

Forestdale - South of the River.

High in the Jacaranda, a Currawong calls to her mate. She is warning him that the pesky Magpie is somewhere about, waiting to swoop. Cousin he may be, but no friend. The Magpie is territorial, aggressive, a bully. He rules by attacking other birds in a manner most unbecoming to our little patch of paradise. The trick is to draw him off with a bit of minced beef and, while he is suitably distracted, there is time to see to the Butcher birds, the Noisy Miners and the Kookaburras, along with the Currawongs, that come every morning - and most afternoons - for a feed. There can be anything up to twenty or thirty birds, at one time, all jostling for some food. There is little place or time for a pecking order here, as the birds various swoop and strut, gobble and go. Occasionally, an argument will break out, as they accuse each other noisily of taking more than their fair share. All keep a wary eye out for the Magpie. We will have to have words. He seems to have forgotten that it was us who fed him when he was a squawking abandoned fledgling.

We have heard the advice about not feeding wild birds, but after ten years of drought it was hard to watch the wild-life that were obviously struggling. It started with two Butcher birds that flew in from their nest at the bottom of the block. They didn't tell us - they didn't have to - but we knew that some chicks had arrived and like all good parents they were foraging desperately. We liked the way that they announced their arrival by trilling loudly from the shelter of the Pepper tree. A little ball of meat thrown towards them would be caught as delicately as you would like. This would then be ferried off to the safety of the upper branches of the large gums or neatly trapped in the junction of two branches and consumed in situ. These days, they are bolder and will come to the shelf outside the kitchen window. Their soft mewling is usually enough to attract our attention, but when all else fails, they will burst into song. From that time, it became a routine; a routine in which the flock has grown gradually to its present proportions. Feed one, feed them all. We can't have anyone going hungry.

If the truth be known, the birds have become substitutes for our two dearly departed ancient and much loved Labradors. It is Nature's way of compensation. We have always been fortunate enough to enjoy the presence of the King Parrots, the Moreton Bay Rosellas, the Rainbow Lorikeets and the screeching Cockatoos-in-the-morning, all of whom tended to stick to above dog-height, but were happy enough to drop in for a drink when the bird-bath had some water. Even the beautiful little Barrel-chested Finches would swarm down from the highest tops, when the dogs were asleep. Every morning would begin with the dogs excitedly 'sniffing the news' as they toured the yard investigating who or what had visited during the night. Occasionally, a frenzy of barking would announce that some intruder had been uncovered, although the day they found the Echidna, some sort of wary, mutual respect gave way to an uneasy truce. Since the dog's departure, the Wood Ducks now feel emboldened to waddle across the lawn, the Galahs openly help themselves to the Bindii-eye (and many thanks for doing so; please come again!) and the Crested Pigeons are just taking liberties, as they strut about flaunting their Pippi Longstocking red legs. Colour is the order of the day. Who but Nature would think to serve up a palette of pink and grey or blue and yellow or green and red and have them blend beautifully into the foliage? We seem to have lost one set of companions. There was a pair of Willie Wag-tails who appeared to be the only birds that the dogs tolerated, as they darted cheekily collecting stray bits of dog-hair for their nest. It must have been a deluxe fur-lined nest. Perhaps the shortage of fur has forced them to look elsewhere? Perhaps they just miss their friends, as we do?

The crowning glory has been the Masked Lapwings who have set up home for the last two years on the back grass. Two clutches of eggs; two successful hatchings; and what great parents they make. They are highly protective of

both eggs and young, to the extent that the grass goes un-mowed for the duration. A good excuse for not doing, but the reality is one of self-preservation. It is not hard to see where the design came from for dive-bombers when two Masked Lapwings are swooping around our ears. After hatching, they shepherd their brood around the yard, squawking continually at any slight interruption or potential threat. Gradually, they have come to terms with the notion that we intend them no harm. Indeed, a bigger danger to them lies in the family of Frilly Lizards who have taken to venturing further from the trees and onto the grass. On occasions, they have made it as far as the house, which tells us that the dogs probably did a great job of keeping their reptilian cousins at bay.

One more guest must rate special mention. For three or four years now we have caught brief glimpses of what we came to think of as a Goshawk. Reddish in hue, shy in character, we never got close enough to identify it for certain. Then, one afternoon, to our utter astonishment, there on the wall outside the window, was a long, gingery-brown, pheasant-like bird. Not a pheasant, as it happens, but a Pheasant Coucal, a member of the Cuckoo family. Beautifully camouflaged, the plumage blends in with leaf debris, this ground-dweller actually builds its own nest. Well, of course it does! There is little that is conventional about our yard.

The drought has broken. The routine has lingered, although some interesting changes have occurred. The Hibiscus hedge at the side of the house, which has struggled for years to gain a foothold, has now burst forth in all its glory. It creates the screen that we have been hankering after all these years whilst at the same time providing us with a source of never-ending entertainment. Birds flit in and out, helping themselves to the nectar on offer. The Honey-eaters, in particular, have returned in considerable numbers. They have been joined by an infinite variety of butterflies, insects of strange, mysterious colours, a profusion of spiders made immediately visible in the early morning by the dew on their webs and, although we cannot see them, we know that the White ants are busily munching away at the fence rails. The skinks and geckoes grow quietly fat on the rich pickings. The Sacred Kingfishers and the Cuckoo Shrikes help themselves to the White ants, having already colonised their nests high in the gums.

If anything, the level of entertainment increases at night. In the light shed from the window, it is possible to watch one drama after another unfold, as unsuspecting moths become supper for lizards or insects are trapped in intricate spider webs. Glory of all glories! Our Green Tree Frogs have returned. During the drought, we could go months or even years without seeing or hearing them, but since the return of the rain, we have heard them croaking in the downpipes and gutters, are seeing them on their nocturnal ramblings and have found one that has taken up residence in the mail-box. We have long-since become used to seeing and hearing the Flying Foxes, although their numbers have been seriously down in recent times, but it is the Possums who steal the show. Where do they learn to dance, for it is quite a repertoire that they work through on the roof? Do they carry the music in their heads or is it just the celebration of being alive? Regardless, when they have grown tired of cavorting and the new dawn rises to the chorus of the Kookaburras, they slip off back to their hidey-holes in the car-port, where they can get more than a little grumpy, if disturbed.

When we are asked where this piece of Eden is, we reply, "South of the river, twenty- five minutes from the CBD" - and continue to be amazed by the number of people who have never been.