

The Nostalgic Naturalist

by Old Timer

Tradition is part of the magic of Rottnest for me, and when I stepped onto the *Rottnest Islander Two* at the Fremantle jetty for my first visit in a long time, memories came flooding back.

Now, all my early visits to Rottnest weren't entirely in the company of my mum and dad. There was a time in my distant youth when me and a group of blokes, feeling a bit wild and looking for fun, would head to Rottnest for the weekend. There was just us, the sun, the beach and the beer. Today, I think they call it raging.

Yes, those were great times: wake up late in the morning after a late night, head to the shop for something to eat, then maybe take a short bike ride until the pub opened and then start all over again. The island for me began at the jetty and ended at the basin, with the pub and the bakery in between.

But, eventually, we grow older and look at things differently, and Rottnest has since become many things to me. I've shared the island with my family, and through the eyes of the kids came to see a whole other world, where bikes and feet ruled the roads, cute quokkas munched bakery bread, and it was okay to eat cream buns for lunch.

This trip I'm on my own, and I'm not sure what Rottnest will be like. My friends suggested I take one of those new planes or helicopters, but part of Rottnest is the hour or two spent on the boat. A short plane ride would make Rottnest seem like a suburb of Perth.

Once there, I decided to rent a bike, and let me tell you, things have improved a lot in the bike rental area since the first time I cycled on Rottnest. I trekked off on a yellow one to explore, with towel, zinc cream and lunch in my backpack. Now, with not a clue as to where I was going, those colourful, big, easy-to-read signs on the roads out of the settlement were just the ticket. I headed west, via the south side of the island.

There aren't words to describe my amazement at rediscovering Rottnest. The rocky cliffs overhang sheltered beaches edged by brilliant blue-green water. The gulls screamed and circled overhead, and I think I saw an osprey hanging in the sky over the next bay, hunting for fish. It seemed like a good place to stop for a swim.

I lay in the sun afterwards and had a bit of a think. You know what I reckon? I reckon that with all the things we do on Rottnest - cycling, eating, drinking, partying with friends, snorkelling, swimming - we tend to lose track of the fact that this little island's pretty unique. Rottnest means different things to all of us at different times in our lives, but it also means survival for many of the plants and animals living here.

For instance, the quokkas. They're just about the only ones left in the world, except for a few somewhere in the karri forest down south. The homes of the mainland quokkas were destroyed when all that clearing was done for farms, and Rottnest is the last main quokka stronghold. And now, some of these quokkas have given up their natural nocturnal habits for free and easy daytime bread handouts in the settlement.

On my way back, I ran smack into a brick wall of smell. It was those salt lakes, a whole string of them in the middle of the island. At first look they're flat, dead sheets of stinking water, but I took a closer look and sure enough, there were ducks and swans and those little waders that dart off or take to the air all at once if you move too close to them.

The water must have something in it they like to eat, because there were sure a lot of them. My curiosity was aroused, so when I got back to the settlement I bought a book on the birds of Rottnest. Among other things, it said that Black Swans, Mountain Ducks, Pied Oystercatchers and Caspian Terns live here, and Fairy Terns, White-faced Herons, Banded Stilts, and Curlew Sandpipers take a break on the island on their flight south for the winter.

It was getting late, almost time for the ferry to leave and I just had time to return my bike and reclaim my deposit. Yeah, Rottnest has a lot of different things to offer, and it seems the best part of the island is something you have to go looking for. I only wished I'd looked a little bit sooner.



Hans Versluis

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Cover Photo

We've heard of wolves baying at the moon, but frogs? Obviously, this amphibian is not above displaying a little lunacy. Nor is the photographer, Jiri Lochman, who must have been moonstruck to get this superb shot.

EDITORIAL

Every year at this time the subject of bush fires becomes a preoccupation with land managers. Steps must be taken to ready fire-fighters and their equipment; hazards must be identified and minimised; education programs for neighbours and visitors must be renewed. Fires are inevitable. The combination of hot, dry weather, inflammable fuels in the bush and ignition from lightning or careless people will see to it that almost every day over the next few months Conservation and Land Management Staff or Bush Fire Brigades will be fighting a bush fire somewhere in the State. Because of modern technology and efficient fire control practices, land managers these days can very largely determine the fire regime which is to be applied in a given area. For example, in most of the land CALM is responsible for, the policy is to try to keep fire out, pending a better understanding of ecological requirements. In a small proportion of the CALM estate (notably parts of the south-west forests), regular, controlled burning is done. The aim of this operation is to minimise the risk of serious wildfires in places where values are highest. The most important value to be considered in the South-West is human life. In this edition of *Landscape* readers are urged to recognise their individual responsibilities. Most importantly, these are to make their own houses safe from bush fires and to learn how to look after themselves and their families if a fire occurs. This dual approach by land managers and householders will help combat the worst consequences of one of nature's most dangerous and predictably-occurring events: the Australian summer bushfire.

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