

# Pelicans

It was late morning on a hot, cloudless day and all living things were preparing for a long afternoon siesta. The sleepy stumpy-tail lizards had had an unusually busy morning chasing each other around the flower garden. Funny big fat bumpy creatures with matchstick legs smoothing out the sand with their chubby tails. But now they were totally worn out and had reverted to their usual state of drowsiness under the tank stand.

A row of shags were standing on the river-bank with their wings outstretched, drying their feathers before flying off to a shady tree somewhere. On the far side of the river an old red kangaroo lay sprawled out in the dust under a massive Red Gum. Even the butcherbirds had given up terrorising the unwelcome English sparrows and had gone away to organise some singing practice for the youngsters. We had watched a mother ruffle her wings up in despair at the tonelessness of two fledglings. Being a music teacher myself I understood completely how she felt. One of the exam syllabus exercises we do is to play a tune but stop just before the end and get the student to try and sing the last anticipated note.

Well the mother grey butcher was doing the very same exercise. She had a fledgling puffed up on either side of her and proceeded to sing melodiously about distant lands with far flung rivers, and the joy of homecoming. When she got to the last note she bowed her head low as a signal for the little fledglings to sing a simple toot toot-toot toot of admiration.

Unfortunately the best she could get out of them was a rather late and out of time squeak. She tried again and again, some-times just repeating the last phrase of her glorious cadenza, but the fledglings never quite got their part together so she gave up and let them go off and play. The defeated mother sat and stared at a knothole in the tree for a while and ominously hummed the tune to Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

But there was no music practice today under the relentless sun and I dragged the lay-back canvas chair beneath the lemon scented gum and settled back to do some serious thinking underneath a wet handkerchief. I had scarcely got settled when I sensed something approaching. I couldn't hear anything, but simply felt a bump in the air. I opened one eye and peered out from under the sanctuary of the handkerchief and was startled

to see a line of massive pelicans gliding silently at head height straight towards my chair.

I stayed very still and watched as the first swept over my face, so close he could have grabbed me with his long beak. I could see the look in his eye and the wrinkles in his leathery feet. A second pelican followed and a third and fourth and more in close succession until eight of the great birds had swept over me.

With a single flap the procession of pelicans rose up over the house and began a very tight spiral in a thermal of air that seemed to rise directly above the hot iron roof. Spellbound I lay back and watched these ancient flying boats as they effort- lessly circled the rising air casting sweep- ing shadows across the ground. For the next hour I flew with them, my spirit rising up into the distant blue, until they were just specks that disappeared into worm holes in space.

I could see the distant horizon through their eyes. To the south the Mallee surrounded a patchwork of vast wheat fields. To the north the saltbush country rolled away over the horizon. But to the east, if you looked far enough you could make out the first bumps which marked the foothills of the Great Divide. And somewhere over there, hidden below the granite ridges lay Secret Gully.

Pelicans never visit Secret Gully. There's not enough clear space for a pelican to turn around and the runway is far too short. I've seen them occasionally flying high above the ridges, on their way to some coastal resort where the fishing is good and the company is jovial. Although sometimes they drop into a nearby swamp for the night and swap yarns with a pass- ing jabiru.

To the East of Secret Gully you'll see the odd pelican on the beach at Byron Bay. Supremely skilled gliders, they ride the air pressure on the faces of incoming waves.

But I was far from the coast, enjoying a visit to the flat dry country with its ancient river systems and deserted lakes, where the water is thick with pelicans. Here they work in teams, herding the fish and gorging themselves until their soft throat is heavy with their catch.

Late in the afternoon they like to take a rest and a massive old dead tree on the edge of the river is a favourite spot for all the water birds. I watched with interest one day when an overweight pelican circled the tree looking for a place to land. Every branch was full of birds - shags,

pelicans, darters, spoonbills, herons, you name it! The old dead wood branches creaked ominously, and every time the heavy pelican approached a branch all the birds settled on it would call out in alarm and tell the pelican to go away.

But he was determined, and eventually he spied a little tiny spot on the very tip of a high branch, and came in with his feet stuck out ready to grab on. The birds all cried out in warning, but it was too late and as the great pelican landed there was a loud snap and the branch exploded and fell to the ground. You can imagine the commotion, the air was full of birds flapping and cursing, and now there was no- where for any of them to land.

No doubt, great size can have its draw- backs, but I know that if I ever had the chance I'd love to change places for a few weeks with a pelican. I'd visit the Coorong and pay my respects to my birthplace, and then I'd follow the Murray river up from its mouth. I'd take my time and investigate the backwaters and go fishing in all the lakes. And then, maybe I'd head up the Darling river and make my way into Queensland.

And I wouldn't need to take anything. No horse, no car, no trail-bike, no billy and no swag, no box of matches, no fish hooks and no tent.

Life could be so simple. If you were a pelican!