SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #1 | 2022

July

ENCOUNTERING GHOST SPECIES

Cameron Muir

Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

1 • 2022

Cameron Muir

On Lord Howe Island, 600 kilometres off of Australia's east coast, you can snorkel the world's southernmost coral reef, clamber up a basalt mountain to a cloud forest 850 metres above the sea, and clap your hands to induce providence petrels to fall from the sky and land at your feet. David Attenborough once described this place as "so extraordinary it is almost unbelievable." It's the last place I'd expect to witness suffering and death.

Flesh-footed shearwater surrounded by pieces of plastic removed from its stomach in the research station on Lord Howe Island, 2018.

I'm here following biologist Jenn Lavers and her team as they study shearwater birds that feed their chicks to death with ocean plastic. Each day we wake at dawn to collect the birds that have died on their first flight and then washed up on the beaches. By midmorning, we head to the lab, where the scientists dissect the birds, pulling out piece after piece of plastic, and then we work until close to midnight in the colony, pumping the chicks' stomachs with water to induce them to vomit pieces of plastic.

Today I've walked to Mount Gower, Lord Howe's highest mountain, where the sheer cliffs catch the humid seaborne winds, creating a microclimate and shrouding the summit in a near-permanent band of mist. The palms are low, the trees gnarled, and everything is coated with moss and lichen. You have to crouch and crawl as if you're in a miniature world. Through the gaps in the canopy, you can see providence petrels riding the winds, courting. Seabird enthusiasts from around the world travel here to witness this.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-950

I've come to escape the bleak rhythms of collecting, dissecting, and counting. I'm with a group, and at the summit canopy, fellow trekkers pant and wheeze, compare cuts and scrapes, torn clothes, and mud stains. As I sit on sedges and grasses, eating a muesli bar, a woodhen emerges from the forest.

The researchers work in the colony at night, pumping water into the birds' stomachs to induce them to vomit pieces of plastic (a technique they call "lavarging"). © Cameron Muir. All rights reserved.

I'd heard about these birds. They have become part of a conservation success story, lauded by locals and scientists. Forty years ago, the woodhen faced extinction. Ornithologists only counted 15 birds. Beginning in the 1970s, with millions of dollars in funding, conservationists began a program to eradicate cats and pigs on the island. One scientist, who spent a year working on a captive breeding program, tending to the incubated eggs, carefully turning them a little each day, and waking every two hours to handfeed chicks with tweezers. Their population numbers about 300 today.

The woodhen forages in the grass and then steps a little closer to me. He's drab, olive grey, a little smaller than a common farmed hen, with no flourishes save for some white ear coverts and mottling through his nape. He doesn't have a melodic sing song; he communicates through a series of low grunts. This is the most unostentatious miracle bird you could imagine.

Now he walks under my raised knees and for a moment I'm thrilled that this special bird is so close, a creature back from the brink, nonchalantly pecking at the crumbs of my muesli bar, oblivious to how precarious his existence was.

But then he looks at me, and I notice his unnerving red iris, then he turns his head and inspects me with his other eye.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-950

And I can tell that at this moment, he knows. He might've looked dim at first, but he knows.

A Lord Howe woodhen (*Hypotaenidia sylvestris*) emerges from the forest at the summit of Mt Gower. © Cameron Muir. All rights reserved.

I can't help thinking about E. O. Wilson's alternative name for the Anthropocene, the Eremocene, or "the Age of loneliness," which foreshadows an epoch of existential isolation after humans have extinguished much of the living world. As Delia Falconer writes in the *Sydney Review of Books*, we face the prospect of a future "in which we are thrown back only upon ourselves."

So I tell the woodhen, "I know, buddy."

In James Bradley's novel *Clade*, set in the near climate-changed future, a scientist has reached the end of his marriage, and cruelly tells his partner the birds that she watches out the window are declining, but no one knows why: "... they might look fine but they've stopped breeding, or if they're still breeding their eggs aren't hatching, or the heat is killing the chicks. The ones you can see here are adults because that's all that's left, and when they're gone that will be the end of them."

He says, "They're a ghost species."

I look at the woodhen, this spectre from a previous epoch, and I wonder if his mates, the shearwaters down below this mountain, are a ghost species. I wonder how long until someone decides to intervene and begin breeding them by hand in warm boxes.

I look the woodhen in the eyes and tell him, "I know you know."

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-950

And maybe it's from the exertion of the climb, but I swear he's mocking me. He knows our fates are entwined. Humans aren't so different.

And then he puts on his dim, impassive look again, our brief encounter over, and wanders back into the forest.

DOI: 10.5282/rcc-springs-950

Cameron Muir is a writer and environmental historian. His work has been shortlisted for the NSW Premier's History Awards, the Eureka Prize for Science Journalism, and the Bragg Prize for Science Writing. He is co-editor of the literary anthology, *Living with the Anthropocene: Love Loss and Hope in the Face of Environmental Crisis* (2020). In 2013–14 he was a Carson Fellow. He is currently a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Western Australia exploring "shadow places" in the Australian Anthropocene.

Cite this article

Muir, Cameron. "Encountering Ghost Species." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 1 (July 2022). https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-950.

Springs: *The Rachel Carson Center Review* is an open-access online publication for peer-reviewed articles, creative nonfiction, and artistic contributions that showcase the work of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) and its community across the world. In the spirit of Rachel Carson, it publishes sharp writing with an impact. Surveying the interrelationship between environmental and social changes from a wealth of disciplines and perspectives, it is a place to share rigorous research, test out fresh ideas, question old ones, and to advance public and scholarly debates in the environmental humanities and beyond.

Springs is available online. To view, please visit
https://springs-rcc.org

ISSN 2751-9317

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research