

# FROM OUR SOUTHERN CORRESPONDENT THE FINAL CHAPTER



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## “I GET SO TIRED OF THE RAT RACE CHASIN’ MY TAIL LIKE A HOUND I’LL SING ONE LAST SONG FOR OLD TIMES’ SAKE BEFORE I TAKE MY FINAL BOW”

Lindi Ortega (2017)

I mentioned last time that it’s almost exactly 20 years since former Bulletin Editor, Peter Thomas, twisted my arm to write periodic pieces for the Bulletin from a southern perspective. I have to confess that I didn’t expect to still be writing southern correspondent pieces 20 years later. And I’ve reached the conclusion that 20 years is long enough for any one person to rabbit on about stuff. So, this will be my swan song as Southern Correspondent.

As often happens, I got distracted by wondering where the saying “swan song” came from. According to Wikipedia, “(It) is a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance given just before death or retirement. The phrase refers to an ancient belief that swans (*Cygnus* spp.) sing a beautiful song just before their death, having been silent (or alternatively, not so musical) during most of their lifetime.” As with many things in ecology, there is debate about this. It turns out that there have been arguments about the saying for a while, with people pointing out that most swans aren’t silent and few have been heard singing beautiful songs while they kark it. Still, why let evidence get in the way of a nice idea?

Thinking further about swans took me back to my childhood hobby of stamp collecting and of discovering that a relatively rare and desirable set of stamps featuring swans originated in Western Australia in the mid 1800s. Growing up in Scotland, I knew little or nothing about Western Australia and was also more than a little puzzled that the swans on the stamps were black. At the time I thought this must be an artefact of some primitive printing process, but later discovered that Australian swans are, indeed, black. I’m now completely used to seeing, more or less on a daily basis,

black swans swanning about on the river in Perth (aptly named the Swan River). They make nice swanny noises, but I’ve never heard one sing a beautiful song.

For people living in the northern hemisphere, the initial discovery of black swans came as something of a shock. All swans were white, as far as everyone was concerned, until 1636 when Antonie Caen, a sailor on board the Dutch sailing ship the *Banda*, first sighted black swans near Bernier Island off the south-western coast of Australia.



Western Australia 1 penny stamp, 1854

The author Nassim Nicholas Taleb used black swans as a metaphor for the human propensity to fool ourselves into thinking we know more than we actually do (Taleb, 2007). He suggested that, “It illustrates a severe limitation to our learnings from observations or experience and the fragility of our knowledge. One single observation can invalidate a general statement derived from millennia of confirmatory sightings of millions of white swans. All you need is one single (and I’m told quite ugly) black bird”.

I, personally, think black swans are actually rather handsome birds, but visitors from the northern hemisphere still get a huge kick out of seeing something that is, to them, quite weird. Living in Australia, and particularly the southwest, you grow accustomed to being confronted with biota that don’t conform to the norms by which the rest of the world lives. One never, however, loses the propensity to be surprized and amazed by the flora and fauna here – or to consider the questions these organisms pose to how we understand the natural world.

Taleb describes the Black Swan phenomenon as representing events that are outliers, outside the realm of regular expectations because no past experience can hint at its possibility, that have an extreme impact (think 9/11, the 1987 stock market crash, Brexit, Scotland beating England in a one day cricket match). And despite their inherent unpredictability, humans try to explain their occurrence post hoc in an attempt to make them explainable and predictable. He suggests that events with this combination of rarity, extreme impact and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability are actually incredibly important in shaping our world – much more so than most of the ordinary things we spend our time trying to understand.

The Black Swan idea resonates for me with what we’re currently grappling with in trying to understand our local and global ecologies in the face of unprecedented environmental and social changes. Ecologists spend their time trying to develop predictive capability, but often end up with the conclusion that the organism or ecosystem in question pretty much does as it damned well pleases,



Red-tailed Black Cockatoo eating fruits of the non-native Cape Lilac in Perth, Western Australia © Christine Chester

whether we understand why or not. Here in Perth, we’re trying to understand why another locally iconic black bird, the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, has moved from the forest into the city and is now feasting on the seeds produced by a non-native garden tree, the Cape Lilac. We’ve pretty much documented when the move started (Johnstone *et al.*, 2017) and are looking at the relative nutritional value of the new food source, foraging efficiencies and the like. And we may be able to come up with some pretty convincing ideas as to why the birds might have moved (although cockatoos are renowned as particularly tricky and idiosyncratic organisms). However, 20 years ago, it wouldn’t have even crossed anyone’s mind that the red-tails would become urbanites. Maybe Taleb should rename his book “The Black Cockatoo”.

This is just one example of many in which we’re having to recalibrate our ideas about how species and ecosystems respond to changing conditions. This is challenging, especially in the midst of reduced funding for research and fluctuating political and social interest and engagement. Indeed, we seem to be in an era where dystopian fiction no longer provides a crystal ball into the future but more of a mirror reflecting the current situation. However, it’s also an incredibly exciting time to be an ecologist. And luckily, there are plenty of switched-on enthusiastic young ecologists willing and ready to take part in the quest to better understand, manage and conserve the world’s species and ecosystems.

So, as I say farewell in my last Southern Correspondent article, I do so with a mixture of hope for the future and envy for the people who will continue the ecology enterprise. I’ll also miss the regular opportunity to rib my British colleagues regarding the lack of prowess in whatever sport happens to be being played at the time. Back to the swan song. While I hope I’m not going to drop off the perch any time soon, I did find the derivation in Wikipedia oddly relevant. Having been “not so musical” during most of my lifetime, I picked up a guitar a few years ago, rekindling a desire to play that had lain dormant since my youth. Whether or not I can turn this ambition into “singing a beautiful song” remains to be seen: however, instead of squawking from afar in the pages of the BES Bulletin, I’ll now be putting more time into being a little more musical in the land downunder. Many thanks to Peter Thomas and Alan Crowden for putting up with me, to those who have communicated with me about my articles over the years, and to the few lost souls who have regularly read them. So long, thanks for all the fish, and watch out for low-flying black swans.

## REFERENCES

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