



KOALA HUNTING

AND OTHER PLEASURABLE DIVERSIONS

**TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY SEAN CRANE**



It's not as if I had a shotgun draped over my shoulder when I walked into the multi-tasking outdoor outfitters/information center in Anglesea, Australia. I mean, sure Nikon has made great strides in the past few years to keep pace with Canon, but a D-200 still only shoots five frames per second, not bullets.

"How can I help you?" asked the cheerful attendant, a middle aged woman who ran the center with her husband.

"Well, I'm looking for wildlife to shoot."

"Any particular kind?"

"Anything, really. I like to shoot anything I can find. Birds, reptiles, mammals. Especially mammals, although I already nailed plenty of koalas."

A mask of what can best be described as hatred came over her face.

"YOU CAN'T SHOOT KOALAS, SIR!"

"No, no, no," I stammered, "not shooting shooting... with a camera... shooting with a camera." I held up the D-200 in a desperate attempt to prove my innocence.

It was the only time in my

three-week trip to The Land Down Under that I was met with anything less than friendly enthusiasm.

Quite obviously the Australian people love their country as much as the tourists who travel as far as humanly possible to see it. It's a pride that usually manifests itself in generosity, as most locals will eagerly point you in the right direction to share their homeland. It's just one of the reasons Australia is such a great destination for the wildlife photographer.

If you haven't looked at a map lately, you need to know one thing — Australia is big. We're talking lower

48 big. In fact, it's just two percent smaller than the states that touch each other. Seeing it all in three weeks or less falls under the category of impossible. With a good plan, however, you can cover an unbelievable diversity of terrain at a relatively relaxed pace.

My trip covered everything from rainforests and deserts to mountains and grasslands. I swam the waters of the Great Barrier Reef and drove the spectacular twists and turns of the Great Ocean Road. The one constant everywhere I went was a surprising abundance and variety of easily seen wildlife. I knew there would be kangaroos. I hoped to see koalas. And I prayed to see a platypus. I saw all three, along with just about every conceivable one of their relatives, cousins, neighbors, and casual acquaintances.

As advertised, the kanga-

roos were widespread and easy to spot. It's not like they're hanging out sipping lattes at a Melbourne Starbucks, but as long as you know where to look you'll have no problem bringing home excellent photos. Koalas, although not as widespread, are easy targets as long as you're in the right place at the right time. The right place requires little more than consulting a guidebook or asking around. Being there at the right time, on the other hand, requires a bit of luck — if only because they sleep 20 hours a day. As for the platypus, you'll need equal parts time and persistence. It's possible, of course, so is seeing Sasquatch. For me, getting photos of this elusive egg-laying mammal became an obsession.

My search started in the mountains west of Brisbane at a place called Lamington National



OPENING SPREAD: Koala, Hanson Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia. ABOVE: Red kangaroo, Flinders Ranges National Park, South Australia. RIGHT: White-lipped tree frog, Daintree National Park, Queensland.

KOALA: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6. KANGAROO: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6. FROG: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8, SB-800 Flash, Canon 500D close up filter.



LEFT: Cassowary, Daintree National Park, Queensland. **BELOW:** The Remarkable Rocks, Flinders Chase National Park, Kangaroo Island, South Australia.

CASSOWARY: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6. REMARKABLE ROCKS: Nikon D200, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8, Gitzo tripod.

Park. Although the forests of Lamington are full of wildlife, it's the birds that people come to see. I've been to a lot of places on this earth, and few compare to Lamington for close encounters with exotic birds. As soon as I stepped from my car to check in at O'Reilly's Guesthouse, I was surrounded by the red and blue of crimson rosellas and the equally brilliant green and red of king parrots. It's not often that you can get great shots of birds with a wide-angle lens — even birds in flight as they hover around the lodge's front lawn waiting for handouts from the downright giddy tourists.

Amidst the display of red, blue and green came the occasional yellow and black from the star attraction at Lamington, the regent bowerbird. Bowerbirds are attractive mid-sized birds that build conical bowers on the ground, rather than nests, to attract mates. They come in a few varieties at Lamington, including the satin bowerbirds with their striking purple/blue eyes.

All these birds, by the way, are easily spotted just outside your front door. I wouldn't recommend it, but you could skip the miles of spectacular trails through the national park and still have a great wildlife experience.

In fact, it was also on the grounds of O'Reilly's Guesthouse that I saw my first macropod (the diverse family of marsupials commonly known as kangaroos). Out of the corner of my eye it came — a small creature hopping along in late-day light. It had assumed ownership of the lawn left vacant by the birds, and I quickly gave chase, camera and tripod in tow, as if my life depended on getting a shot of this rare specimen. As I struggled to find focus, the small roo hopped into the bushes before I could snap the shutter. Dejected, I turned to head back to my room, almost tripping over the twenty or so other mini-marsupials lounging in the camera-loving glow of sunset. These were pademelons, the smallest of the macropods, and if you're staying at O'Reilly's, spotting them late in the day or early in the morning is almost guaranteed.

A day later I saw my first koala at a place called Noosa, an almost perfect town an hour's drive north of Brisbane. It's a bit commercialized, but to some that's a good thing. Low key, yet trendy shops and restaurants line a stretch of road just steps from a beautiful beach. Walk along the beach for fifteen minutes and you come to Noosa National Park. It was in the park's park-

ing lot that I saw a few surfers coming in for the day and pointing to a eucalyptus tree. There he was, stuffing his face with leaves, oblivious to my excitement as I set up my tripod. The light was fading fast and the shots were mediocre at best, but it was a koala, and it was in the wild. Granted I was standing amidst asphalt and automobiles, but there was nothing keeping the little guy from going wherever his heart desired. The next day I would return at first light and get as many shots as my heart desired. I watched as he came down one tree, climbed halfway up another, walked through the parking lot, and up another tree where he settled

in for a nice twenty-hour nap.

A two hour flight north of Brisbane brought me to Cairns, where I immediately rented a car and drove north to the seaside town of Port Douglas. Port Douglas is the upscale alternative to Cairns for exploration of the Great Barrier Reef. To me, it meant I was an hour closer to the tropical rainforest of Daintree National Park and Cape Tribulation. Resisting the urge to head straight for the jungle, I took just about everyone's advice and arranged a day exploring the reef. One word of advice if you plan on photographing the kaleidoscope of color under water: bring your own camera to

do the job. I was shocked to find that in the scuba diving Mecca of the world, there was no place to rent anything more than a simple point and shoot. I was hoping for a housing for my D-200. I settled for an 800 speed disposable from the local drugstore.

The disappointment of being without a viable means of picture taking aside, I wish I could get more excited about my time on the reef. As a World Heritage Site and one of the great natural wonders on earth I had to see it, but in between bouts of seasickness, all I could think about was getting back to dry land and into the forests.





Much like O'Reilly's Guesthouse in Lamington, the Red Mill House B&B in Daintree Village is a wildlife experience in and of itself. A small pond on the property provides all the habitat necessary for a mini-safari without ever leaving the backyard. It was here that I discovered the unbridled pleasure of spotlighting in Australia. As a vast majority of the native fauna come out only at night, any serious animal lover will include at least a few spotlighting sessions in any given itinerary.

The key is to shine your flashlight at or near your line of sight until you see two little balls of light shining back at you. This works great for spotting mammals, both large and small. For amphibians and other small creatures, this won't work and you'll just have to look and listen. In one night and morning around the tiny pond, I was able to photograph several different species of tree frog, an assortment of exotic bugs, a variety of reptiles, including water dragons and skinks, numerous birds, butterflies, and what seemed like hundreds of cane toads.

The cane toad is one of those creatures that falls under the category of being so ugly that it's cute. The locals hate them, as they do any creature that was introduced to the country. The cane toad was brought over to eat a certain beetle that was wreaking havoc on the local sugar cane crop. Unfortunately the beetle lives high in the stalks — higher than the toad can jump. The beetles remained, as did the toad which, having no natural predators in its new land, quickly spread throughout Australia. In its wake, the cane toad displaced many native frog species that couldn't compete for habitat.

Over the next couple of days I would see much more, including the specialty of the house in Cape Tribulation, the cassowary. The cassowary is a large, flightless bird that stands about 5 to 6 feet tall, making it the third largest bird in the world behind the ostrich and the emu. It's very colorful with a blue face and long red wattles. It's also very strange with a horn, known as a casque, atop its head. Seeing this highly endangered bird in the wild is quite



ABOVE: Australian sea lions, Seal Bay, Kangaroo Island, South Australia. **RIGHT:** Pademelon mother and joey, Lamington National Park, Queensland. **BELOW:** Orchard swallowtail, Kuranda, Queensland.

SEA LIONS: Nikon D200, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8.
PADEMELONS: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6, Gitzo tripod. SWALLOWTAIL: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8, Canon 500D close up filter.



an experience. I was lucky enough to see a father and two chicks at very close range. Which brings me to the most famous distinction of the cassowary — it was voted the “most dangerous bird on the planet” by the Guinness Book of World Records. Apparently, it uses its razor sharp claws to rip open the torso of its prey. As big daddy took several quick steps toward me, I didn’t know whether to take advantage of the situation by firing off a few quick shots, or to run. I’m writing this, so I guess you know how that decision went.

The next day, my undisturbed entrails and I headed south to the Atherton Tablelands, a beautiful part of the country that feels more like the American heartland than the Australian tropics. Of course, you’re not likely to see bandicoots, flying foxes and ringtail possums mixing it up with the squirrels in central Wisconsin.

Near the charming little town of Yungaburra, I was fortunate enough to stumble upon the local celebrity, the Lumholtz tree kangaroo. Looking more like a primate than a marsupial, the Lumholtz variety of tree kangaroo is found only in northeastern Queensland. Although strictly nocturnal, the kangaroo I saw was clearly experiencing sleep deprivation issues as he sat lazily in a giant silkwood tree enjoying the morning with the rest of us.

About 20 camera clicks later and a quarter mile down the riverside trail, I had my first encounter with none other than the aforementioned platypus. And I use the word encounter loosely as the sighting only lasted about 1/500th of a second. I sat patiently on the bank of the river for an hour waiting for the strange creature to return. Unsuccessful, I walked back to the motel wondering if I had even seen it in the first place. Although I wanted desperately to return to the river, I had a plane to catch.

A three-hour flight from Cairns brought me halfway across the continent to Adelaide, the capitol of South Australia. An additional hour’s drive south was the one destination I was most looking forward to — Kangaroo Island. My pre-trip research confirmed that Kangaroo Island was the one can’t-miss spot for Australian wildlife. As the name would suggest, it’s an island and kangaroos live on it. So do koalas, seals, sea lions, penguins, echidnas, several kinds of possums, all manner of exotic birds and yes, the platypus. The one living being the island was surprisingly devoid of, however, was people. Strange for a destination that so much is written about, and which seems to have a rather well established tourist infrastructure. This, by the way, is not a complaint, but a very good thing indeed. Especially on the less-populated western half of the island where most

of the big ticket wildlife activity occurs. On my morning hikes in Flinders Chase National Park I felt as if I had the place to myself. Perhaps it was the time of year, or the continuing draught in southern Australia, or my 5 a.m. start times. Whatever the case, I loved it.

The koalas at Hanson Bay were plentiful and easy to find, the seals at Admiral’s Point were reliably photogenic, and the kangaroos were generously dispersed across the island willing and able to pose royalty free at my convenience. And then there were the platypuses. I liked my chances when I discovered that unlike the river in Atherton, the Kangaroo Island platypus lived in a series of water holes in the middle of the national park. They couldn’t escape my lens by heading down river. Although wild, they were captive in a sense. What goes down must come back up. Or so I thought. What I didn’t count on was not finding them in the first place.

For four straight mornings I tried, heading out before daybreak, hiking a mile into the forest and sitting by several different water holes. On my fourth and final day I had finally had enough. I had wasted three mornings of great light when I could have been photographing kangaroos or wallabies or koalas. And for what, a platypus? An animal so strange looking that when it was first discovered and sent back to



LEFT: Long-billed corellas, Grampians National Park, Victoria. **ABOVE TOP:** Platypus, Flinders Chase National Park, South Australia. **ABOVE BOTTOM:** Koala, Hanson Bay, South Australia.

CORELLAS: Nikon D200, Nikon 600 f/5.6. PLATYPUS: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8, Gitzo tripod. KOALA: Nikon D200, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8, Gitzo tripod.

For more of Sean Crane’s wildlife photography, go to www.seancrane.com.

England, it was thought to be a hoax — stitched together out of a duck and a beaver. I decided to head back to the car and hightail it to the fur seals before the sun got too high in the sky.

On my way back to the trail that led away from the supposed platypus hotspot, I discovered one last water hole that I hadn’t noticed before. I figured that I might as well take a quick look.

Sure enough, there was a platypus circling around the water’s murky surface. Even more amazing, he didn’t see me. I immediately dropped my gear and snuck up slowly, camera in hand. I knew I had probably one shot before he headed under never to return. I had to be fast, but I also wanted to make sure that I had a good exposure that was well composed. I’ve never really been nervous taking a picture, but for this I was.

I raised the camera and shot. Startled by the flash, the platypus darted under water. I took my time before looking at the camera’s LCD screen, fearing failure. But there it was. You could even see the eyeball. As I was admiring the shot, the platypus resurfaced. Or was it another platypus? I sat by the edge of the water for the next hour and a half, photographing two platypuses in the dim light. They eventually became habituated to my presence and let me shoot away while they went through

their daily routine of diving down to sift through the mud for insects before surfacing to eat them.

After the triumph of Kangaroo Island, I traveled north to Flinders Ranges National Park. This is where the Outback meets the mountains and is a great area for kangaroos and emus. From there it was on to Grampians National Park in Victoria before continuing along the coast to Melbourne. The road that took me there, The Great Ocean Road, is one of the most famous in the world. The many stops along the way are certainly beautiful, even majestic, but I think the name of the road could be updated to The Great Fly-Infested Ocean Road. It was almost unbearable and I’m surprised that I didn’t read anything about this particular problem in any guidebook. Perhaps it was just bad timing — the invertebrate spring break when every fly in the country packs up and heads south for the annual coastal holiday gig.

If you can hack the flies, however, The Great Ocean Road really is a worthwhile excursion. In addition to the great scenery, there’s plenty of wildlife, including easily seen koalas near the town of Lorne. Go early or late and you’ll be able to shoot plenty of them.

Just don’t tell the locals that you did.