



Cape Chatter

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Magpie Dreaming ...

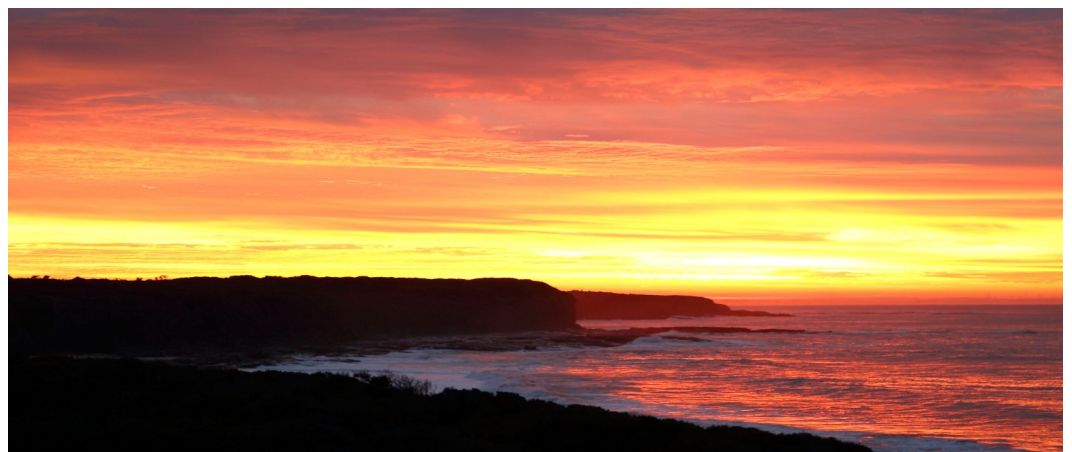
"According to the Dreaming, the sky was once so close to the ground that trees could not grow, people had to crawl, and all the birds were forced to walk everywhere. The days were dark and cold and one day the magpies decided to end this undesirable situation ... they went to the higher hills, took a long stick in their beaks, and kept pushing the sky higher and higher, until they reached the highest mountain in the whole land. Then, with a special heave, they gave the sky one last push! The sky shot up in the air, and as it rose it split open and a huge flood of warmth and light poured through onto the land below. The animals wondered at the light and warmth, but more at the incredible brightly painted beauty of the Sun-Woman. The whole sky was awash with beautiful reds and yellows. It was the first sunrise. So that is why, according to this Dreaming, every morning when the Sun-Woman wakes and lights her early morning fire, to this day all the magpies greet her with their beautiful song, (and) perhaps to remind everyone else of their important role in holding up the sky."

This is an enchanting story about the *Australian Magpie* in Aboriginal Dreaming and the creation of daylight ... for it was the clever magpie that raised the sky and helped emus to straighten their necks, kangaroos to hop and wombats to leave their burrows.

I found this dreaming story in the introduction of a wonderful book I am reading about the **Australian Magpie** by Gisela Kaplan. Given my special relationship with local magpie 'Darcy' who swoops me for 3-4 months of the year during the nesting season, I thought I needed to get a better understanding of his biology and behaviour; why he has such good cognition; how he has the ability to recognise people; and how he works together with his small family group to communicate, defend territory, forage and play. Magpies are one of the more intelligent birds in the world—so what makes *Darcy* tick? I am fortunate (!) to live within *Darcy's* territory and have been getting to know his family group which now consists of another two generations. So I am going to observe and photograph this family more intently and share some of our stories with you over time in *Cape Chatter*.

What a wonderful gathering recently when the people of Cape Paterson were *Welcomed To Country* (and granted a visa!!) by elder Uncle Mick, Sonia and Shane Jnr from the Bunurong Land Council. A most thoughtful and respectful occasion from which, for me, some of the key messages were: *connect to nature, get out and enjoy our natural world... and most importantly, tread softly, give back and help protect what we have left.*

Right:: The Bunurong Coast at sunrise—a dreaming creation ...



Meet the Darcy's ...a local Magpie family group

I settled into **The Cape** in August 2019 and immediately started to get out with the camera to record and photograph the wildlife, particularly the birds. I spent a good deal of time around the central wetlands and along the edge of the Yallock-Bulluk Park. Unbeknown to me, I was entering a well defined magpie territory in which I also had built a house and garden. In 2019, I was free from attack, but in 2020, during magpie nesting season, I became threat number one to 'Darcy'. In that year, Darcy and the missus had four birds that fledged—one remains in the family group—who I have dubbed SOD (*Son of Darcy*). In 2021, despite a couple of failed nesting attempts due to severe storms, two birds fledged late in the season and are still among the family group. Again, I was under sustained attack from Darcy. What I did not realise until now was how fortunate we are to have the well bonded **Mr and Mrs Darcy** (and a couple of other breeding pairs) here within **The Cape**. Reading the *Kaplan* book, I was intrigued to find out that only 14% of magpies ever reproduce and to do so in successive years is even more startling. So what we have here is an interesting bonded pair—tough, resilient, intelligent—and fortunate to have a permanent territory that is supporting their breeding efforts. It is well worth following their fortunes ... so let me introduce the players!



Left: "The Man" ... Darcy, one impressive bird! Males are distinguished by the clean white back. Our local species is the white backed form, ssp *tyrannica*. Picture taken 6 August 2020. **Centre:** Mrs Darcy, lightly grey tinge on the white back. **Right:** Son of Darcy (SOD), hatched in the 2020 season, as a juvenile bird, May 2021. Notice the dark beak and silvery plumage which darkens as it grows.



Left: SOD is growing up! Pictured here on 13 Feb 22, SOD remains as part of the family group and is helping raise the two new youngsters that fledged in late 2021. **Centre:** SOD 11, the older of the fledged birds pictured 8 Feb 22. **Right:** SOD 111, the youngest of the new juveniles and who appears to be spending more time closer to the mother while learning the skill of foraging.

Next *Chatter* I will talk a little bit about the family's territory and their foraging tactics.

The Magpie Lark ...

Another black and white bird that lives ‘side by side’ with our *Australian Magpie* is the *Magpie Lark*—also known as the *Mudlark* and *Peenvee*. A resident pair occupy the same territory as the *Dary* family group, but surprisingly, they are very cautious birds and I have found them difficult to photograph. Recently I managed a couple of close shots and also a territorial interaction with a juvenile *Black-shouldered Kite* near the central wetland.



Above: Magpie Lark pair—the male has a white eye-brow (front) and the female (behind) has a white forehead and neck.



Above: Male Magpie Lark—ever alert!



Whereas *Magpies* display an extremely complex group cooperative behaviour called “mobbing” to evict predators like raptors from their territory, *Magpie Lark* tend to mob but more often than not do not actually force the predator out of their territory as we can see in this sequence of photos—both birds seemingly at peace on the same tree branch! During nesting season, both *Magpie* and *Magpie Lark* (along with *Masked Lapwing*) will be aggressive toward each other, but otherwise, they appear to co-exist in the same territory.



Echidna—"peeky boo" ...

There is quite a bit of *Echidna* movement at the moment. One has been quite at home in our house garden feeding on ants among the mulch and habitat logs (see two pictures directly below) and regularly crossing the road at Sunlight Blvd and Moonshadow Ave ... a good reason to drive slowly and be observant.



The same *Echidna* was busy feeding next to the oval around the same time and was quite at home with its head and beak stuck in a crevice between two large rocks for a reasonable period of time (about 20 minutes). It finally emerged and stuck its head up to check things out, playing peeky-boo, before wandering off for its next source of food, happy that it was safe to move.

Thanks to resident Glenn Satur for alerting me to the *Echidna* on the oval—we managed quite a good chat about this strange animal while watching it feed from a distance.

The hungry caterpillar ...

Some pretty good nature observations in Seaberry Crt recently. I was alerted to the sighting of a very large bright green caterpillar in a small eucalypt tree (I think it might be a *Powlett River Snow Gum*) by resident Fran K who was put onto it by another resident Wendy J. The caterpillar was about 10 cm long, at least the width of my knuckles. After digging into my trusty *Insects of Tasmania* website and *Museum Victoria Fauna App*, the caterpillar was identified as the larvae of an *Emperor Gum Moth*. Stunningly beautiful creature!



These caterpillars are usually found on young adult leaves between October and March. When the caterpillars hatch they are black with short hairs on top of small nodes on their bodies called tubercles. The hairs are not poisonous and will not sting. There are five stages in the caterpillar's appearance, and as the caterpillars mature they change colour each time they shed their skin. The fully grown caterpillars are usually found on the highest branches of the host tree where the leaves are the youngest and easiest to digest. By the final stage before pupation the caterpillars have developed striking green coloration, having a yellow/cream stripe down their bright green/blue body and nodes of red and blue—in this lovely specimen, the nodes are blue and it is probably in the late instar stage, the final stage before being transformed into a cocoon.

Dragonflies and Damselflies ...



I am quite fascinated by these freshwater invertebrates and we have a few different varieties of both *Dragonflies* and *Damselflies* around **The Cape**, particularly around the wetlands, but also within the home gardens. I could watch these insects for hours, enjoying their unusual flight patterns and array of striking colours. They are so exquisitely created and fragile looking.



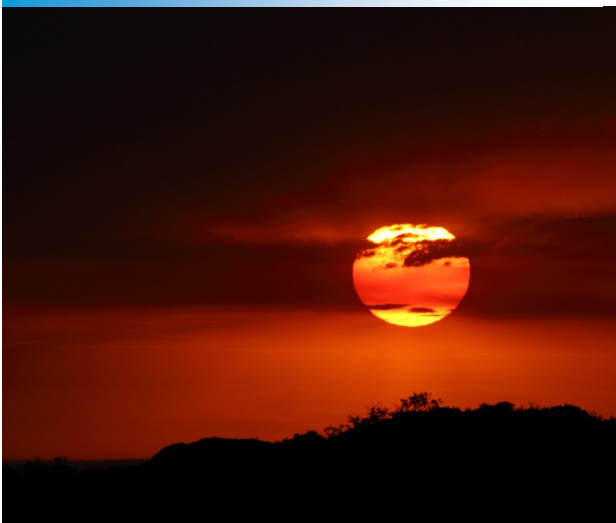
So what are the main differences between a *Dragonfly* and *Damselfly*? Both are active insect predators. *Dragonflies* tend to be larger in size, up to 10 cm in length, more robust in structure and their eyes are large and usually joined together at the top (they look like goggles!). When they land, they usually spread their wings outstretched from their body. They tend to fly more and land less than *Damselflies*. *Damselflies* are generally smaller, about 5cm long, their eyes are bulbous and separated, and when they land, they usually have their wings folded parallel to their body. A *Dragonfly* in flight is pictured in the two bottom right photos, the others are *Damselflies*.

Our pollinators delivering us delicious food from the garden ...

It is wonderful to be able to walk out the back door and pick fresh food from the vegetable garden and it would not be possible without our precious pollinators, particularly our native species. Great work by our *Blue-banded Bee* and *Hoverfly* in helping create some wonderful tomatoes and zucchini/squash.



Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the
Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Feel free to contact David by email or through the website to report any nature observations at **The Cape**.

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