

# CREPUSCULAR



Front Cover  
Image  
Boobook Owl  
Photography  
Louis Porter  
Taxidermy  
Dean Smith

Exhibition dates  
12.05.11 - 06.07.11

Gallery hours  
Monday 10am - 2pm  
Tues to Fri 11am - 6pm  
Saturday 11am - 4pm

City Gallery  
Melbourne Town Hall  
Swanston Street  
(enter via halftix)  
[melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery)



# THE WILD ANIMALS OF MELB URNE



Image:  
Brushtail Possum  
Photography:  
Louis Porter  
Taxidermy:  
Dean Smith

*crepuscular* *adj.*

1. of or resembling twilight. 2. of certain insects, birds, and other animals active at dawn and dusk.

As commuters step onto shiny escalators and descend into the loop, as digital natives search out dim bars and stroke their flashing iphones, and as columns of cars stream out of the city, Melbourne's other inhabitants begin to stir.

The crepuscular theatre is enacted in the half-light, as if in a crack between two time zones, unnoticed by humans, intent on their own kind.

It is Melbourne's possums who most regularly cross this threshold, creatures alternately admired for their audacity and despised for their nightly raids on young leaves and near ripe fruit. The bigger of the two resident species is the Brushtail Possum. *Trichosurus vulpecula* is a robust forager of parkland.

On a hot summer evening, at any of a hundred green places in the city, pull-over, wind down the window and your head will be filled with the inexorable whizz of Greengrocer Cicadas—the white noise of excited males. Step into the parklands and look up into the darkening spaces between spreading elms. As the first stars materialize, you are likely to see zitting micro-bats echo-locating insects.

The inner-metropolitan area is far from an urban desert. The evening explorer will be rewarded with an abundance of wildlife: Ringtail Possums tightrope-walk between buildings above cobbled laneways, rats raid bins and snails glide on glistening trails. From waterways to parks to buildings, urban infrastructure provides multiple micro-environments; nutrients brought in to the city

by the container-load further supercharge the possibilities for life.

What are the origins of the wild animals that have found a niche in the city? Are they a menace to our health or do they bring benefits? How should we respond to their presence?

Melbourne was founded around the shores of Port Phillip Bay, a great shallow lens of salt water, ringed by wetlands and fed by a small sweet river. This rich crescent of land occupies a zone where two major environmental systems converge, breaking into a mosaic of smaller ecologies, all feeding into an immensely productive biological basin. It is no surprise that it has been a preferred site for human habitation for millennia.

The land that has become Melbourne marks the convergence of the basalt plains to the west and the thickly forested hills of the east. East and west both have their own distinctive fauna – here the Kulin could be assured of shelter and abundant food to support extended gatherings.

It was this richness that attracted Batman and his followers to the area. The colonists were blind to the ways of traditional indigenous land maintenance preferring to cultivate their own familiar species. The new system was made manifest by the imposition of Hoddle's rectangular grid over the gently undulating topography, abutting the Yarra's sinuous form. Open drains and ships at anchor quickly replaced the red gums and flowering wattles that had lined the river. It was not only humans and their cats that arrived on the first vessels. Stowaways, like the Black Rat, also made their way ashore.

Across the colony, earth was turned-over in search of gold. This precious mineral was abundant and provided the ambition that made Melbourne marvelous. This wealth and trends in urban planning enabled the creation of the parkland. Inspired by the great estates of Britain and France, the gardens could only reach their picturesque potential when planted with trees from Europe and Americas, with a sprinkling of Australian species, like the statuesque Bunya Pine from Queensland.

Animals were also required to ensure that the elms and oaks burst forth with sounds familiar to the colonists, so the Acclimatisation Society was established at Royal Park to expedite those introductions. On the occasion of its first annual meeting in November 1862, Professor Frederick McCoy summarised the society's purpose:

*... bringing together in any one country the various useful or ornamental animals of other countries having the same or nearly the same climate and general conditions of surface.*

Indeed, McCoy celebrated the coloniser's opportunity to further God's work.

*If Australia had been colonised by any of the lazy nations of the earth, this nakedness of the land would have been indeed an oppressive misfortune, but Englishmen love a good piece of voluntary hard work, and you will all, I am sure, rejoice with me that this great piece of nature's work has been left for us to do.*

The acclimatisers oversaw the introduction to Victoria of a wide variety of 'useful and ornamental animals', from Mute Swans to



Elephant standing on trailer of Wirth's Circus truck, c1945  
Harold Paynting, Commercial Photographic Co  
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

glossy Himalayan pheasants. Some of the most successful introductions were the Red Fox and the European Rabbit, animals that remain active every evening in the city. These and many other 'acclimatised' animals multiplied beyond the colonial bubbles into which they were released, interacting with and displacing indigenous species on a continental scale.

However, the traffic has not been one way. As Melbourne's world famous elms have matured, their pruned and manicured branches have decayed to provide possums with perfect nesting hollows. Grey-headed Flying-foxes, displaced from their habitat in subtropical forests, have found Melbourne to be brimming with fruit. Chased away from their chaotic camps in the tall trees of the Royal Botanic Gardens - the former home of Ferdinand von Mueller, the man who introduced the blackberry to the colony - flying foxes now stream out of their new riverside roosts each evening.



Gardeners in Queen Victoria Gardens, c1914  
Photographer unknown  
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Through the work of the acclimatisers and a sequence of accidental introductions, nature has become thoroughly mixed up in our city. Plants and animals from six continents have found their niche, together with persistent local species. But we are not unique; Melbourne is just one frontier of a vast biological experiment that will over time, change the course of evolution on a global scale.

Thus the genie was out of the bottle by the advent of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No legislative wave of the hand, such as a White Australia Policy, could end nature's unruly pluralism. Appearances to the contrary prevailed in Melbourne's parkland where lawn and order as assiduously maintained by council workers.

Celebrations of wildness were the exception. Artist Ola Cohn imagined a liminal world of naturalised elves and indigenous animals, carving images of their interaction into the trunk of an ancient River Red Gum at the Fitzroy Gardens. Dreaming, it seemed, was the exclusive sphere of children and artists. By contrast, lions, tigers and elephants were trucked into parkland under the big top of Wirth's Circus and Menagerie of Performing Wild Animals, to be presented as 'An education and an object lesson'.

Change gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s. The English Cottage Garden was rethought and suburban gardens bloomed with 'native': grevilleas, banksias and showy eucalypts (originating mainly from the north and west of the continent) provided nectar for sabre-beaked honeyeaters and feather-tongued lorikeets. It seemed for a time, that biological and cultural nationalism would flourish.

The reality of climate change hit home in the first decade of the new millennia. Once again cultural factors were reflected in horticultural practice. Neither the ideological purity of 'native gardens', nor the revival of the fecund greenery of the 'Garden State' would suffice in the face of increasingly intense and prolonged aridity. Low energy solutions were required for the uncertainly with which we were confronted.

City planners reviewed their plant lists with an eye to water use as well as amenity. New gardens such as the Trin Warren Tam-Boore (bellbird waterhole) were developed. Located at the western corner of Royal Park, these wetlands were designed with consideration

John Wolseley  
*The Nocturnal Life  
of Melbourne's  
Parks and Gardens.*  
2011 (detail)  
Watercolour on  
paper, 111 x 244 cm  
City of Melbourne  
Art and Heritage  
Collection



of the 'ecosystem services' that accrue with attracting a diverse array of insects, birds and microorganisms to feed on recycled storm water run-offs from surrounding roads, gutters and rooftops.

Simultaneously rooftop and vertical gardens have been nurtured at previously barren sites, providing islands of green as stepping stones for dragonflies and crepuscular moths. Recent wetland projects across metropolitan Melbourne demonstrate that we are learning to live with and encourage nature, not just for its picturesque qualities, though they are undeniable, but for the other benefits that are intrinsic to complex, well structured ecosystems.

The recent drought had more dramatic consequences in the hinterland than any we experienced in the relatively well-watered city. Mature trees withered, wildfire proliferated and populations of bushland animals plummeted. The absence of arboreal marsupials drove the forest's most magnificent predator, the Powerful Owl, to abandon upland territories.

Some individuals found their way into the heart of the city where they discovered a population of over-sexed possums squeezed into the parklands. The abundance of food and shelter embolden competitors—male possums fight for mates and in the process run themselves ragged and maul their opponents. Swooping on broad silent wings, the newly arrived Powerful Owls effortlessly pick-off and consume preoccupied possums.

Can Melbourne's 'possum problem' be managed? Possibly — if these eagle-sized owls are

Powerful Owl,  
Fitzroy Gardens,  
2007  
Photography:  
Lucas D'Arcy



encouraged to make a permanent home in our parkland. To this end, four huge nesting boxes have recently been installed at favoured roosting sites around the city. It is hoped that the chicks of *Ninox strenua* will be raised on possum meat this season, adding to the influx of new residents with a 3000 post code.

There is the potential for accommodation with nature in Melbourne, but we must be willing to bend to nature's vitality. Humans and their domesticated animals are not the only species that make this city livable.

John Kean



Mali Moir  
*Short-finned  
 Eel Anguilla  
 australis*, 2011  
 Oil based paints  
 on lead  
 23 X 100 cm

Alexis Beckett  
*Trin Warren  
 Tam-boore Wetlands  
 #1, 2 & 3*, 2011  
 Glass dome,  
 silkscreened  
 baked decal,  
 acrylic base  
 Each 16 x 28cm

Back Cover:  
 Dianne Emery  
*Adult Greengrocer  
 Cicada Cyclochila  
 australasiae*, 2011  
 (detail)  
 Watercolour on  
 Kelmscott vellum  
 12 x 19 cm

Dianne Emery  
*Greengrocer  
 Cicada nymph  
 skin Cyclochila  
 australasiae*, 2011  
 (detail)  
 Watercolour on  
 Kelmscott vellum  
 12 x 19 cm

Crepuscular is based on new works created especially for the exhibition by Alexis Beckett, Dianne Emery, John Pastoriza-Pifol, Mali Moir and John Wolseley. They are keen observers of nature with a passion for specificity, thanks for your generous embrace of the concept.

Taxidermist Dean Smith has mounted specimens of some Melbourne's most familiar crepuscular animals with animation and charm. Photographs by Lucas D'Arcy inspired their attitude.

Jim Greenwood has dared to dream of establishing breeding pairs of Powerful Owls in the heart of the City. The nesting box he designed and constructed is symbolic of the need for humans to accommodate fierce nature, even in apparently hostile urban spaces.

Works by Andrew Brown and Brook Andrew, from the City Collection provide a handsome counterpoint to the exhibition's scientific focus.

Rob Scott, Brendon Hackett and Robert Stanton have used timber from historically significant trees (weakened by drought and felled by storm) from

Melbourne's parklands to create the large object supports and frames that grace the exhibition.

Danielle Thomas and Belinda Rachele of Park Services have provided invaluable advice about the animals of Melbourne's parklands, as well as delivering for display nests (pre used) and detritus found in the parks. Conversations and with Liz Alcorn, Rob Ellis, Eamonn Fennessy, Angela Hill, Cathy Kiss and Ian Shears of Urban Landscapes in the City Design Division, have illuminated how the rich history of the parklands is being managed with an eye to improved water use, while increasing habitat for wild creatures.

Special thanks to Eddie Butler-Bowdon, Catherine Hockey and Cressida Goddard who manage the innovative program at the City Gallery; where each exhibition provides a focussed insight in to one aspect of the city.

The show is dedicated to Jackie Kerin, Linden Gillbank, Richard Leppitt and all the friends groups who spend their time nurturing nature in the urban landscape.





