

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Humans are meant to leave only footprints in the remote wilderness of south-west Tasmania, but they are not alone – it's brimming with other creatures great and small.

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Tasmanian Boat Charters runs tours from February to May. For more information, go to tasmanianboatcharters.com.au.

The wildlife expert leading our boat-based expedition around pristine Bathurst Harbour stops abruptly when he spots three huge raptor claws carved into buttery sand along spectacular Stephens Bay. "You rarely see a print like that: an eagle turning slightly and landing hard then walking to food," declares biologist Nick Mooney. He pokes at the nearby carcass of a penguin with ribs splayed in a cavernous yawn of congealed blood. "Fresh dead and turned inside out like a sock," he muses.

Mooney's canvas for claws and paws is about as far away from civilisation as you can get. It's an estuarine outpost on the outer rim of Australia. Next stop Antarctica. There are no roads, no towns and, most of the time, no human beings.

We are outsiders experiencing isolation with near complete ignorance of life and death in the wilds. Our ecological educator unfalteringly fills the breach, scattering information like seeds across the landscape, halting this time at the trail of the world's largest carnivorous marsupial. The quirky broken amble cast into sand is the signature gait of the Tasmanian devil. "No other animal anywhere that I know does that, and Tasmania is the only place in the world where you will see these marsupials on a beach," he says.

Mooney knows because he is the devils' advocate (having worked for years with the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment in Hobart). The beast has, in his estimation, been unfairly maligned. He admires their curmudgeonly ways and knows them well enough to predict which boot they will steal first – the right, as it's usually last to be taken off.

It was Mooney, now regarded as a local hero, who alerted the world to the fact that the Tasmanian devil might be heading for extinction – like the thylacine or Tasmanian tiger – after a contagious form of facial cancer was found to be killing off the population and spreading inexorably over the island. "I'll never forget the horror of seeing that first devil with advanced facial tumour disease," he confides. "Though we don't have records of it here in the Port Davey area."

A STUDY IN SAND

What we have in Port Davey is a scramble over dunes in pursuit of enlightenment. Nature's essay on animal behaviour is right there in front of us. On the left, spotted-tailed quoll prints are bounding amidst strands of giant kelp. On the right, more prints, of a Tasmanian pademelon (wallaby) slowly grazing on salty seaweed chips rich in iodine.

The animals patrolling the wash line are entirely absent on this brightly sunny afternoon but, like us, are drawn to the



fresh drinking water that seeps from creek to bay. All around, the atmosphere is amiable and benign until, quite suddenly, the ground beside my ankle moves. A snake slips silently into the shallows and ripples away upstream. "Probably a black tiger snake," says Mooney, helpfully.

We walk on, framed by raging surf on one side and, on the other, sculpted sandbanks as tall as city walls. Towards the end of the beach, next to the ancient aboriginal middens of the Needwonnee people, there is evidence of a shy albatross. Bones from seal and shearwater, bleached white by the sun, have collapsed into sand next to the shimmering abalone and turbine

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK DAFEEY

shells long ago discarded by indigenous Australians. It's the most poignant natural art installation I have ever seen.

Unlocking the secrets of this profound and prehistoric landscape is not only the task of our expert guide. We also have the keen eye of Pieter van der Woude, the skipper and owner of the *Odalisque* ship and its runabout dinghy. Over the next three days he takes us from crashing coves to calm inlets across a vast reserve that is three times as big as Sydney Harbour and every bit as picturesque.

He knows all about the weather-beating ways of Tasmania and his 20-metre luxury vessel is custom-built for wilderness.

Bathurst Harbour is not an easy trophy. Ships have foundered trying to skirt the brutal coastline of the South West Cape to get into the Port Davey Marine Reserve. There's not one cove along the cliff line to provide shelter from the Southern Ocean

on the voyage into Bathurst Harbour, which forms part of the 1.58 million-hectare Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

One night on the upper deck, with glass of red wine in hand, van der Woude reflects on his career as an abalone diver. It made him enough money to build several boats (including *Odalisque*). "I don't need to do this," he admits. "It's so much bloody harder than I thought it was going to be, but the feel-good return is fantastic. Being here, in this place, changes you all the time.

"This is one of the last untouched remote places left in the world. There's no-one here. It's just so special and I love bringing people, but we are very careful to leave nothing but footprints."

We take a one-hour flight from Cambridge Airport (in Hobart) to a raggedy quartzite strip known as Melaleuca. The airfield exists due to the famous tin miner Deny King, a legend in his own lifetime, who discovered the extinct shrub *Banksia kingii*.

A BIRD IN THE BUSH

Melaleuca is also the home of the critically endangered orange-bellied parrot. A short path through buttongrass and tea-tree leads to a hide for viewing the elusive bird. It is the last known natural nesting place and the threat remains deadly serious for a species thought to be functionally extinct, with less than 33 in the wild and another 350 (at last count) in captivity.

Grown men can become hysterical when they miss out on the little green parrot. "Some have spent fortunes trying to see the dapper things," Mooney recalls. "It would be fascinating if you could take a blood pressure reading before and after a sighting."

No medical intervention is required in our case, since the last remaining individual has already flown to the mainland for

winter, and there is more than enough other wonders in this wilderness to compensate.

Nights on *Odalisque* are spent beneath the domineering peak of Mount Rugby at a home anchorage designed to avert disturbance of the fragile seabed. The evenings with pink sunsets and cool drinks are still, waves lapping under the bow. Days have no set itinerary and run according to whim, wind and tide.

The boat sleeps 10 guests comfortably in four double cabins and a few single bunks. In the saloon, strangers are soon friends. Conversation comes easily when there are channels, mountains and coves to explore.

VIEW OF A LIFETIME

One day we thump at high speed over cresting waves and down into the gentle channel of Old River. We disembark through the cutting grass to marvel at the remnant lumberjack stands of rare Huon pine, towering myrtle, sassafras and celery top pine. Crescent honeyeaters skitter in the canopy and frame every step with a song. At other times, we ascend mountains that slide

"This is one of the last untouched remote places left in the world."

– Pieter van der Woude, skipper

into the sea and, from these heart-pounding peaks, indulge in the panoramic views that you'll likely see only once in a lifetime.

With each return to *Odalisque*, the showers are hot and the guest chef, Michael Ooyendyk, has food on the table before you can say "what bird is that?" Choices depend upon season and spontaneity – from gin-dressed oysters and scallop tarts to Leap Farm goat shoulder and Cape Grim beef.

It's hard to nominate the best part of an exploration that presents the untamed wilderness to you like a lobster on a platter. The power of this place is overwhelming. It sneaky accepts you into its labyrinthine bays and then regurgitates you into the outside world possessed by a strange force.

Even Hobart appears, quite unexpectedly, to be a growling and clamouring metropolis where human footprints – not animal – are everywhere. 🐾

VISIT Meet the Thylacine Awareness Group, dedicated to research into the Tasmanian tiger. This group believes it is still out in the wild, despite being declared extinct in 1986. Find out more at mindfood.com/thylacine.