



Flying South for Good

A bird brought him to Kangaroo Island, where things seem upside down.

by KATE PARHAM

→ WE TURN OFF EMU RIDGE ROAD and park at Duck Lagoon. How perfect. I expect to see something exotic at this Kangaroo Island reserve. The island is said to embody Australia more than Australia itself, with a higher concentration of koalas, wallabies and, of course, kangaroos per square mile. There must be some odd birds too. Ahead I see Mike Barth, a California transplant, with one eye glued to his telescope. Mike, 43, moved Down Under (as in, clear to the underside of the continent) with his Australian wife, Bronwyn, in 2004 to manage the glossy black cockatoo population on the island. “There are only 350 left,” he says, still peering into his lens. Glossy black cockatoo manager. Could there be a managerial position with less drama anywhere?

Q: Help me out here. You manage 350 birds. Is that really full-time work?

A: Sure. We conduct a bird census part of the year and then we monitor their activity for about nine months.

Q: So you're a hawk, in a way.

A: My eyes are always open, yes. I'm looking for activity in the gum trees. Looking for possums too. These cockatoos only eat the seeds of one type of tree, the sheoak. So I try to keep those seeds away from the possums.

Q: What about dangerous predators — crocs, deadly snakes, dragons?

A: It isn't like that. It's nothing like California either. There aren't any



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foxes or coyotes to worry about. We have marsupials, platypus and echidnas [anteaters]. Our cat, Trix, might be the most dangerous animal around.

Q: The cat? Are you serious?

A: Cats get a bad rap here. There's a feral

cat population that may be doing damage to small birds, mammals and reptiles.

Q: Who would have thought: cats, the menace of Kangaroo Island?

A: Yesterday, Bronwyn and I woke up to what sounded like a cacophony of cats. Turns out it was hundreds of white silver-crested cockatoos screeching and squawking. That was strange, even to us.

Q: How strange is life here for your sons?

A: The boys, Joel [8] and Kian [6], were born on the island. So the only strange thing to them is my American accent.

Q: Are you treated like an outsider — aside from how your family treats your accent?

A: No, there's a sense of community despite any differences. The islanders are resourceful. Most have their own veggie gardens, raise chickens and catch fish for food. We're learning to do the same so we can barter.

Q: You use the barter system?

A: Yeah, we trade our fish or eggs for your homemade jams. We all live off the land to a certain degree.

Q: How is it to raise kids here?

A: I think the kids are safer. There's very little crime. When they ride bikes, we know the neighbors will look out for them. The island

population is only 4,500.

Q: Does it ever get too quiet?

A: I love the solitude here. But we do have a tourist season.

Q: OK, so it gets crazy at some point.

A: It only lasts from late December through January. The population can get as high as 20,000 during that time.

Q: That isn't crazy. Unless you think managing 350 birds is chaotic.

A: It does seem busy during those weeks. But understand I enjoy remote places. That's why I like surfing. The

beaches and coastlines here are among the best I've ever seen. Yet if I see 10 other people, it seems like a crowd.

Q: What do you do when the beach is “packed” with nearly a dozen people?

A: I might go to another one.

Q: How many favorite spots do you have?

A: I'm always discovering new places. That's the nice thing about the island. You could spend years exploring the coastline and interior. Wide-open spaces are all around. You get some of that in the States, but the difference here is that you're never close to a big city.

Q: No traffic and no angry animals.

A: The biggest worry is driving at dusk, when the wildlife comes out. I almost hit a 6-foot kangaroo one of the first times I drove here. Some people avoid driving at night altogether.

Q: Which gives new meaning to the idea of staying in to avoid the night life.

A: Growing up in Southern California, I always felt the need to escape to nature and slow down. Now we're swimming with dolphins and watching koalas play.

Q: And spying on glossy black cockatoos.

A: Oh, well, yes, and there's that too.

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I Never Expected ...

A LANGUAGE PROBLEM: MINE

Even though everyone speaks English around here, I don't always get the terminology. Someone once asked me to get something out of the “boot of the car.” I finally figured out the boot is the trunk, and the “bonnet” is the hood.

THE LACK OF ENTERTAINMENT OPTIONS

Going to the movie theater is a thing of the past. And I miss Mexican food. You can't get it here like you can in the United States. It's pretty much a two-pub town. The advantage is when you have a beach or campground to yourself.

KANGAROO HONOR

The island is so isolated from Australia's other states and territories that people carry a real sense of pride — stronger than I've seen elsewhere in the country.

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