

AvIan Whimsy #45 — With extreme prejudice

I'm biased. Actually I think that we all are, and I further think that that's fine as long as we acknowledge it. My strongest bias is based on my concept of what it means to be Australian and my relationship to the land. I am not especially 'proud' to be Australian; pride is for me an utterly irrelevant concept with regard to country. We can take no credit for the existence of the things that make the land and its life so very special (though plenty of shame for the damage wrought). On the other hand I feel very very privileged indeed, but with that privilege comes a weight of responsibility. Despite all the changes already imposed on the Australian environment, it is still recognisably unique and ultimately a product of a unique set of climatic and geographical circumstances. I believe that we have a duty to resist further 'global homogenisation' of that environment, as far as we can.

Accordingly I am unequivocally biased, where a choice has to be made, in favour of native species and against exotic ones. There are probably examples where choice is unnecessary; Goldfinches seem only to be interested in exotic seeds and Greenfinches are probably too scarce here to be an issue. We need to be pretty careful about this though.

Take Blackbirds for instance. This Whimsy actually had its genesis at a meeting I recently attended where a high profile and highly respected (including by me) birdo expressed a fondness for Blackbirds. It is often asserted that they do no harm, but I think the precautionary principle requires us to adopt the French or Mexican legal position and make no presumption of innocence. I imagine we have all observed aggression by Blackbirds towards native species, but more insidious to me is their ability to penetrate a range of relatively pristine habitats far from humans. I've seen them thus in dense coastal heathland on the Coorong and in tall wet forests in Errinundra and the Brindabellas. It is not reasonable to assume that there are empty niches there waiting to be filled, so it is probable that they are displacing something else.

Ergo, I believe that complacency is misplaced.

I have heard it said that even among COG members there are those who oppose Indian Myna control on the grounds that all things have a right to live. My private suspicion is that this is an urban myth and that such individuals do not exist, but if they do and you are one, here is my challenge to you. You know and I know that it is an untenable position. For instance, in a given nest hollow we can have myna chicks or Rosella (or Kingfisher or Dollarbird or treecreeper) chicks, but not both; allowing the mynas and rosellas both to live is not then an available option and the mynas virtually always win out. So, I am declaring my bias by saying that I prefer rosella chicks to myna chicks and am prepared to intervene to ensure that they prevail. In return I want you to say publicly that you prefer the mynas, because by allowing them to live and breed we are ensuring that the rosellas will not. In no way am I declaring that my position is 'right' – it is only a bias after all – and it is not one whit more valid than yours. It's just that we both need to be prepared to declare our biases, and acknowledge the implications of our stance.

One might reasonably point out that rosellas and kingfishers (say) can't use the same hollow either but firstly, after millenia of millenia of co-evolution a *modus vivandi* was long ago reached – existing nests are not usurped and chicks and eggs not evicted or smothered.

Secondly of course we have drastically reduced the already finite number of available hollows, thus putting the less aggressive native species at a disadvantage entirely of our making. I think that imposes on us an obligation. Another frequently heard comment is “it’s not their fault – humans are the real problem”. I would suggest firstly that that’s a red herring – it’s not about ‘fault’, which is an irrelevance as applied to animals. Secondly, while logically valid, it doesn’t go anywhere with regard to resolving the problem; in fact it’s usually an excuse for doing nothing, which is not an ethical option. But all of this is just reflecting my own bias. What’s yours?

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