

HANNAH STEEL

NEW RHYTHMS: EARTH. AIR. WATER — SOUTH NEPTUNE ISLANDS

The two South Neptune Islands provide little shelter for the windswept vegetation clinging to its limestone capping. After living here for a while, every part of the rockscape becomes familiar. Each spring the islands wear magnificent crowns of yellow and white wildflowers, of Australian hollyhocks and Coastal Daisy-bush. In amongst the granite boulders with their patches of ochre lichen, a rockery flourishes with compact silver cushion bush, blue flax lilies and clumps of Australian pelargonium. Sweet smelling tangles of musk daisies climb up the garden walls and hum with the visits of native bees. With the changing seasons we learn to distinguish the different plants as they flower and fruit: Ruby Saltbush, Sea berry Saltbush and Coastal Bonefruit.

The first summer when we make jam from the nitre currants; its astringent taste alarms us. Have we poisoned ourselves? Francis makes a hurried call to the Botanical Gardens in Adelaide. Next batch we merely add more sugar. We nibble on the Karkalla figs ripening in fields of yellow and pink pigface, sample the salty Grey Samphire and use the crisp, green sea celery in the place of parsley. The once undistinguished bush, as I first saw it, becomes an abundant native garden and orchard. When the rains begin again, saltwater creeks trickle across the fresh moss green lawn where the thick carpet of yellow billy buttons will flower. Buckets of rock salt crystallise in granite pools.

The saltspray and summer winds mock at our attempts to grow imported tomatoes and zucchini. The winds rip through the house gardens stripping the coprosmas of leaves where any branches are exposed above the fences. We constantly repair the glass-house. I plant silverbeet among the saltbush while the Shearwaters are away. Every year, when the earth is soft, we weed out a patch of introduced electric yellow sour sobs before they finish flowering and we begin on the dandelions. We collect the rock salt ample for our needs. We learn to work with the earth and weather rhythms.

An elegant flock of 100 Cape Barren Geese, grey feathers bejewelled with black, settle in winter. They are one of the world's rarest species of goose. As do the seals, they make their ground nests only on the second island. The large whitish eggs are covered over with soft feather down while they come to graze on our island. As the zebra striped chicks grow, we learn to recognise the

wounded parent distraction trickery, with the 'broken-wing' display. The adult geese when moulting are unable to fly, and become desperate if we come too close, even making kamikaze leaps off rocks into the ocean swells.

Each spring tens of thousands of Shearwaters return from the Arctic Circle for breeding. The fishers see their arrival first, out at sea; then on the equinox, at dusk, the muttonbirds start circling the islands to make their spectacular return. Black shapes criss-crossing the airwaves, they are clumsy on landing. We watch enthralled for hours. The island becomes alive; the saltbushes shake with the growling and chattering of Shearwaters. Dirt splays everywhere as they dig out their burrows (and decimate any of our surviving winter vegetables). We adjust to their cycles, avoiding the warren of burrows as best we can, and, if we do inadvertently collapse their underground nest and bury them, dig out the chick or brooding parent, which attacks in panic.

The spring mating flights of the Crested Terns, as they spiral in perfect unison, are more breathtaking than any military aircraft display. A pair ascends skybound, occasionally followed by a third in pursuit. Two separate out to start the downward dance, the courtship mirroring, as they dip and glide, pure beauty. Then another pair soars high to start. Each year 1000s of Crested Terns find a different place on the islands for breeding; their location marked by sheer gleaming white. Some seasons a small group of minute Fairy Terns also fly in.

We try not to disturb the Crested Tern colonies, because they rise in squawking agitated clouds, leaving eggs and chicks exposed to waiting scavenger seagulls, likely to swoop in for a meal. Even the seals and Sea Lions seem aware and make space for the birds on the rocks and beach when they bring out their young to await the return of the other parent with a garfish in its beak. The seals and Sea Lions choose a different, nearby spot on which to snooze; this species leaving room for another.

The Shearwaters' cycles become predictable. When they all disappear in November they have merely gone off to feed, after mating. On their return we wait for the day they lay - to find the large white eggs strewn about by those pairs with burrow unfinished. Francis installs layers of plastic downpipe for emergency nesting. For a couple of months it is impossible to drive the tractor after dusk because of the carpet of birds. Soon after the adults leave, the juveniles practise flying. They no longer smash into the light-tower, with only its narrow solar powered beam, but they hit the wind-generator until Francis installs a light to illuminate the blades.

We learn that our two sensitive White-breasted Sea Eagles are likely to abandon

the chicks if we disturb them – if we get too close to the stick nest on the eyrie above the chasm on the second island. Each year we watch for their offspring, wait for their first flight to our island. So familiar becomes the birdscape that when we have airy visitors, such as crows, or the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, they stand out as a comet in the stars. Francis has to get out his bird identification book when we first see two rare Red-tailed Tropicbirds in December 1991; he searches for a nest in the granite cliffs when a juvenile accompanies them. Returning next October, the two mature birds will stay again until early summer.

When full summer arrives and most Cape Barren Geese have gone to greener pastures, the two pairs which stay drink the chooks' water and stroll into the house gardens to eat the gazanias. We move the water container closer and closer to the kitchen window to encourage them. Great wings rise in alarm if we inadvertently spring open the back-door too suddenly. They honk and trumpet in warning. The beauty of these wild creatures contrasts strongly with the greedy domestication of the fowls.

Dragon lizards, the male gaily decorated to match the gold lichen, and geckos sun themselves on the rocks. Francis bottles up some of the spiders to send to the South Australian Museum to identify. We think ourselves lucky not to have the poisonous dugite snakes here, which are numerous on the North Neptune Islands, remnant population from some past era. With the lack of fresh water springs on South Neptune, neither do we have any land mammals. The sense of sharing the islands with other creatures grows stronger; this is especially so with the marine mammals.

As the landscape became familiar, so too does the seascape. We become adept at catching fish and recognise schools of tuna when they skit past the island, leaping and skipping. We learn the movements of the fur seals and Sea Lions and know the places where they congregate in the water. Occasionally far out at sea to the north, in the good weather, we see pods of Common Dolphins presumably venturing down from the more sheltered waters near the mainland. Our most exciting sea visitors arrive in Autumn. In April, sometimes the weather is perfect and the sea glasses out as the plankton rises to form a film. Large pods of Oceanic Dolphins pass through. The first year we see them we are merely aware of a lot of black shapes frisking on the horizon. The following year, I am tempted out and find it is safe to go several kilometres out. Experience and familiarity curls around and protects me. The dolphins stream through the air to bow-wave the dinghy.

I am careful not to interrupt a large group of dolphins seriously schooling fish, circling collectively with some members feeding. Most on the rim keep the fish

tightly contained while others flash through to feed. Crested Terns plummet from above. I watch from a distance. Suddenly a flipper in the air, a female Sea Lion is cooling, resting from her work helping to herd the fish. I chortle with disbelief to realise that these two different species are working harmoniously together. Immediately and powerfully, it feels all right to be part of this whole.

The next year, same season, huge cumulonimbus clouds tower and rainbows stalk the seas, but the weather is stable and it is safe still. When I see the black shapes far out at sea, I head out in our twelve foot dinghy. I have to be alert for they seem to stay in the vicinity only for a few days. When I am a couple of kilometres out from the island, tens of dolphins race to meet me. So many, a crowded carnival, one bumps the boat. I turn off the outboard. Large dolphins move everywhere, as long as the boat. Close in, weaving, checking me out, eye to eye, and huffing. I put my feet over the side into the water. Along swims a super large dolphin with seaweed slung on the dorsal fin. Then this decorated dolphin breaks right out of the water, belly towards me, and straight up in the air a metre away, then splash.

I am witness to such a performance that it is hard to believe what I see. When some of the great grey scarred dolphins disperse, another group will come bouncing over. If I start the dinghy, invariably some break from a feeding group and charge over to dance and leap. They breach and tail slap. What are they tuning into? Occasionally I can reach out and stroke.

I learn to expect these hundreds of dolphins every year, on their migrations east and anticipate their arrival with great joy.

