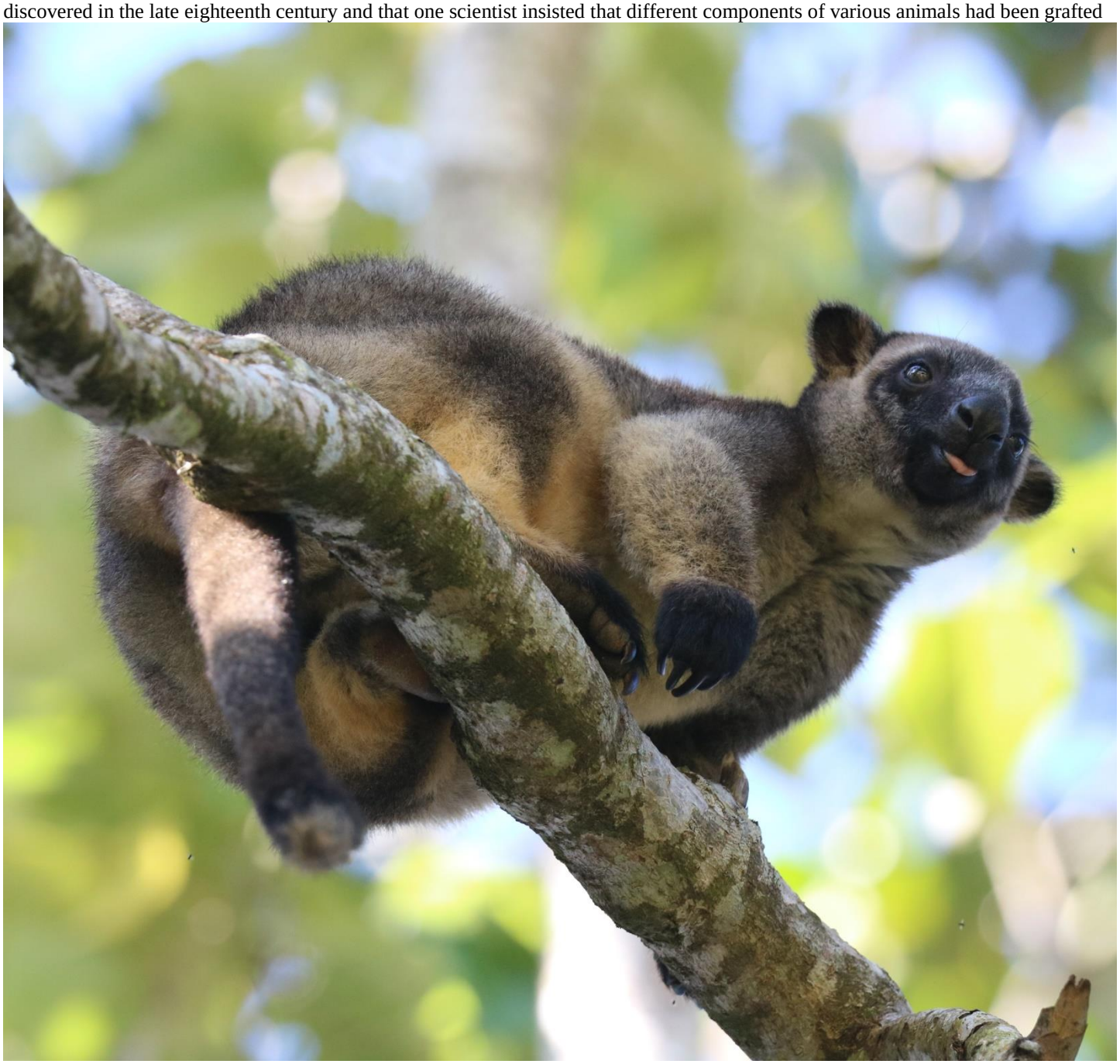
height, emus are also apparently slightly taller, cassowaries are hugely impressive creatures and although no one appears to be entirely certain of their lifespan in the wild, they have been known to live for more than sixty years in captivity. Their distinctive casque, which appropriately enough means helmet in French, is larger and more pronounced on females and might be used to attract a mate. That said, again no one really knows and it could equally denote age and dominance or even assist in the production of the low frequency sounds with which these striking birds communicate. Whatever explanation is correct, and they could easily all be wrong, it was enormously rewarding to spend time with these magnificent animals and our Kuranda detour also produced a close and protracted view of another celebrated bird, a male Victoria's riflebird, which was named after Queen Victoria and not the Australian state and is one of four birds of paradise native to Australia. I would probably advise people to spend longer here than our time allowed, as we also encountered a few musky rat kangaroos around the bird feeders and although we had already seen one briefly at Mount Lewis, this was a real bonus in many ways, as they were totally relaxed around the lodge and I was able to take some nice photographs of what is a highly unusual marsupial. In addition to being the smallest quadrupedal macropod, which means that they use four legs to move and not two, musky rat kangaroos are one of the few truly diurnal macropods and they usually give birth to twins. They make nests to sleep in at night and, uniquely for members of the kangaroo family, have prehensile tails, which they use to carry leaves and other nesting materials after they have been collected with their mouth and paws. I was really happy to see an animal that is considered to be the only surviving link between kangaroos and possums, from which kangaroos evolved, and from Kuranda we continued south to the small town of Mareeba and a slightly less conventional wildlife location, the local golf course. Despite the somewhat incongruous setting, this was actually a significant day for us both, as a population of eastern grey kangaroos have made their home on the golf course and we were guaranteed our first view of a 'true' kangaroo, that is to say, a large traditional kangaroo, as opposed to a smaller wallaby. Although you are permitted to walk around the course and photograph the resident roos for a nominal fee, I decided to hire a golf cart instead, as the supremely relaxed macropods are accustomed to these reasonably quiet vehicles and will allow you to approach to within a couple of metres. After decades of misery and suffering in some of the worst conditions imaginable, I had finally discovered the secret of mammal watching and as we loaded the buggy with a variety of cold drinks in the searing Queensland heat, the only dilemma we faced was who was going to drive first? I eventually did, but we took both the driving and photography in turns and enjoyed a wonderful few hours with the second largest species of kangaroo, regardless of the unusual backdrop. I was delighted to see so many 'joeys' hanging out of their mother's pouches at all kinds of improbable angles, as a kangaroo's reproductive system is as intricate as it is fascinating and I have always been struck by the fact that female kangaroos spend most of their life, from sexual maturity to death, constantly pregnant. For a start, like all marsupials, they have three vaginas and two uteri or uteruses, whichever version you prefer. The two side vaginas carry sperm to the two uteruses and the doe will give birth from the middle or median vagina. Through a process known as embryonic diapause, the mother has the ability to suspend pregnancy as necessary and generally a female kangaroo will have one older joey feeding at her side, another growing in her pouch

and a third gestating in one of her two uteruses. The babies are born more or less as a tiny embryo, both blind and without hair, and have to make their own way from the birth canal to the pouch via a path that the doe will lick to guide them, as even their organs are not fully developed at this stage and they have to reach one of four nipples by scent alone. When that joey starts leaving the pouch and eating other food types, it consequently suckles less, which indicates to the mother that she can allow another fertilised egg to begin developing. Up to 33 days later, depending on the species, the new young will appear and make the same life or death journey to the safety of the pouch, at which point you would probably assume that the older joey would have to stop feeding from its mother. Miraculously, this is not the case, as female kangaroos can produce two different types of milk simultaneously, one that is rich in fat for the older offspring and another that is full of carbohydrates for the newborn joey. We watched a number of patently oversized youngsters attempting to squeeze themselves back inside their mother's pouch and were also able to observe the ingenious process by which kangaroos control their body temperature in severe heat. In addition to the familiar evaporative mechanisms, such as panting and sweating, kangaroos lick saliva along their forearms and when the saliva evaporates, it cools an expansive network of blood vessels near the surface of the skin, which in turn cools the blood and lowers the body temperature. The sheer genius of nature never ceases to astound me and if I had not witnessed so many wonders first hand, I would scarcely believe some of the phenomena that I have learned about and often had the privilege to observe over the years. Kangaroos hopping about in trees and mammals that lay eggs were just two of the many marvels from this amazing trip and at Mareeba we discovered another, a bird building a great stage on which to serenade his love, or, if that is perhaps a little too fanciful, to at least attract a mate and pass on his genes. The bird in question was a great bowerbird and we found his carefully constructed stage or 'bower', in a clearing within some bushes right next to one of the greens. Like all bowers, this elaborate effort consisted of a skilfully crafted avenue of sticks and twigs with piles of colour coordinated 'jewels' decorating the open ground at each end. In addition to the clear glass scattered liberally all over the site, there were small heaps of white snail shells, purple bottle tops, yellow flowers and green broken glass. All were collected purely to impress the opposite sex and, when he was not improving his magnificent creation, our feathery lothario would perform ornate courtship displays among the shiny objects to hopefully dazzle any passing females. Sadly, although our visit coincided with the mating season and we spotted the male bowerbird waiting patiently, no females appeared and we were not afforded our own personal performance. No matter, as we were really just happy to see such a famed construction and another of my ambitions was fulfilled that day in any case, when I spotted my first ever wild laughing kookaburra, a bird that I had really hoped to see on this trip. The buggy aside, which I was already thinking of ways of incorporating into every trip, at times it was difficult to remember that we were on a golf course and the hot day drifted pleasantly with a variety of wildlife for company. Bush stone-curlews or bush thick-knees, which lie completely motionless when they feel threatened, tested that rather questionable defensive strategy whenever we rumbled by and black kites hovered over fields full of Australian ibises and hundreds of magpie geese, one of only two geese endemic to Australia. It had already been quite a day and although we had to reluctantly part with our beloved golf cart, we still had one more stop to make at nearby Granite Gorge, which is home to a population of Mareeba rock wallabies. I had been warned before I travelled that I would not enjoy this experience, as Granite Gorge is a fairly

popular local tourist destination with some decent short hikes among the imposing boulders and some nice swimming holes. Whilst it was true that this was not really the type of destination that I enjoy exploring, the wallabies do occur naturally here and did not appear to be in terrible condition. Visitors are sold specialist kangaroo pellets, which is at least better than letting them feed the wallabies their packed lunch, and in some ways it was nice to spend time with these gentle creatures at such close quarters. We did not feed of course, but it was still not an entirely authentic sighting and I was pleased that we saw these pretty wallabies again at Undara Volcanic National Park a few days later. There are actually nine distinct species of rock wallaby along the coast of Queensland, roughly from the Cape York Peninsula all the way down to the border of New South Wales and beyond in the case of the brush-tailed rock wallaby, and 'A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia' states that seven of the nine are *'virtually indistinguishable in the field'*. I have to admit that I can only concur, as we saw four of the seven, plus one of the other two, and I would have been forced to base my identification on range on at least two occasions, had I not been able to call upon expert local knowledge. Technically all three of our additional stops fell within the area known as the Atherton Tablelands, but we would be staying further south, right in the heart of one of the most diverse wildlife destinations in all of Australia. A lush plateau in tropical north Queensland, the Atherton Tableland, or

Tablelands according to most locals, protects some of the last remnants of a rainforest that once covered the entire fertile region and a host of exotic and in many cases rare animals. Finding a Tasmanian devil aside, this was the section of the trip that I had most been looking forward to and we had a full week to explore a variety of habitats that I knew to be productive, at least in terms of mammal sightings. I had less specific knowledge regarding other creatures and although I was aware of much of what occurred in this and other areas, I was less certain about what we should actually see. As it was, we encountered a staggering assortment of wildlife, the majority of which was entirely new to me, and I found myself constantly beaming as I scampered from one delight to another like a kid in a candy shop. When you include some of the microbats and rodents that do not feature on my final list at the bottom of this report, we discovered about 40 different mammals during this part of the trip alone and more birds, snakes, lizards, frogs and insects than we had sufficient time to fully appreciate. From owls, frogmouths, riflebirds and lorikeets to carpet pythons, water dragons, monitor lizards, snapping turtles and tree frogs, there was barely a moment, day or night, when we were not mesmerised by one outlandish animal or another. Having completed a massive amount of research on the area, including lengthy and detailed correspondence with several locals, I had selected two lodges that were likely to be the most productive in terms of sightings, as well as a guide with an outstanding reputation. Superbly situated in idyllic natural settings, both lodges more than lived up to my expectations and my choice of naturalist was inspired, as he turned out to be the kind of knowledgeable and interesting person that you would like to travel and spend time with. Finding skilled and professional guides is always a major objective of these research tours and whilst we unfortunately did not have long enough to fully benefit from his extensive local expertise on this particular trip, I will rectify that going forward and know already that his respect and enthusiasm for the dynamic wildlife that he grew up surrounded by, will be greatly appreciated by anyone lucky enough to enjoy his tremendous company. We were not due to meet him for a couple of days, by which time we had already encountered some of our main target species, including, in my mind at least, the almost mythical tree kangaroo. As a few species have recently been split, there are now thought to be fourteen types of tree kangaroo in the

world, although one of these, the wondiwoi tree kangaroo from the Papua Peninsula in Indonesia, may already be extinct. Mainly as a result of habitat loss and overhunting for food beyond Australian shores, none are doing particularly well and of the possible fourteen surviving varieties, twelve are classified as either vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. We were searching for lumholtz's tree kangaroo, which is endemic to the narrow coastal rainforest belt of northeast Queensland and is the smallest of all tree kangaroos. It is one of only two species, the other being bennett's tree kangaroo, which occurs slightly further north, currently evaluated as near threatened, which means that they are clearly not thriving, but are thankfully not struggling to the extent of so many other species. Despite the fact that they are not exactly abundant and I have wanted to see one for decades, we did not have to work too hard for our first encounter, as I had been given details of a fairly reliable site and within less than ten minutes of our arrival, we were watching a beautiful mother and her equally adorable offspring. I estimated that the young was probably approaching two, but it is difficult to say with any certainty and even today almost nothing is known about the mating habits or behaviour of wild tree kangaroos, as much of the data collected has been regarding captive animals. We spent almost two spellbinding hours watching the contented pair eating leaves and dozing in the shade of the morning sun and only left because a few more people arrived and I did not want too many of us to disturb their tranquil routine. I had waited a very long time to gaze upon an animal that I did not believe existed as a child and of course whenever I laughed at the absurdity of kangaroos in trees, well, the joke was very much on me, as all macropods used to be arboreal and actually evolved out of the trees to live on the ground. From one extraordinary creature we moved directly to another and on the very same day that I saw my first tree kangaroo I also saw my first platypus, another animal that has fascinated since childhood. I grew up knowing it as the duck-billed platypus and the first thing I was taught, was that it was a mammal that laid eggs. If that was not outrageous enough, I also learned that biologists did not believe that the platypus was a real species when it was first discovered in the late eighteenth century and that one scientist insisted that different components of various animals had been grafted



together *'by artificial means'*. This is not quite as outlandish as it sounds, in an age of astounding discoveries from all over the world and the development of new techniques in taxidermy, hoax species regularly appeared in both the United States and United Kingdom, from the fossil scandal that ruined the careers of three academics at the University of Würzburg in 1725 to the 'feejee mermaid' that the renowned showman and theatre impresario P.T.Barnum displayed to an astonished world in 1842. Barnum's mermaid was in fact part monkey and part fish that had been sewn together by fishermen in Japan, a common tradition at the time in parts of Asia, and at the same show Barnum exhibited a platypus as: 'the connecting link between the bird and the beast'. With the bill of a duck, the tail of a beaver and the large webbed feet of either a waterfowl or an aquatic mammal, the confusion was perhaps understandable and it took

almost a century to establish that this bizarre creature does in fact lay eggs. The platypus is just one of five extant mammal species that lay eggs as opposed to giving birth to live young, the other four are all types of echidna, and collectively they are known as monotremes. In addition to this major reproductive distinction, female monotremes do not possess teats and instead secrete milk through pores for their young to lap up and all platypus hunt using electrolocation, which basically means that they can detect the minute electrical currents that their prey generate when moving. Both sexes are born with a spur on each hind leg, but the female's

never develops and drops off at an early age, whilst the male spur produces a venom that increases appreciably in potency during the breeding season and is used on other males when competing for a mate. The venom has no lasting effects on defeated males, but is said to be so excruciating to humans that not even morphine can ease the pain. We had missed this fascinating animal at our previous destination, but I was aware of several more or less guaranteed sites both on the mainland and in Tasmania and most of them produced excellent sightings, some in extremely clear water. This first encounter was one of the best in a supremely picturesque location and exceptional light with just the two of us watching a number of platypus swimming on the surface in customary fashion and then diving for food. Having said that, even in good conditions photographs were tricky and I did not manage to take a single platypus shot that I was even remotely satisfied with during the entire tour. The same fortunately could not be said of possums, which often appear to be as simple, in the not too bright sense, as they are endearing. I noticed that common brushtail possums are especially absurd, possibly because they spend more time on the forest floor than their ringtail counterparts, and lost count of the number of times that I found them climbing over or even in our accommodation. They are particularly hilarious when disturbed out in the open, as their first instinct is to jump on anything even remotely resembling a tree, regardless of its height, size or suitability. This resulted in several huge fat lumps swaying precariously on flimsy fence posts and insubstantial shrubs and on more than one occasion virtually full grown possums attempted to flee on their mother's back, as the poor females half carried, half dragged their lumbering bulks across the grass to the safety of a tree. I have no idea how long we spent watching and recording their surreal antics, but they certainly provided many of the highpoints of the tour and it took a few days back in England to adjust to not having these ridiculous creatures scampering around me like demented 'Ewoks' or perhaps a few of Gru's 'Minions' if you are not a big Star Wars fan or just not as old as me. We were extremely fortunate in terms of possum encounters and had already seen two before we met our guide and began searching in earnest. The first was a striped possum, a conspicuous animal that bears a striking resemblance to the pale fork-marked lemur from Madagascar, and the second was a sugar glider, which is one of

eight species of glider, all of which have the same gliding membrane as flying squirrels and are basically gliding possums. Brushtails, ringtails and gliders all belong to the same mammalian suborder phalangeriformes, which incorporates the medium-sized arboreal marsupials occurring in Australia, Papua New Guinea and parts of Indonesia, including the cuscus, of which there are two varieties in Australia and twenty more further afield. Six of the eight glider species are found in Australia and we would ultimately see five on this tour, only missing the mahogany glider, which occurs in one relatively small coastal area that we drove through but did not visit at night when this animal would be active. We will make an effort to find that species on our return to Queensland and ultimately went home delighted to have observed twelve different possums, five of which were gliders. Seven were encountered on one amazing night, when our local naturalist proved just how well he knows his area, including individual trees for certain species, and James demonstrated how proficient he is with a spotlight by finding more or less everything that moved and quite a lot that did not. On a night of so many 'firsts', we had our first views of the common brushtail possums that would entertain us so royally at almost every subsequent destination and our first encounters with not one, but four ringtail possums, common, green, lemuroid and Herbert River. Of the two glider species observed, the yellow-bellied glider was new and our efforts also produced multiple sugar gliders, the only tree kangaroo we would observe at night and lots of pademelons, bandicoots and owls. However, as always it was more about how than how many and a number of our sightings were very special, not just in terms of how close we were able to approach these beguiling nocturnal creatures, but in terms of the time we were able to spend with them and the intimate natural behaviour this allowed us to enjoy. Watching gliders 'fly' from tree to tree was particularly rewarding and during the mainland section of the trip, we were fortunate enough to witness this impressive spectacle on numerous occasions. Given that we would have just one more evening with him during our week on the Tablelands, our guide very kindly provided us with a number of reliable or at least promising sites for several of the mammals we were hoping to see, one of which was a dingo. As anyone who knows me or has read my trip reports will appreciate, although I have taken great pleasure in searching for and finding the vast majority of the world's cat species, dogs are my real passion and I spend much of my time either looking for wild varieties or interacting with myriad incarnations of the basically

dopey domestic version. To many, the dingo is considered to fall somewhere between the two, as neither an entirely wild species or a fully domesticated dog. I was never happy with this classification as basically a feral version of the domestic animal, as feral and invasive species have devastated the continent's wildlife since Europeans first arrived and dingoes always appeared to play a far more constructive ecological role, in much the same as it is now acknowledged wolves do. Firstly, dingoes have roamed Australia for thousands of years, recent evidence suggests that they may have originated in southern China and arrived more than 18,000 years ago, so if they were responsible for any extinctions, and it is certainly not clear that they were, they are not going to be repeated in modern times. In addition, it is now widely recognised that dingoes actually help protect native animals by partially supressing the burgeoning

populations of invasive species, including rabbits and pigs, which do an enormous amount of damage to the environment. In areas where they are allowed to live and hunt with impunity, red fox and feral cat numbers are significantly reduced and it has now been established beyond any reasonable doubt that apex predators are essential to the ecological health of ecosystems all over the world. This is particularly the case in Australia, as the resident wildlife did not evolve with cats and consequently has no defence against them. With no major predators to limit their expansion, the thylacine has been extinct on the mainland for around 3,000 years and dingo populations have been in decline more or less since the first British settlers arrived towards the end of the eighteenth century, cat and fox numbers have spiralled beyond any form of effective control. As I intend to examine further in my Western Australia trip report next year, these two much maligned but blameless animals, it is difficult to object to a creature for simply attempting to survive, have been largely responsible for the extinction of almost 30 mammal species since their deliberate and calamitous introduction in the mid nineteenth century, which equates to 36% of all such extinctions throughout the entire world since the year 1500. At the same time and despite all evidence to the contrary, the dingo has been treated as just another feral pest and no distinction has ever been made between actual feral dogs, that is to say domestic dogs living in the wild, and the pure dingoes that lived in harmony with their environment for several thousand years until the British arrived. Catastrophically, for both the dingo and the land itself, in addition to the foxes and rabbits that were introduced for recreational hunting, the British also brought sheep with them and although the first few breeds were not able to adapt well to the harsh Australian conditions, merino sheep thrived following their arrival in 1797. Within a century wool was the country's number one export and today Australia still produces more merino wool than any other nation. Although in most areas sheep are not a substantial part of a diet that includes feral pigs and rabbits, as well as kangaroos, dingoes will of course predate on such easy quarry if the two come into contact and have consequently, and erroneously, been blamed for the evident decline in sheep populations over the last 25 years or so. Whilst sheep numbers have fallen from their zenith in the early 1990s, when there were over 180 million degrading the landscape, there are a range of social economic factors involved in this decline, including low international wool prices and younger generations no longer wanting to follow in their father's and forefather's rural footsteps. The fact is, there are still more than 74 million sheep being farmed in Australia today and the few thousand that dingoes kill each year would barely register as a percentage. Far more die during live exports and I have personally seen mortality figures of over 5% for both sea and air livestock exports, including cattle and goats, and in September 2013 4,000 sheep died of heat stress on one horrendous voyage to Qatar. Over the years the Australian government has instigated a shocking regime of routine cruelty and abject ineptitude in terms of wildlife management and conservation, which very much continues today as the mistakes of the past are repeated and thousands of dingoes are poisoned, shot and trapped as a pest species. They are persecuted on a national and regional level with the government of Victoria offering a bounty of $120 for the skin of a single animal and the council at Southern Downs in Queensland, where we would be visiting in a few days, pay $100 for the scalp of an adult dingo and $50 for every puppy the cattlemen and farmers are able to butcher. Instead of spending millions of dollars every year to eradicate what is clearly a keystone species, the government should be funding a compensation scheme for farmers and promoting better husbandry practices, as maremma guardian dogs are highly effective in terms of protecting flocks from dingoes, wild dogs and

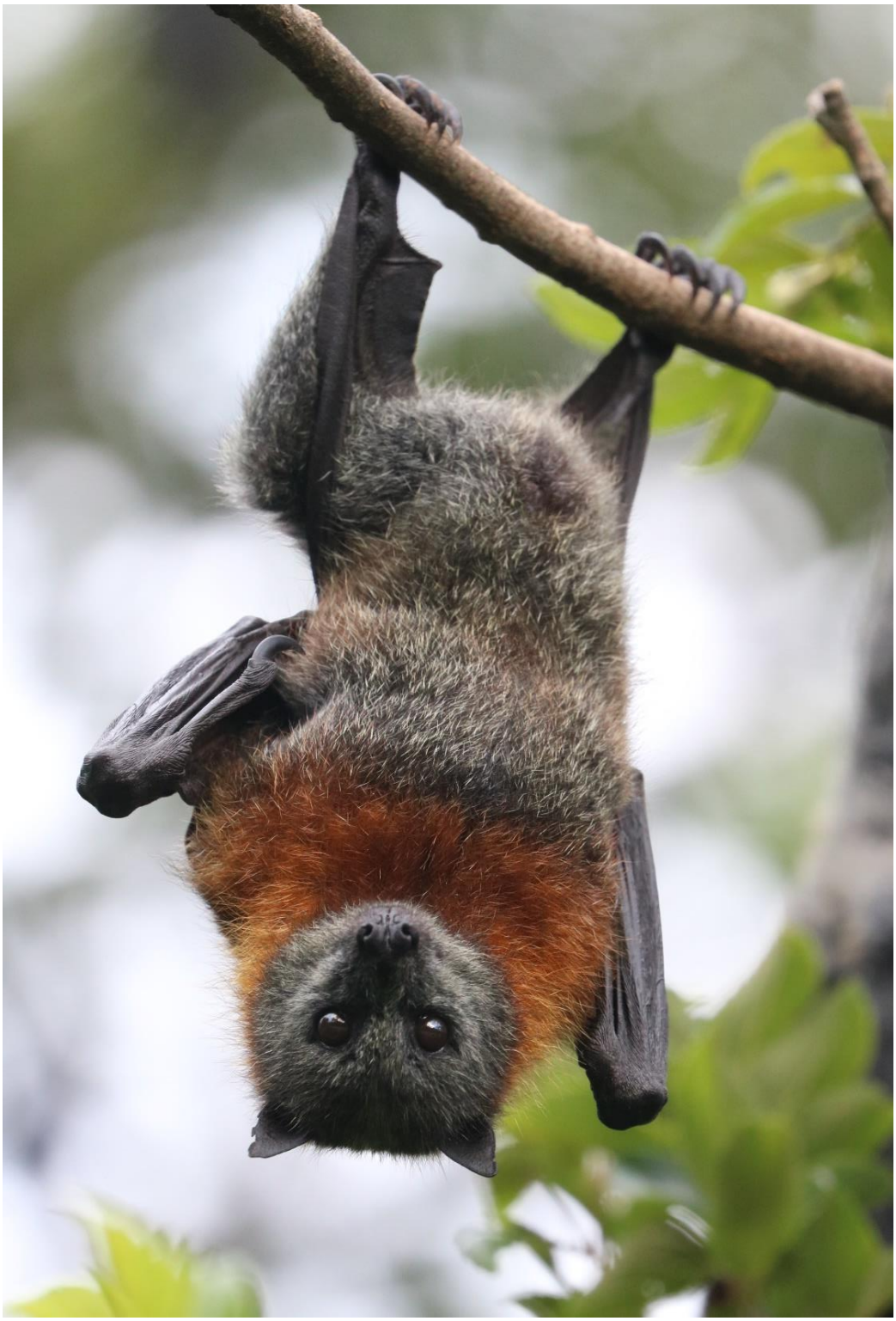
foxes. It may also make sense to begin maintaining the 'Dog Fence' that runs through 5,614 kilometres of Australian desert from near Nundroo in South Australia to just north of Dalby, which is just over 200 kilometres from Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland. Originally conceived and built to restrict the proliferation of rabbits, in reality the fence, which is the longest in the world, has created more problems than it has resolved, for although there are far fewer dingoes on the southern side of the fence, there are consequently more rabbits, emus and kangaroos, which the farmers also despise and blame for degrading their sheep's pasture. As Professor Chris Johnson from the University of Tasmania would no doubt testify, the massive expanse theoretically protected within the enclosure is suffering from the absence of an apex predator that would naturally regulate animal populations and help to preserve the ecological health of the region. For several years Professor Johnson and his dedicated team of fellow scientists, academics and ecologists have been studying the dingo and its almost entirely positive effect on the ecosystems in which it occurs. In 2013 their pioneering research and ground breaking findings were recognised when they were awarded the Australia Museum 'Eureka Prize for Environmental Research'. The award citation read: *'Professor Chris Johnson and his team's work is conservation with bite! It has shown how the dingo helps sustain biodiversity in Australian ecosystems. It points the way to improved environmental management in which the dingo could be used to aid the recovery of degraded lands and therefore help protect threatened species'*. Professor Johnson added *'Far from being vermin, Australia's dingoes sustain biodiversity and can help land managers control invasive species'* and two of his team members, the naturalist and author Adam O'Neill and the ecologist and Project Director Dr.Arian Wallach are cofounders of the 'Dingo for Biodiversity Project', an innovative initiative that encourages predator friendly farming and the protection of the dingo, as well as other species, both endemic and invasive. In addition to educating farmers, Wallach and O'Neill have helped to create three large reserves where these misunderstood and generally unloved canids are given the protection and space they need in order to fulfil their role as environmental guardians and I am very much hoping that I will get the opportunity to visit one or more of these important sanctuaries on a future trip. A year later in April 2014, the dingo received another unexpected boost when a group of Australian scientists published an article in the Journal of Zoology asserting that the dingo was a species in its own right and not a descendant of wolves or dogs. The study was based on the remains of over 70 skull and skin specimens that all predated any possible contact with domestic dogs introduced by European settlers. As the German naturalist Friederich Meyer had advocated in 1793, the scientific name would be Canis dingo, as opposed to either Canis lupus dingo or Canis familiaris dingo, and the article went on to confirm that a dingo's colour was not an indication of genetic purity or otherwise. In some quarters, although certainly not all, it had long been assumed that only the iconic yellow or sandy coloured dingo could be genetically pure, but this latest analysis determined that this was not the case and that purebred dingoes can be black, tan, white or indeed a mixture of colours. Although I was delighted that this belated but exciting discovery would ensure that the dingo could no longer be dismissed as just another domestic animal with absolutely no rights, I knew that the findings would prove to be controversial to some, as dingoes can conceive fertile young with domestic dogs and the rules of reproductive isolation either prevent different species from producing hybrid offspring or ensure that any hybrid offspring are sterile and cannot consequently continue hybridisation beyond that first generation. I am by no means an expert on this subject, but I am aware that the mechanisms of reproductive isolation are not entirely fool proof and I know several instances of distinct species conceiving fertile young, including grizzly and polar bears, which have successfully produced second generation hybrids. The situation apparently depends on how long ago the two species diverged and whether significant genetic differences have had time to develop. Polar and grizzly bears evolved from the same ancestor as recently as 150,000 years ago and are not therefore so genetically dissimilar that they cannot produce fertile young. Most bears, for example, share 37 pairs of chromosomes which will pair to form fertile offspring. However, to take a type of hybridization that I had recently

witnessed in Alaska, a red fox has 17 pairs of chromosomes and an Arctic fox 26 divergent pairs. Whilst they would be able to conceive and their offspring would successfully grow into adulthood, the chromosomes would be unpaired and that adult hybrid would be sterile. It is a very simple explanation regarding a highly complex subject, but my only real concern was that by being declared a distinct species, the dingo would be one step closer to some form of formal and practical protection. More sinned against than sinner, this was sadly unrealistic and dingoes are still being shot and poisoned with almost total impunity, even within national parks. Some backward landowners continue the barbaric practice of hanging their dead and mutilated carcasses from trees and fenceposts as trophies and it is going to take an almost unprecedented reversal in public opinion and government policy to return this elegant but persecuted animal to its rightful position as the most significant biodiversity regulator on the continent. Some dedicated people are trying to achieve this and on my tour to Western Australia in December 2017 I will be visiting several sanctuaries administered by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, a charitable organisation at the very forefront of wildlife conservation that takes both the practical and ethical view that dingoes deserve our protection. The AWC are the largest private owners of protected land in the country and their 26 reserves, which are scattered across an astoundingly diverse range of habitat, support and preserve 71% of all endemic mammals and 86% of terrestrial birds, as well as around half the reptiles and amphibians found in Australia. I have followed

their critical work for some time now and they are clearly doing more than anyone, including the government, to conserve Australia's fragile ecosystems and vulnerable wildlife, including a number of species that are either severely threatened or teetering on the brink of extinction. I am very much hoping to be able to support their wonderful efforts in a variety of ways and will provide additional details regarding some of their many ground breaking projects and an unparalleled network of sanctuaries, when I return from my next Australian tour. For now, having studied these remarkable canids for so long, I was desperate to see a dingo in the wild and we spent a great deal of time searching a patch of farmland within the extensive territory of a black dingo, which our guide had observed on numerous occasions and was thought to be pure and not a crossbreed. James actually spotted her first as I drove and although we were never able to get as close as I would have liked, primarily because we did not want to attract attention to her on a farm, we were able to watch this beautiful and alert creature for more than twenty minutes and to follow her in the car for several kilometres. It was a thrilling experience to encounter this iconic Australian animal after so many years and I was delighted to chance upon three traditional sandy coloured dingoes later in the trip, two at different locations around Atherton and one much further to the south at Lamington National Park, more or less on the border of New South Wales. The only very slight disappointment was the absence of a suitable photograph, as the three yellow varieties all disappeared before I could take a shot and I was only able to photograph our stunning little girl at distance. No matter, as at least I have those pictures as a memory of an unforgettable experience and I more was just happy that we had been able to observe such an influential animal and one of our major targets. This was also the case when we spotted our first carnivorous marsupial, a northern quoll, although this time I was able to take a few reasonable photographs. We saw two in fact on the same night whilst searching for northern bettong around Tinaroo Dam and I was particularly pleased that we had spotted this northern species, as we could potentially encounter three quolls during the course of the tour and this was the one I was

concerned we might miss. Arguably the rarest of all six quolls, four of which are found in Australia, the northern quoll has proved to be particularly susceptible to invasive species and the Tablelands was the only area where we had a reasonable chance of seeing it. Killed by both foxes and cats, although apparently eaten by neither, another introduced pest, the cane toad, has had a devastating effect on quoll populations, to such an extent that this once common carnivore is now classified as endangered. On a par perhaps with the unhinged short-sightedness of the Englishmen who introduced red foxes for a spot of jolly hunting back in the nineteenth century, the cane toad fiasco is yet another example of our apparently limitless stupidity causing ecological disaster and suffering on an almost inconceivable scale. The toad was introduced to Australia by the sugar industry primarily to control the native cane and frenchi beetles, which were damaging sugar cane crops and of course reducing profits. It was discovered, under laboratory conditions of course, that cane toads will eat both beetles and in 1935 around a 100 were released at various sites in northern Queensland. Until the arrival of the cane toad, there were no toads at all in Australia and it has to be said that these new settlers proved to be remarkably proficient colonists. The first females laid eggs within a week of release and the tadpoles emerged less than three days later. Within a few months there were already thousands of toads, half of which were females that can produce anywhere from 8,000 to 35,000 eggs at a time. 80 years later their numbers are thought to have increased to at least 200 million and they are currently expanding their range by approximately 60 kilometres a year, with the inevitable disastrous consequences for local wildlife, most of which cannot survive the lethal toxin that the toads secrete when threatened or consumed. Animals that actively attack and feed on such easy prey have suffered by far the greatest losses, as cane toads are highly visible and have no obvious defence to a wide range of predators, including quolls, monitor lizards, several types of snake and even freshwater crocodiles. In numerous areas biologists studying the effects of this entirely self-inflicted tragedy are witnessing mortality rates of up to 90% in certain species and there are reports of more than one local extinction in the case of the northern quoll. To make matters worse, the scientific experiments that the entire catastrophe was based on were not really that…well…scientific. They essentially involved dropping the two strains of beetle into tanks full of cane toads to see if the toads would eat them, which of course they did in the absence of anything else. However, beyond a contrived laboratory environment, these beetles were not the cane toads' food of choice and they stopped feeding on them as soon as they had access to their own Australian smorgasbord of more or less everything else, from birds and small mammals to other amphibians, reptiles and an extensive range of invertebrates. As Elizabeth Kolbert determines in her award winning book, invasive species are another mechanism of extinction and just about the only consolation regarding the entire debacle is that the cane toad has not been responsible for any actual extinctions. Indeed, after the initial extreme population crashes, many species are slowly recovering and there is evidence that whilst certain animals are learning to avoid this poisonous menace, others are evolving at a vastly accelerated rate in order to continue to predate upon it. Some native snakes are said to have developed smaller heads and mouths in relation to their bodies, so that they can only digest little toads that are accordingly far less toxic, and although many birds are unaffected by the cane toad's venom, others have evolved to completely avoid the toxic parotoid glands on their shoulders and to eat only the less harmful body parts. These rapid and almost miraculous biological and behavioural adaptions have not occurred across all species and a number of dedicated individuals and organisations, including the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, are doing their best to save an animal that evolution appears to have left slightly behind...the beleaguered northern quoll. In a process known as conditioned taste aversion, quolls are fed small 'teacher toads' or sausages made out of toad meat and laced with a chemical that causes nausea, in the hope that these diminutive carnivores will begin to associate the taste and smell of cane toads with sickness and refuse to eat them. The initial results are encouraging and several 'toad smart' quolls have been released in depleted areas and at locations cane toads have not yet reached, to hopefully ensure that entire populations are not wiped out again. Against this backdrop, you can see why we were so pleased and relieved to encounter this fabulous little animal and on the same night we were equally overjoyed to find our first northern bettong, a tiny and endangered member of the kangaroo family that now only occurs in three isolated areas. Another defenceless marsupial, as so many of Australia's mammals are, the northern bettong has also suffered as a result of invasive species, as they are killed by feral cats and domestic dogs and wild pigs are thought to compete with them for truffles, which form almost 50% of their diet. Strictly nocturnal, we would see four individual bettongs that night and one the next at an entirely different location. I am pleased to say that a second type of bettong, the rufous bettong, is faring much better and is relatively common within its extensive range down the east coast from beyond Cairns in the north to almost Sydney in the south. We first encountered this species on the Tablelands, where we also enjoyed our second cassowary sighting, a male and two chicks, and were to come across it on several occasions as we journeyed

slowly towards Brisbane. The Atherton Tableland turned out to be as amazing and productive as I had hoped and although I have not provided a great deal of detail regarding each individual destination in this spectacular region, I do need to mention the Tolga Bat Hospital and the outstanding conservation efforts that are being made there. Owned and run by the tireless Jenny Maclean and a host of regular and seasonal volunteers, the bat hospital rescues and rehabilitates hundreds of injured or sick bats every year and maintains a sanctuary for those bats that cannot be returned to the wild. A first class facility with an excellent visitor centre and various flight and release cages, the hospital is open to the public and whether you travel with me or not, please make a point of calling ahead to arrange what I consider to be one of the best educational wildlife tours that I have experienced. In addition to being immensely rewarding and highly informative, all visits and donations will support the essential work undertaken here, without which many more bats would perish and thousands are already dying every year. The main cause is tick paralysis, which is a relatively new phenomena in terms of the flying foxes that first began succumbing to the neurotoxins released by the Australian paralysis tick in the mid 1980s. Having evolved alongside the ticks, most Australian animals have some tolerance to their toxin, however, this does not appear to be the case with the flying fox, which would not normally come into contact with this type of ground dwelling parasite. Whether the bats' feeding habits have changed significantly and they are foraging far lower than was realised or these traditionally terrestrial ticks are somehow climbing higher, no one is really sure, but it is known that the ticks main 'questing' period, when the females are actively searching for host animals to feed upon and the males are in turn searching for the females, coincides with the bats' breeding season. Tragically, this results in a great number of orphans and these fragile pups require almost constant attention if they are to survive to adulthood. In the early stages they need to be fed every few hours and as you are shown around the centre, you cannot fail to notice dozens of incredibly cute miniature flying foxes wrapped in surrogate socks or towels, depending on their age. Millions of kilometres of barbed wire fencing is another huge problem, as flying foxes, unlike the smaller microbats, do not possess echolocation and many end up getting caught and dying on barbed wire, particularly in poor weather and high winds. All types of bat are cared for at the hospital and staff spend much of their time educating farmers and other landowners regarding wildlife friendly fencing and fruit netting, as well as local communities concerning bat conservation and habitat protection. Any visit to the Atherton Tableland should automatically include a stop here and I am extremely grateful to Jenny and her wonderful team, not only for taking the time to share such obvious passion with us, but for the extraordinary work they do on behalf of this keystone species. As we now understand, bats play a hugely significant ecological role all over the world in terms of pollination, seed dispersal and pest control, which is believed to reduce crop damage in the United States alone each year by almost $4 billion. The photograph above of a grey-headed flying fox was not taken at the bat hospital, as I did not want to disturb the already hectic staff with requests for pictures, and over the course of the trip we would encounter four flying fox species at a number of contrasting roosts, some of which were fairly small in sparse, fragmented forest, while a couple were massive and clearly supported several thousand bats. Although they do not appear on my final mammal list, largely because they are almost impossible to identify on the wing without a bat detector, we also observed at least a dozen microbats, including four at our next destination, Undara Volcanic National Park. Taken as a daytrip from the Tablelands, which meant that we



did not have as long there as I would have liked in the evening, Undara was one of the surprises of the trip, both in terms of the amazing lava tubes and caves that the area is famed for and the abundant wildlife we encountered at a national park I had not initially planned to visit. The lava tubes were formed almost 190,000 years ago when the Undara volcano erupted and spewed a staggering 23 cubic kilometres of lava not straight up into the stratosphere as you might expect from a traditional volcano, but gushing along the ground some 90 kilometres to the north and 164 kilometres northwest. As the outer crust cooled to form a solid roof, the river of lava beneath continued to flow, creating some of the longest lava tunnels on earth. Where the roof remains intact, long stretches of hollow tube survive and where it has collapsed, fertile depressions snake through the landscape like dark green islands among a contrasting sea of grass. Dozens of outlandish caves have also been formed where the roof has given way, some of which have potentially fatal levels of carbon dioxide, and although the areas we were permitted to visit were undeniably impressive, I was slightly disappointed that our access was so restricted and that we could only explore very small sections of this geological marvel. Even those were spoiled to some degree by the various steps, boardwalks and signs and it would be an amazing experience to hike some of the deserted tunnels and caves undisturbed. That said, an impromptu swim in the inviting pool on another scorching day was most welcome and any disappointment was more than made up for by the profuse and surprisingly diverse wildlife. Apparently eleven members of the kangaroo family have been recorded at Undara, although distribution records indicate that a couple barely reach and are probably not permanent residents, and we encountered eight in total, including three new species for the trip, the whiptail wallaby, the common wallaroo or euro and the antilopine wallaroo. I was aware that we were unlikely to view an antilopine wallaby beyond Undara and was therefore pleased to get a couple of reasonable reference shots, but the opposite was the case regarding the wallaroo, which I was just as certain we would see again and was not at all concerned when I failed to take even an adequate photograph. I should have been of course, as we were not to see another common wallaroo during the entire trip, which was as surprising as it was unfortunate when you consider how widespread these macropods are. With hindsight our wallaroo encounter alone more than vindicated our belated decision to visit Undara and the impressive number of distinct macropods was almost overshadowed by the prolific birdlife, as glorious lorikeets and parrots dazzled among the similarly glamorous miners, flycatchers, fairy-wrens, pale-headed rosellas, sulphur-

crested cockatoos and laughing kookaburras. You could easily spend much longer than our scant single day savouring the splendid wildlife here and I was well aware of that before we had even experienced the dramatic spectacle that Undara is famous for, tens of thousands of bats spilling out of one of the main caves into the evening sky. The bats themselves are a sight to behold, but they are just part of a remarkable natural phenomenon that involves a deadly game of cat and mouse with some highly resourceful pythons and brown tree snakes, a game that is replayed on a nightly basis ad infinitum. In order to reach the safety of the open air, the bats must first pass a merciless sentinel of snakes hanging from the branches of conveniently positioned trees and although you initially think that it will be impossible for a snake to catch a bat on the wing, suddenly the serpent coils and plucks and one unlucky bat is lost as thousands fly past to begin their own quest for food. Tomorrow night the same lethal play will be performed with almost the same players, as the timeless circle of life continues on its inexorable path. It was an exceedingly fitting way to end what had been a wildly successful section of the trip and after spotlighting most of the way back to the Tablelands, we said our sad farewells to the resident brushtail possums at our lodge and prepared to move on to Magnetic Island, where hopefully we had an appointment with another

Australian legend, the koala. Considering their iconic status across much of the globe, I was surprised to discover just how difficult koalas are to see in the wild, as there are lots of captive collections where you can even have your photograph taken holding these utterly sweet animals, but relatively few wild populations receiving the protection needed to ensure their long-term survival. As is the case with so much of the wildlife in Australia, koalas are afforded precious little state protection despite their universal appeal and although the current population estimates vary enormously from anywhere between around 40,000 and 300,000 animals, the undeniable fact is that koala numbers have declined severely in recent years and there are almost certainly far fewer than most people believe or indeed government officials are willing to admit. Existing on a diet consisting almost exclusively of eucalyptus leaves, koalas are particularly susceptible to habitat loss and around 80% of all koala forests have been cleared since the arrival of the British settlers in 1788, at which time there were thought to be ten million of these arboreal and entirely harmless animals. Millions of these were killed for their fur and after they had been all but wiped out in New South Wales and Victoria, the fur trade moved north to Queensland and more than a million koalas were butchered in a six-month killing spree in 1919. A few years later and they had been completely eradicated from South Australia and in 1927 the Queensland government declared another open season and an additional 800,000 defenceless animals were shot, poisoned or strangled with nooses in a single month. Largely as a result of the public outrage at the continued slaughter of such a loveable and vulnerable animal, the koala was declared a Protected Species in 1937, coincidentally the year after the last Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine as it is now commonly known, had died in awful conditions at Hobart Zoo.

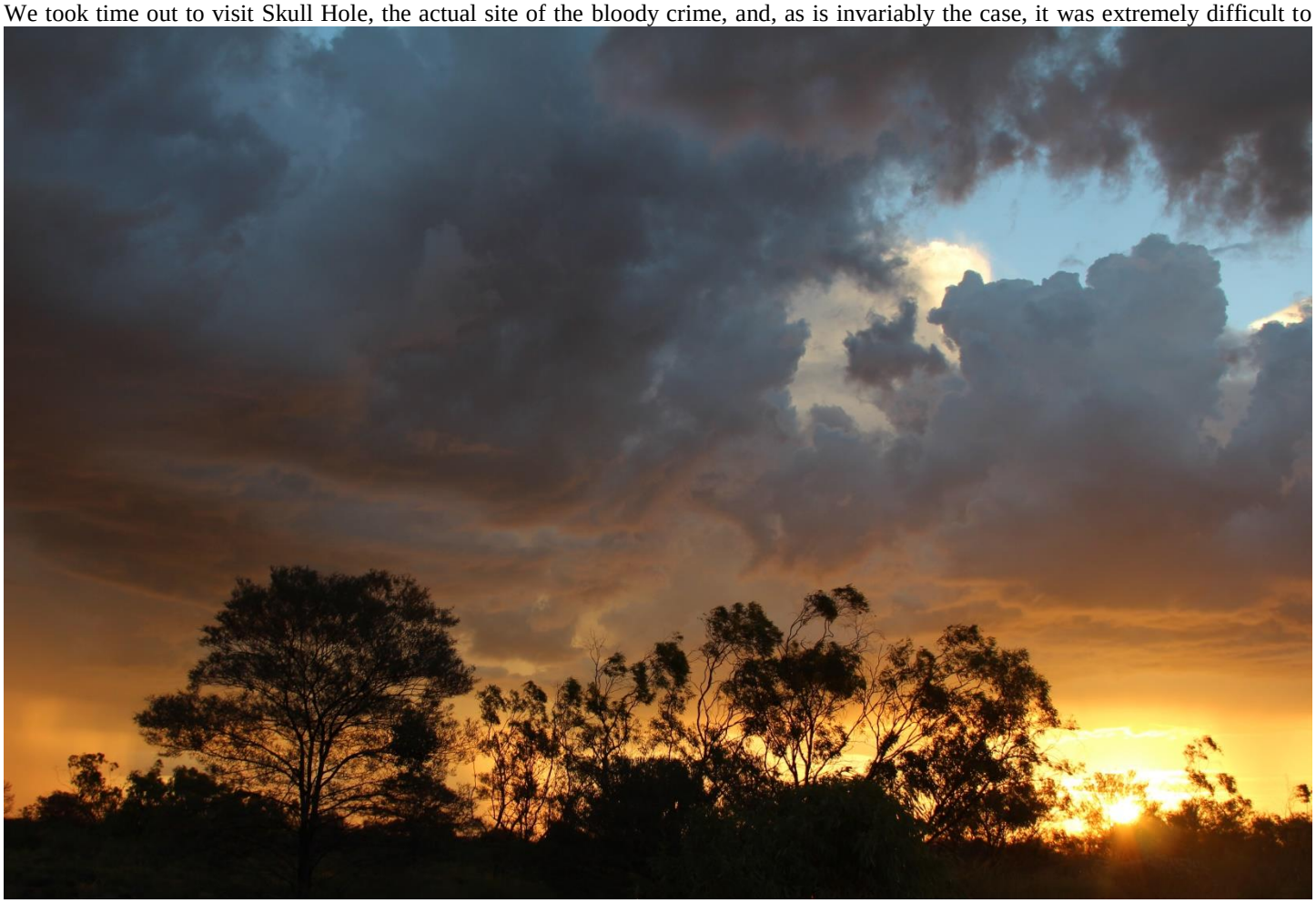
Sadly, the same Australian public had not considered the thylacine quite as loveable and had actively participated in the remorseless persecution and ultimate extinction of the largest carnivorous marsupial to grace the continent for thousands of years. It was not the first species that Australians had either relentlessly pursued towards extinction or stood by and watched passively disappear and it certainly would not be the last. Whilst the koalas may have received some form of belated protection, the eucalyptus or gum trees essential to their survival did not and vast tracts have been destroyed to make way for farms, industry and housing developments. By vast tracts I am talking about approaching 300 million acres and very little of the existing 20% of koala habitat is on protected land. So precious are these old growth forests, both in terms of the koalas themselves and the carbon value of such ancient trees in the battle against climate change, that a staggering 22 trillion new trees would need to be planted just to remain carbon neutral if these remaining forests were felled. To make matters worse, thousands of koalas are killed by dogs and vehicles each year, as these gentle and largely sedentary creatures have no way of resisting attack when on the ground and many Australians do not appear to understand the concept of stopping or even slowing down for their wildlife. The population on Magnetic Island was introduced in the 1930s when it finally dawned on people that these animals were being slaughtered at an unsustainable rate and several other islands are also home to the descendants of translocated koalas. These so called safety populations, where numbers can increase reasonably rapidly in an often confined environment, have been allowed to mask the serious and continual decline of the species on the mainland and have also led to reduced genetic diversity and consequently less robust animals. Like most species, koalas need to disperse in order to breed and maintain a healthy gene pool, which is impossible to do at most restricted island locations. We would see five individual animals around the fort complex on Magnetic Island and only two more on the mainland throughout that entire section of the tour, one at Noosa National Park to the north of Brisbane and the other near Lamington National Park on the border of New South Wales. Whilst I was understandably thrilled to have observed another of the magical creatures that Australia is famed for and which I had waited for hopefully not much more than half a lifetime to see, I have to admit that our island encounter lacked some of the intensity of other wild sightings and I was grateful for the two additional views later in the trip. Given that eucalyptus leaves provide so little energy, as well as being poisonous to most animals, koalas have a very slow metabolic rate in order to maximise the energy extracted from their fibrous toxic diet and will spend anywhere between eighteen and twenty-two hours a day sleeping. When you add the fact that they are considered to be largely nocturnal and that most of their foraging consequently occurs at night, most tourists, both domestic and international, spend just a few minutes watching them napping before moving on to the next activity or distraction. I saw several hundred react in this way and although we lingered with different koalas for much of the day, the only one that stirred appreciably had

a massive tick that had closed its left eye. The poor creature did not appear to be overly inconvenienced by its unwelcome guest, but the engorged parasitic horror did ruin my photographs and eventually I had to accept a disappointingly conventional slumbering shot that I could have taken within the first two minutes of our arrival. We still had a most enjoyable and productive short stay on another sumptuous South Pacific island, over half of which has been designated as a national park. Common brushtail possums were exactly that at night and new mammals included a tremendously relaxed group of allied rock wallabies, that were evidently well used to having their photographs taken, as well as a few black flying foxes, which we would observe in far greater numbers the very next day as we visited a couple of parks in Townsville before continuing south to Eungella. Although I simply do not have time to list every animal spotted on each of our generally long drives, or indeed to describe our many impromptu stops to explore areas that looked either promising or interesting, one of the real joys of this trip was that there was always something engaging vying for our attention. Our journey to Eungella was no exception and stops in Townsville at The Palmetum on the Ross River and at the Dan Gleeson Memorial Gardens produced thousands of little red flying foxes and black flying foxes, as well as agile wallabies, which were also regularly observed on the actual drive, along with eastern grey kangaroos and, to my complete delight, our first ever emus. As the second tallest bird in the world behind the ostrich, emus are fantastically imposing creatures and were yet another of the familiar Australian animals that I was desperate to encounter, particularly as they are the only surviving emus after the King Island and

Kangaroo Island species, as well as the subspecies on Tasmania, were all wiped out by the early settlers. Ironically, considering the severe persecution they have endured, an emu appears on the Australian coat of arms, although, having said that, so does the kangaroo and the government still sanctions the barbaric slaughter of millions of kangaroos and wallabies every year in what is the single largest massacre of terrestrial animals on the planet. I intend to focus on this outrage and other equally deplorable atrocities in my next trip report, but for now, I can confirm that the horrifying official statistics do not include the hundreds of thousands of baby kangaroos that are either left to die in their mother's pouches or bludgeoned to death by the hunters who have already shot their helpless and terrified parents. Thousands of wounded and maimed animals die in agony away from the smoke of the guns and again the official death tolls do not include the innumerable kangaroos that are killed illegally, none of which are ever investigated or even publically acknowledged. Regrettably there appears to be no collective will to stop what can only be viewed as a national disgrace and many

Australians display a general apathy and callousness towards wildlife that I find difficult to understand or accept given the absolute paradise they have been so blessed with. The standard of education is far higher here than in many of the countries where the people have far more respect for their environment and yet the levels of ignorance that I have become aware of over the years, and indeed encountered on a first-hand basis on this tour, are as concerning as they are staggering. Relatively few Australians appear to have learned the harsh lessons of their British ancestors and seem determined to destroy their own unique and breathtaking island in pretty much the same way that my fellow countrymen, particularly those of the ruling class, devastated Britain centuries ago. Although these acutely distressing issues can be difficult to reconcile with the genuinely life enhancing and idyllic experiences I have grown to cherish over the years, I decided a long time ago that there is no point ignoring them and simply pretending that everything is fine and that I would instead try to highlight some of the environmental and animal welfare issues that ultimately concern us all. In this way people can make up their own informed minds regarding where they visit and which conservation initiatives they choose to support, if any. Despite the serious and in some cases critical concerns that I have raised, there was very little on this tour that I would not repeat or recommend to guests and that would include our brief stay at Eungella National Park, which is one the best destinations across their entire range to view a platypus. We would have two nights at Eungella, which protects an isolated patch of rainforest and the highest density of platypuses that we would come across. I believe that we encountered seven different animals in the picturesque streams and rock pools within an easy walk of our accommodation and we would have almost certainly seen more if the weather had not intervened, as it rained heavily during our entire visit, but not again until we reached Tasmania and then only sporadically. The adverse climatic conditions did not stop us searching of course and we found a small group of unadorned rock wallabies at Eungella Dam, which is a well known site for them. We could not get as close as I would have liked for photographs, as the gate accessing the road across the dam was locked and whilst we were waiting patiently to see if one of the wallabies may approach, a suicidal parrot flew straight into the fence and knocked itself out. It was actually lying on its back completely immobilised with its feet in the air in some form of grotesque Monty Python parody and before you could say *'this parrot is no more, it has ceased to be'*, James had climbed the fence and passed this poor caricature of a *'Norwegian Blue'* through to me, at which point it instantly revived and began stripping the flesh from my fingers. James said that he knew that the lethal bird must have recovered as he scrambled back, from my initial exclamation and the string of colourful language that followed as I did my best to staunch the bleeding from the two gaping wounds that our *'ex-parrot'* had repaid our kindness with. James had a nice long time to laugh about this the next day, as our sodden

and somewhat blighted stop at Eungella had been a detour really and I now had almost a 1,000 kilometre drive inland to Winton, gateway to Bladensburg National Park. The drive was accomplished in a single rather onerous day and within a few minutes of our arrival we were back in the car and game driving in the national park, which was the scene of the late 19th century massacre of around 200 Aborigines back in what euphemistically became known as the 'pioneering age'. Such atrocities were commonplace in those violent early years of colonisation and the often brutal suppression of the indigenous population continued well into the 20th century. We took time out to visit Skull Hole, the actual site of the bloody crime, and, as is invariably the case, it was extremely difficult to



reconcile the fact that such an horrific act took place in such a tranquil and ravishing setting. The park now is a scintillating desertscape of immense blue skies, golden grasslands, dramatic rocky plateaus and inviting creeks and is also home to the red kangaroo, the largest native land mammal in Australia and the main reason for our visit. Our base Winton is famous as the birthplace in November 1920 of Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services Limited or Qantas for short and is also where 'Waltzing Matilda' was written by the author and poet Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson in 1895. Although many foreigners believe that this legendary ballad is a straightforward romantic tale, a Matilda is actually the bundle that an itinerant worker or swagman carried their belongings in and the song chronicles the death of one such traveller, who commits suicide after being caught stealing a stray sheep. Despite this surprisingly common misunderstanding, there is romance of a different kind here, as the ballad is almost certainly based on the sheep shearer labour disputes of the early 1890s and the suicide or possible murder of one of the workers involved in the dispute, who was pursued to his death by the landowner and three policemen that the song refers to. Landowners in those days were known as squatters and they often had no more legal right to the land that they grazed their animals on than this doomed swagman had to the paltry sheep that he pilfered. Paterson obviously intended to highlight the poor conditions that the sheep shearers and labourers were forced to accept by the wealthy farmers and the unmistakable anti-establishment sentiment of 'Waltzing Matilda' has been taken

to heart by generations of Australians, who clearly empathise with the downtrodden swagman and the injustice that he finds himself confronted by in the form of these corrupt authoritarian figures. More than 70 years after Paterson had completed his memorable work, the Scottish folk songwriter Eric Bogle, who emigrated to Australia in 1969, used part of the chorus for his own moving social masterpiece 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda', which was written as a scathing commentary on the Vietnam War. Bogle set his poignant and intentionally disturbing ballad in Gallipoli during the First World War, where more than one hundred thousand Allied and Turkish forces were killed in a mind-numbingly savage campaign. A quarter of a million more are believed to have been

wounded and this figure does not even include the tens of thousands struck down with typhoid and dysentery due to the unsanitary and basically unspeakable conditions that these young men had to endure for months at a time, at least in terms of those who survived that long. Although I have resisted the temptation to include the lyrics of both influential works in this format, simply to save space, I would encourage anyone who does not know these songs to take a few minutes to research them and to watch one or two performances of each. There are numerous traditional versions of 'Waltzing Matilda' and whilst I very much like Eric Bogle's rendition of his own haunting melody, my favourite version is performed by the Irish band The Pogues and appears on their eclectic and successful 1985 album 'Rum Sodomy and the Lash', which was a quote attributed to Winston Churchill when describing the culture and discipline of the British navy. I have to admit that I had not made the best part of a two-thousand kilometre round trip in order to visit the Waltzing Matilda Centre in town, but we did take time to drive out to the Dinosaur Stampede National Monument, which until recently was thought to be the only fossilised record of a dinosaur stampede. Recent evidence disputes this and it looks as if this was now a busy river crossing as opposed to a predator prey event, but regardless of the exact details, the thousands of fossilised footprints remain an intriguing window to the past and are highly recommended if you are in the area. The rest of our stay, at least during daylight hours, was more or less entirely devoted to searching for and photographing red kangaroos, not so much because they were all we were interested in, but more due to the fact that there was very little else to see, certainly in the way of

mammals. Neither of us were complaining of course, as we had driven a long way specifically to see these barrel chested monsters and they were every bit as formidable as I had imagined. Although it must make them far more vulnerable, I loved the fact that most of the really colossal males barely even acknowledged our presence and it was a rare privilege to observe these imposing and globally recognised creatures in a genuine outback setting, as I had been reliably informed that Bladensburg was indeed part of the outback. I make this point because there appears to be a fair amount of confusion and disagreement regarding where the outback actually begins in each state and a familiar joke has it that the very next town is part of the outback, regardless of who or where you ask. I will see far more of Australia's magnificent sprawling interior on my next trip and am ultimately planning to spend a few weeks in what to me is an absolutely ideal environment, particularly in the Northern Territory and the heart of the nation's arid 'Red Centre', which will sadly have to wait until I can schedule an extended third tour. The striking red kangaroos aside, emus and Australian bustards were the most commonly encountered animals during the day, as well as a superb collection of reptiles, including some marvellous yellow-spotted monitors and a number of different dragons. As is usually the case, snakes were more regularly observed at night and a succession of spotted nightjars did their best to confuse our efforts to find the small mammals that we were now searching for largely on foot. A herd of feral pigs did much the same for a moment or two, but we were not to be denied and a series of lengthy nocturnal walks eventually unearthed not one, but two carnivorous marsupials, the kultarr and the stripe-faced dunnart. When you consider that we would detect just nine carnivores throughout the entire tour, to find two at one destination was a significant achievement and not inconsiderable reward for our dedicated and patient efforts. Obviously only the dingo is a true carnivore and all of the other marsupial meat eaters belong to the family dasyuridae, including the Tasmanian devil and the four Australian quolls, three of which could be encountered on this trip. The dunnarts actually proved reasonably easy to locate after we had spotted our first, we had probably already missed a few that had been too quick to identify, but the kultarrs were as tricky as they were unexpected and we were never able to find them again after

inadvertently disturbing several in one tiny area. They scattered in all directions and fortunately, although they all went to ground in one way or another, one unusually cooperative animal decided that the best form of defence would be to stand completely still in totally open ground and allow me to take its photograph. If only all wildlife was as considerate, we could save each other a great deal of time and effort and in all my two miniscule marsupial shots probably took the best part of 24 hours to achieve. It is tempting to write that it took almost as long to make the 850 kilometre journey southeast to Carnarvon National Park, but in truth it just felt like it having again chosen to complete the drive in a single day. I prefer this option in order to spend more time at each carefully selected

location and it was certainly a good call here, as I would have been really disappointed to lose a night at what turned out to be an amazing wildlife destination and perhaps the surprise of the trip. Whilst I had obviously researched the area thoroughly and knew that it had the potential to be special, previous guests had all seen a few different animals without fully managing a great collection and we would be further disadvantaged by the fact that we were not visiting during the main tourist season for the region. Consequently, there were no guides available and we would be looking for some fairly elusive species without a great deal of local knowledge or up-to-

date information, both of which are generally invaluable. Thankfully that was not the case on this occasion, as we enjoyed some remarkable good fortune and although my tours are always about far more than the number of animals observed, excluding a couple of rodents and microbats that I did not identify, we encountered fifteen different mammals at Carnarvon, six of which were new for the trip. These included an astonishing five distinct glider species, four of them in a single glorious evening, as well as a thoroughly

unique creature that we had been desperately hoping to see since landing in Australia. A sprawling national park of around 736,000 acres, which makes it slightly smaller than Yosemite National Park in the United States, Carnarvon incorporates seven adjoining sections and we would largely concentrate our efforts at Carnarvon Gorge, one of two southerly gorge areas of the reserve, the other being Moolayember Gorge, which can only be accessed via a week-long hike. Carved by the remorseless advance of water and time, as so many of the outstanding natural features of Australia are, Carnarvon Gorge is a culturally and spiritually significant location to the indigenous Aboriginal people, who wandered this ancient landscape for millennia before the arrival of the white man. Their haunting presence can be experienced at various evocative sites throughout the gorge, several of which feature some mesmerising examples of Aboriginal painting, engraving and stencilling. All are reached via one main hiking route through the gorge, which leads to a series of side trails and hidden treasures, eternally shrouded by their towering sandstone sentinels. Crystal clear creeks and rock pools mingle with the mysterious caves and sculptured rock formations that would have sheltered the early people and all the while their vibrant rock art provides a trace of their existence, a communal negative resonating through time. This is a magical place and if some of the site names perhaps appear a little grand, Amphitheatre, Art Gallery and Cathedral Cave for example, they do not even begin to convey the majesty and humanity on display here. Our accommodation was its own miniature paradise tucked away within easy walking distance of the park entrance and having thrown our bags into our room, we were soon out watching sulphur-crested cockatoos, pale-headed rosellas and blue-winged kookaburras in the late afternoon sunshine. Eastern grey kangaroos and whiptail wallabies relaxed in the extensive grounds and as a massive colony of little red flying foxes prepared to take to the wing, James and I sat silently by a pool as a platypus dived among the lengthening shadows and a keelback snake shimmered across the rippling surface. After an exhausting drive it was a moment to treasure with my son in an enchanting setting and the night would continue in much the same atmosphere, as we looked to add to the two glider species observed at Atherton. Five of Australia's six gliders occur at Carnarvon, the one exception being the mahogany glider, which can only be found in a relatively small area of coastal forest between Townsville and Cairns. For the record, the five species are the sugar glider, the yellow-bellied glider, both of which had already been encountered on the Tablelands, the squirrel glider, the greater glider and the feathertail glider. As the smallest gliding mammal on earth, the latter was always likely to be the most challenging, but the owner of our accommodation very kindly provided us with a few encouraging tips and I was fairly confident regarding the other four, certainly over the course of our three-night stay. Having said that, I know several tour leaders and guides who have only been fortunate with two or three species here and I was consequently both surprised and delighted to encounter three within no more than an hour of our first nocturnal walk and a fourth several hours later when we were finally getting tired and decided to give the approach road a cursory scan in the car. This was a familiar theme for the tour, as almost everything we tried more or less instantly worked in our favour and on multiple occasions we discovered animals that we were not expecting to see or even searching for. I have experienced the opposite providence of course, when absolutely nothing goes right and every decision is a bad one, but in Australia the gods were very much on our side throughout and at Carnarvon the stars had aligned and greater and yellow-bellied gliders were routinely observed before we had even accessed the park. They were joined within the reserve by the considerably smaller sugar glider and later

from our vehicle by a squirrel glider, our fourth and final gliding possum of a spectacular night that had also featured a number of rufous bettongs around our accommodation, as well as the ubiquitous and highly entertaining common brushtail possum. As expected our remaining target would be the diminutive and elusive feathertail glider and although I was aware that this animal may well evade us, I had earlier been convinced that I had discovered something far scarcer when I spotted a rodent at the edge of a creek that looked very much like a water mouse. The water mouse, or false water rat as it is also known, is one of Australia's rarest rodents and only occurs in a few isolated stretches of coast in Queensland and the Northern Territory. As such, Carnarvon would have been well beyond its accepted range, but I was already roughly aware of its appearance, as I had spent time searching for it elsewhere, and this animal was strikingly similar. The key of course would have been to get at least a record shot and I did initially think that this might be possible, as I had spotted what was a reasonably substantial rat grooming on a boulder within the creek and it was certainly not aware of our presence at that stage. The problem was that James was spotlighting in a different direction and had not seen it and as I slowly turned to indicate that he needed to keep perfectly still, he stepped forward and the startled rodent immediately dived beneath

the water and disappeared. We did of course return to the same spot on several occasions, but this time our perseverance was not rewarded and the various experts I have since consulted have all convinced me that it must have been a different species, as there is simply no evidence of the water mouse being recorded this far inland. That said, I am still not sure what else it could have been and it consequently joins a lengthy list of small mammals, plus a few larger ones in truth, briefly observed but never identified. If that was one that got away, the very next night I finally fulfilled another long-term ambition when I spotted my first ever echidna, an animal that had somehow eluded us for the best part of three weeks. I cannot say that I was exactly panicking at this stage, as I knew that we had some great echidna areas to come, particularly in Tasmania, but when you consider that most people are not even able to take a three-week break, it was quite a long time to continually miss a single animal that you are actively searching for and I cannot pretend that I was not at all concerned. As it was, we would spend more time with these wonderfully charismatic animals than most and on one memorable occasion we observed a single foraging echidna undisturbed for more than three captivating hours. It was so completely undisturbed by our entirely passive presence, that at one stage it clambered over my outstretched ankles as if negotiating a fallen branch. There are four species of echidna worldwide, all of which, along with the platypus, complete the monotreme order of egg-laying mammals. Only the short-beaked echidna occurs in Australia and it can be found across more or less every ecosystem, apparently even within the Snowy Mountains in New South Wales, which, in the form of Mount Kosciuszko, Australia's highest mainland peak, ascend to a maximum height of 2,228 metres. A supremely versatile animal superbly adapted to a wide range of diverse habitats, the echidna can maintain one of the lowest active body temperatures of all mammals, from a controlled 33°C to less than 5°C during hibernation, when it can also reduce its breathing rate to a single breath every three minutes. Whereas the active body temperature of most mammals will only fluctuate by around one degree on a daily basis, an echidna's can vary by up to 8°C each day and they are adept in the strategic use of torpor, when the metabolic rate and body temperature are lowered to conserve energy. Whilst this usually occurs at night, the echidna can enter torpor at any point of the day and at any time of the year, depending on conditions.

This no doubt contributes to their longevity, as these fascinating and highly complex creatures can live up to fifty years, which is staggering for an animal of their size and makes them one of the longest living of all terrestrial mammals. Perhaps most miraculously of all, it has recently been revealed that these remarkable monotremes are able to utilise torpor in order to often survive the traumatic bush fires that devastate so many populations of wild animals both in Australia and across the world. Researchers in Western Australia have recorded echidnas entering this state of more or less semi-hibernation almost as soon as a fire erupts and then waiting for several weeks in the safety of their burrows for the flames to subside and their food to return to the scorched landscape in the form of insects. It is not fool-proof of course, as overwhelming flash fires may surprise and overtake a slumbering animal, but certainly the majority of the echidnas studied survived and the fact that other mammals are able to go into torpor in this manner, may at least partly explain how they survived the mass extinction event that wiped the dinosaurs out some 66 million years ago. Having also learned of their rather peculiar mating habits, I would very much like to see these animals during the mating season, the date of which varies across regions, when expectant males literally begin queuing behind prospective partners in the hope of being the one to pass on their genes. These mating 'trains' can include up to ten males, although three or four is more common, who will follow a female around for several weeks until she is receptive and ready to breed. Even then the process is far from straightforward, as the female will often excavate a shallow hole and the males will respond by digging a trench around her and, in perhaps the earliest form of trench warfare, begin pushing each other out of the channel in the ultimate last man standing scenario. Although exceptionally important to the poor echidnas, this must be one of the strangest and most amusing sights in nature and it remains difficult to imagine these adorably sweet creatures ramming into each other like heavily armoured tanks. Perhaps surprisingly at first glance, they have the muscle to do so and have been recorded moving heavy stones and even destroying concrete fence foundations with their powerful front limbs, which are largely used for digging and tearing apart termite mounds and fallen trees in the search for food. Echidnas certainly excavate and aerate a great deal of earth and dense undergrowth each year as they dig for both shelter and prey and as such are considered to be environmental engineers and a keystone species playing an essential role in the health of almost every Australian ecosystem. However absorbing these inimitable animals undoubtedly are, and I have barely touched upon their intricate ecology as monotremes or entire aspects of their intriguing behaviour, as far as I am concerned, their single greatest contribution to the natural world is that the claws on their hind feet curve backwards to enable them to groom between their spines. This basically means that they have intensely comical 'reversible' feet, which, sad as it no doubt is, kept James and I splendidly entertained throughout pretty much every sighting. In all we encountered only three echidnas on the mainland in almost a full month of intense searching and, even more remarkably when you consider the quality of the destinations visited, all three were seen at Carnarvon Gorge. In addition to the feathertail glider, we were also hoping to locate a herbert's rock wallaby, one of several confusingly similar species of rock wallaby found along the Queensland coast that can usually only be identified by range. We had been informed that there was a small population around a private section of our accommodation and just before dusk on our last evening we finally cornered our quarry in the form of two charming little creatures that allowed me to take a few nice reference pictures before it got too dark. Good portent we hoped for the night ahead for although feathertail gliders were also present at our remaining mainland destinations, they are absent from Tasmania and we knew that Carnarvon represented our best opportunity to observe these diminutive and rare marsupials. Around six unsuccessful hours later we had all but given up and when I suggested that we have one last attempt at an area recommended to us as a likely spot, it was unquestionably more in desperation than expectation. We had already tried this particular site six times I believe, but within a few minutes James told me that he could see something small running along the branches at the very top of one of the trees that we had been told to concentrate on. He said that it must be a mouse

it was so small and I immediately knew that he had struck gold. How he had is another matter, as he had somehow contrived to spot a seven or eight centimetre long animal on movement alone at a height of about 20 metres without the aid of eyeshine and at night with just an artificial light for good measure. It was certainly the nocturnal spot of the tour and I am going to sorely miss his spotlighting prowess when he moves on to the next chapter of his life and begins university. Five gliders at one destination was an incredible feat and this sighting was not done by any means, as our little gliding mouse abruptly launched itself, possibly towards James' light, and landed on the grass within a few inches of his feet. It would have been possible to pick it up, but instead we left it to dash across the lawn and scuttle up the trunk of an adjacent tree, where I was able to take a couple of record shots before it finally disappeared. What a wonderful end to a very special experience at Carnarvon Gorge and the next morning, well actually about five hours after we had been watching the feathertail, the 800 or so kilometre drive to Lamington National Park felt like a breeze. Lamington is just one of 50 reserves that form the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia UNESCO World Heritage Site, a world renowned site of significant ecological importance shared between Queensland and New South Wales which protects the largest remaining areas of subtropical and cool temperate rainforest in the world and some of the largest areas of warm temperate rainforest in Australia. Although I do not know every precise distinction between all of the subcategories or convoluted strata, for those who are not aware of the basics, tropical rainforests occur in a belt surrounding the equator and are hot and wet, whilst temperate rainforests largely occur on the coast and have a seasonal climate where the temperature varies significantly at different times of the year. Both are typically dense and wet, but the tropical versions are more diverse and decomposition takes place at a vastly accelerated rate due to the consistently high temperatures and moisture. Gondwana is of course named after the supercontinent that was covered by rainforest millions of years ago and Lamington, which ranges in altitude from about 700 to 1,100 metres, includes both subtropical and temperate rainforest and as such, a massive variety of all types of life. We would spend most of our time exploring these diverse rainforest environments and productive transition zones, but I had also arranged a few activities in the surrounding areas at lower altitudes, principally to look for roosting grey-headed flying foxes and for the brush-tailed rock wallabies that a local guide was hoping to show us on a private reserve. Having arrived to the welcoming sight of red-necked pademelons hopping across the lawn of our lodge, as well as a couple of Australian swamp rats just before dusk, we went more or less straight into an extended night walk that included two species of bandicoot, long-nosed and northern brown, several timid little rufous bettongs and our only dingo encounter since the Atherton

Tableland, which incidentally would be our last of the tour. In addition to the regularly observed common ringtail and common brushtail possums, that same nocturnal trek also yielded a first short-eared brushtail possum, which was classified as a mountain brushtail possum until the species were split on morphological variances in 2002. Anyone who knows me or reads these reports will appreciate how much I like to point out what I usually describe as the vagaries of wildlife viewing, if for no other reason than to prepare future guests for exactly that, the often inexplicable and arbitrary nature of watching animals in the wild and the fact that more or less nothing can or should be taken for granted. As I have already mentioned, I have never met or heard of any guides or tour groups seeing all five glider species on a single visit to Carnarvon and conversely, or perhaps perversely would be more appropriate, I am not aware of anyone, who actively searched over more than one night that is, who failed to see at least one of the same five glider species at Lamington. That, however, is exactly what happened to us and not only did we fail to see a glider at this national park, but

James' spectacular feathertail spot would be our last glider sighting of the entire tour, including in Tasmania where only the sugar glider occurs. It made no real difference to our stay at Lamington, as we had already experienced considerable success and in reality, whilst you still try to search for everything, once you have seen an animal well, your focus can change slightly and it can be hard to sustain quite the same levels of concentration and intensity. You perhaps start looking for other more elusive animals and that was certainly the case at Lamington, when I at least moderately switched my attention to antechinuses, dunnarts and phascogales. It worked in a minor way, as I was thrilled with a first view of a brown antechinus, albeit an exceedingly brief one on the side of a tree, and we also encountered more rodents at Lamington and the surrounding area than anywhere else, although we were unable to identify a few and the majority of the remainder were either swamp or bush rats. As was the case throughout the trip, we were still seeing a great deal and in addition to a number of familiar faces from previous destinations, we encountered nine new mammal species at Lamington and a wealth of gorgeous birds. A particular favourite, although perhaps only its mother would describe it as gorgeous, was the Australian brushturkey, one of which had constructed an insanely large nest within the grounds of our lodge and could be seen frantically collecting leaves and other organic matter to add to it on a daily basis. These birds may not look much in comparison to the king parrots, crimson rosellas, yellow robins and regent bowerbirds that the rainforests of Lamington are renowned for, but as megapodes, essentially birds that do not incubate their eggs by using their own body heat in the traditional manner, they have evolved over millions of years and they clearly still think and act like dinosaurs. Their huge nests or mounds as they are also known, can be almost two metres tall and four metres in diameter and industrious males are solely responsible for their laborious construction, spending weeks diligently gathering soil, leaf litter and other assorted vegetation in order to build what is essentially a compost heap. They will then carefully tend this elaborate incubator by adding or removing earth and organic material to control the heat produced by the decomposing matter, as they need to maintain a temperature of between 33°C to 35°C in order to hatch the 18 to 24 eggs that the female will ultimately lay and bury. The males constantly test the temperature by burrowing down with their beak and, as is the case with crocodiles, sea turtles and other reptiles, it has recently been established that the warmth of the nest does influence the sex of the chicks, although not as significantly as some reptile reproduction, where temperature can determine the sex of all of the young. The warmer the nest the more robust the chick apparently and these hatchlings can fly as soon as their wings dry, which is just as well, as they have to dig their own way out of the compact nest and receive absolutely no parental protection or care

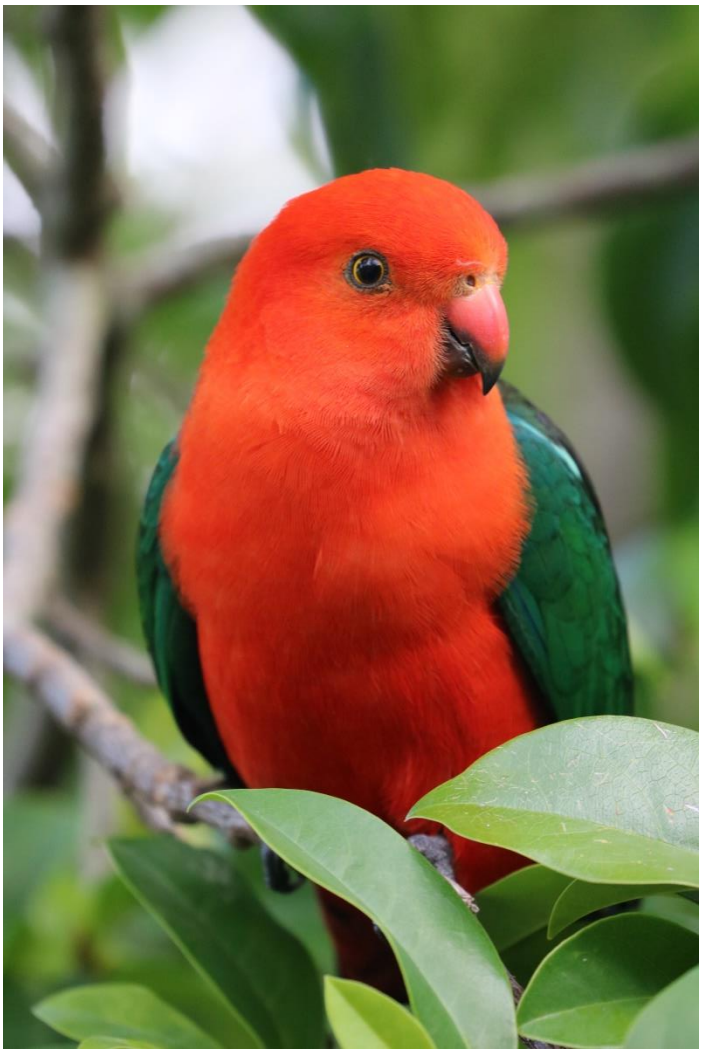
once they reach the surface, again more like a reptile than a bird. When we think of environmental engineers, brushturkeys probably do not come to mind too often, but these resilient birds are the original prehistoric architects and even their family name betrays their origins, as megapode translates as ‘large-footed’ and when you look at their clawed feet, it does not take a great deal of imagination to conjure another Greek term ‘terrible lizard’. Our lodge, O’Reillys Rainforest Retreat, has strong ties to the region, as the O’Reilly family lived in the area before the national park was even gazetted in 1915 and opened their first guest house to paying visitors in 1926. One of the former owners and bushman Bernard O’Reilly carved himself a niche in Australian folk law in February 1937 when the City of Brisbane, a Stinson airliner carrying seven men, crashed in the national park. Although the two pilots and two of the five passengers were killed instantly, three men survived the initial impact, but rescuers could find no trace of the wreckage and all seven were eventually presumed lost. O’Reilly had other ideas and had estimated that the plane did not have sufficient height to clear the McPherson Range and cross the border into New South Wales, where the search efforts had been concentrated. He believed that the rescuers were looking in the wrong place and on the 28th of February, nine days after the crash, the experienced bushman set out on foot to begin his own search. Having camped overnight, on the 1st of March he climbed a tall tree from which he spotted a single scorched tree, which he immediately headed towards and found two of the three surviving men, one of whom had not been able to move because of a broken leg. Having been asked for the cricket score by one of the two men, O’Reilly was informed that a third man, James Guthrie Westray, a 25-year-old Englishman, had also survived and had gone to fetch help. This was much better news than O’Reilly could have hoped for after so many days and having left the men as comfortable as possible and with the last of his food, he began the trek back for assistance. Tragically, he was to find the body of Westray on his return journey, as the Englishman, having survived such an horrific fatal air crash, had apparently slipped at one of the many waterfalls in the park and sustained serious injury in the fall. Whilst he had clearly crawled a considerable distance in a desperate attempt to reach help, he eventually succumbed to a combination of his injuries and exposure. Thanks to the skill and courage of Bernard O’Reilly, the other two men were far more fortunate and both lived to tell an extraordinary tale. There is an impressive full-scale replica of the plane

within the grounds of the lodge, as well as a bronze statue commemorating the event, and for those who are interested, O'Reillys occasionally offer visitors the opportunity to hike to the crash site and the jungle grave of the equally brave but ill-fated James Westray. The accommodation itself is an excellent base to explore much of Lamington, but most of the mammals we were searching specifically for now were further afield and our diurnal excursions produced a new species of macropod, the red-necked wallaby, as well as the splendid grey-headed flying foxes that we devoted a full afternoon to. We also had a tremendously successful day with a knowledgeable local guide who I had been communicating regularly with from the UK and who would hopefully be able to encourage a friend of hers to show us the brush-tailed rock wallabies on his not inconsiderable estate. Having already observed several distinct macropods and some beautiful European hares, which I know do not belong in Australia, but are far too elegant to ignore, we received the good news confirming that we were more than welcome to drop by and that the owner, whose home included a substantial sculpture garden, a lake and a sprawling private nature reserve, would take us out personally. When we arrived, we were greeted by an elderly gentleman of Italian descent and although he was clearly in his seventies, he was built like a Spartan and marched like one and James and I were soon covered in sweat and falling behind as he leapt from boulder to boulder across his property like a young Leonidas. By the time we reached our destination on a rocky outcrop overlooking the wallabies, I had visions of him turning and

screaming ‘This is Sparta’ at us both, but he just laughed at our obvious discomfort and waited patiently until we could catch sufficient breath to actually speak again. When we were finally able to, we enjoyed a memorable couple of hours with our disarmingly friendly host, not to mention his beloved wallabies, and when I returned home, by way of a small thank you for his considerable effort, I sent him a signed copy of the art book ‘Human Nature’ by the talented London-based Israeli sculptor Zadok Ben-David. It was the least I could do and an eventful day was brought to a more than satisfactory close with one last platypus sighting before we would cross the Bass Strait to Tasmania and our only nocturnal view of a koala. Our penultimate destination, a small private eco resort on the border of New South Wales, was barely a 220 kilometre drive, and if the easy drive felt like a gift after several monster journeys, that was appropriate enough, as our two-night stay would include Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Far from celebrating the festivities, although we would break off for a substantial Christmas dinner in a nearby town, the purpose of our visit was to see a spotted-tailed quoll, as they have occurred on this land for decades and university researchers and film crews alike have visited for reliable views of what is one of four quoll species in Australia and the largest carnivorous marsupial on the mainland. Although the

quolls are fed, which is never ideal, it occurs on a minute scale and the owners have taken considerable time and effort to establish a serene wildlife haven for literally hundreds of species. Red-necked wallabies are commonly observed throughout the day, as are rufous bettongs and common brushtail possums at night, and more than 200 different birds have been recorded on the 100-acre property. One in particular took my eye, an immature Pacific baza or crested hawk, a striking raptor that I was not at all familiar with and could not even remember having previously seen images of. With so much ideal and protected habitat, the reserve is also home to a profuse array of amphibians and reptiles and we were fortunate to enjoy close views of two red-bellied black snakes. These venomous serpents are responsible for around 15% of all snake bites in Australia, but they are relatively harmless and no fatalities have been recorded as a result of their bite. Bandicoots and sugar gliders are also apparently fairly easy to find at night, but we only had two evenings available and wanted to concentrate our efforts on the tiger quolls, as they are also known. We actually spotted our first quoll away from the feeding area on an early evening walk and it is impossible to know for sure whether this was one of the two animals we would later see around the food. As it was, we did not have to wait long for the first to arrive and over the two nights were able to relish extended and fabulously intimate views of these terrific and distinctive little predators. They certainly have voracious appetites and when they were not ripping off ragged strips of flesh, they were crushing bones like matchsticks with their incredibly powerful jaws. I did at the time consider that they were probably the fiercest feeders I had ever seen, but having gone on to observe Tasmanian devils, I have quickly had to reassess that judgement. As the largest carnivorous marsupials on the continent, the two animals have more than just poor table manners in common, as spotted-tailed quolls have the second most powerful bite of all mammals in relation to their size and again, only Tasmanian devils can outdo them in this primeval respect. Whilst these initial quoll

sightings were admittedly not entirely natural experiences, I was not overly concerned if a few of these feisty creatures are given a slight helping hand in what is a rare protected environment for them and we would go on to see more tiger quolls in completely wild conditions in Tasmania. We did not know this for certain at the time of course and at one stage on Christmas Day it appeared that we might not even make it to Tasmania or anywhere else for that matter. Partly to cover more ground on such a large reserve and partly because we had such fun on the golf course at Mareeba, we decided to take a buggy out before going into town for Christmas lunch. The difference was that while the golf course had been flat, this reserve had some steep forested sections that our comparatively powerful buggy could climb well enough, but did not handle quite as well when descending. A couple of times we slipped down a few metres with little control and I should probably have taken the hint and turned us round at this point. However, it was a long way back and we only had one more steep descent to make before completing a circuit that would take us directly back to our room. Neither of



us were entirely comfortable as we looked down what was a sharp drop, but, as usual in life, I decided just to keep going and that I would keep the brake applied and just edge down slowly. The theory was fine, ideal in fact, but our main issue was that after perhaps five metres I gently squeezed the brake and nothing happened, a process that I repeated with increasing urgency for the next fifteen metres or so until we began to pick up momentum and I suddenly realised that we were not actually driving anymore and were instead in the process of crashing. With no brakes we were careering out of control and I had to make the instant decision and scream at James to jump, which he did, a second before me as I attempted to shield my camera. Neither of us were able to remain upright, but we landed reasonably well on what was fortunately a fairly soft forest slope and were both able to look up in time to see the buggy thunder another 40 or 50 metres before smashing into a tree, at which point we glanced at each other and burst out laughing. It was certainly one of the more surreal Christmas moments that James and I have shared together and, believe me, there have been a few to choose from. After towing his battered cart back to base, the apologetic owner confirmed that the brake cable had become disconnected and, having seen the distance the cart had plummeted and the damage sustained to the front, suggested that today was the day I should buy a lottery ticket, such was our good fortune. I could not resist responding that not crashing would have probably

been luckier and that in future a vehicle with a working brake was a minimum requirement, but we were both unharmed and instead of a lottery ticket, we drove to town and bought a massive Christmas dinner. The ravenous quolls put everything into perspective later that evening and the next day we moved on to our base in Brisbane in just about the best spirits imaginable. Whilst I generally try to spend as little time as possible in cities, we were staying in a great location in Brisbane and a short walk over Victoria Bridge took us to the South Bank Parklands and an exceptional complex of outdoor recreational spaces and museums, galleries, cinemas, theatres, restaurants, swimming pools and even a 2,000-seater amphitheatre. Opened to the public in 1992 on the former World Expo 88 site, South Bank is a superb resource for anyone living in or visiting the city and there was a marvellously relaxed atmosphere during our Christmas holiday visit, with friends and families swimming and socialising in the warm evening air. In addition to the Grand Arbour, an elaborate pedestrian walkway that consists of almost 450 towering steel tendrils covered in sympathetic plants and flowers, the site is home to a large number of important public buildings and attractions, including the Brisbane Convention Centre, the State Library of Queensland, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre and the Wheel of Brisbane, a Ferris wheel similar to the London Eye, but less than half the height of the ride on the South Bank of the river Thames, that was at one time the tallest Ferris wheel in the world. That distinction currently belongs to the High Roller in Las Vegas at a massive 167 metres and although the Brisbane version is significantly lower at just 60 metres, it still afforded sumptuous views of an illuminated city skyline across the river. There were even a few common brushtail possums running around to complete the delightful picture and make us, or rather me, feel slightly less bad about taking an entire evening off and not looking for somewhere to spotlight. This would be as much as we were to see of Queensland's capital, as our two days here involved excursions north to Noosa National Park and a day on Moreton Island National Park, primarily to assess the snorkelling and to look for a dugong, a large marine mammal in the same family as the three extant manatee species and the steller's sea cow, which was hunted to extinction by the late 1760s, less than 30 years after it had been discovered by the German zoologist and botanist Georg Wilhelm Steller. Although you will no doubt recognise other animals named after this famous naturalist, including the steller sea lion and steller's sea eagle, Steller actually played a significant role in the demise of the pitifully defenceless creature named after him, as he was part of the crew who butchered the first one with harpoons and bayonets in 1741 and went on to describe how tasty its flesh was, which would ultimately seal the fate of this gentle giant. The

dugong, which is also often referred to as a sea cow due to the way it grazes on beds of seagrass, is much smaller than its extinct cousin with a body length of approximately three to four metres in comparison to the ten metres that the massive steller sea cow could apparently reach. As you would expect for such a picturesque region, the island itself is in a beautiful setting, but was obviously very crowded during the holiday period and was probably our worst experience of the trip, if you exclude almost being obliterated by a faulty golf buggy. The resort on the island is operated on a mercilessly commercial basis and all of the activities are organised on a conveyor belt system, to maximise efficiency and profit instead of enjoyment and education. Our snorkelling session, it could only be described as such, was so impersonal it was difficult to enjoy despite the pleasant location and more time was spent organising our particular 'slot' than we were actually permitted in the water. The main boat tour, or Marine Discovery Cruise as it was officially dubbed, was pleasant enough away from the hordes, but we were not to see a dugong and would have to wait until our tour to Western Australia, where they are far more commonly observed. Whilst we were disappointed at the time, in truth dugongs had not been a primary target, or I would have included more than one opportunity to search for them, and they were the only large mammal that we would fail to find. We were more successful with a green turtle and three distinct dolphins, both varieties of bottlenose dolphin and the recently split Australian humpback dolphin, and on the island you can pay, of course, to feed 'wild' dolphins right up in the shallows of the beach. When you consider how many conservation organisations and wildlife charities ask tourists to report the inappropriate use of wildlife in supposedly less enlightened regions, I cannot see how this completely unacceptable practice is still permitted in this day and age in such an advanced and prosperous country. I guess that prosperous is probably the key and that this entirely contrived experience generates a great deal of money. We would not add to it of course and left before the feeding session took place that evening. One disappointing day on a trip of seven weeks is not too bad and we had a much nicer time on our brief visit to Noosa, a tiny national park only slighter larger than Central Park in New York, but apparently the most popular in the entire country. It appeared that the million or so annual visitors had all arrived on the day of our visit, as the entrance was heaving and it took almost an hour to get a parking space within reasonable walking distance. Fortunately, most of the crowds headed straight to the popular beaches and we were able to search for the resident koalas if not in solitude, at least without the bedlam we had encountered on arrival. We ultimately discovered just one, a semi-comatose individual sleeping it off high in a gum tree. Although it was a fairly long return journey to find a single slumbering koala, I had wanted one final opportunity to see these iconic animals on the mainland, at least in daylight, as opposed to the introduced population on Magnetic Island and the nocturnal animal we had viewed near Lamington. We were also aware of a small population of black-striped wallabies about 60 kilometres west of Noosa and thought that we would try for these on the same day, which proved to be another really good decision, as we managed to find an animal that is not reliably observed and I was able to take a few photographs highlighting the distinctive black stripe for which they are named. They were the 61st and last new mammal of a spectacularly successful tour in Queensland and the real beauty of this departure was that on this occasion we were not flying home, but to Tasmania, where we had three more weeks of what had already been a trip of a lifetime.