

THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 2)

Once upon a time a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine valley.

Ratites are classified into five species: Ostriches, Emus, Cassowaries, Rheas and Kiwis. Commercial farming brought most of these species to the flatlands drained by the Serpentine River south of the city of Perth. Regretfully these rural endeavors were not successful. Failure to market the feathers led farmers to slaughter the birds to sell as meat. The Ratite genus is fragile because only the male incubates the eggs. Soon Rheas and Cassowaries disappeared, then Ostriches and finally the Emus vanished from the valley. Now the banks of Serpentine River are populated only by horses, cows and the prospect of an ever spreading urban sprawl. There is a small area however, where some of these birds found refuge.

For conservation purposes, the Shire of Serpentine, granted a few struggling Ratites a small lease where they could hatch their eggs in safety. These enterprising refugees transformed this bit of scrub into a delightful park where hundreds of birds now wish to nest. The inability to incubate efficiently has prevented these Ratites from multiplying. Their dwindling numbers are now under threat of invasion by other species such as Kakapos and Penguins. In the early days of Serpentine Airfield, these non Ratites were accepted almost with open arms. They were not a danger because their numbers were insignificant and some of the aging Ratites needed help to incubate.

The one characteristic that coalesced such diversity of species is the passion for flight. Their hard labor, dedication and tenacity made Serpentine Air Field the delightful place it is today. By building and restoring ingenious machines, these birds exceeded the flight limits of their ancestors. They can travel further, at higher speed and some can frolic with aerobatics and indulge in night flying. All this was made possible by the help, cooperation and enthusiasm which have become the trade mark of the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds.

Regretfully, we still cannot begin at the beginning because, as yet, all is not well among the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds. Let us begin with the story of a special Ratite, the Darwinian Rhea, whose indefatigable and unassuming efforts have befriended all species. He has no ulterior motive, but to help, and in so doing he excels in all matters related to flight.

The following are fictional characters. Any resemblance to reality is purely unintentional and totally coincidental.

THE SERPENTINE FLOCK

The Episode of the Darwinian Rhea

The Rhea is an ostrich-like, flightless bird originally found in South America. It is classified into two types which are genealogically similar, but opposite in behavior.

The most widespread is the Common Rhea. This subspecies inhabits the grassy area of Brazil and Bolivia. The male proudly displays his plumage hoping to attract the attention of others. It is vain and like the Ostrich, will hide his head in the sand.



Common Rhea

The other, known as Darwin's Rhea¹, is polygamous and rare. It roams the Southern region of the Andes. In his nest, the male hatches many eggs, including some, which he knows are not his own. He is renowned for his legendary speed. Shy, but astute, this bird personifies the gaucho, the tough cowboy of the Pampas.



Lesser or Darwin's Rhea

The hard work of a few Ratites like Darwin's Rhea, has made Serpentine Air Field a wondrous park where many birds, from near and far, hope one day to nest. But all is not well among the Serpentine Flock. A small minority, mostly Common Rheas and non-Ratites, are fomenting turmoil by spreading fear.

Trepidation and apprehension have set in among many birds. Some are afraid of invasion by non-Ratites. Others fear the promulgation of the changes to the Incubation Rules, which will require all nesting birds to accept a fair share of hatching. It is an inescapable conflict. Either the changes to the Incubation Rules are enacted or the invasion will occur. This is not a matter of opinion, but of arithmetic.

In the past, incubation was unassisted because the Ratites were young, more energetic and the nests were few. Time has moved on.

¹ Darwin caught a specimen of this rarely seen bird and sent it to the Zoological Society in England.

The number of nests has grown substantially. Several Ratites are fast losing their feathers. Some don't have time to incubate. Others are refusing to do so. For several years, physical energy alone has been insufficient to fulfill Serpentine's incubation and infrastructure needs. To meet the deficiency it has been necessary to purchase incubatory power. It has proved a great struggle to gather these funds from donations. Serpentine Air Park has managed just to survive only because of the Herculean efforts of a few Ratites like the Darwin's Rhea. For quite a while most birds, except Ostriches and Common Rheas, have recognized that this situation is unjust and untenable.

For a brief period, a decade or so ago, a Kiwi bird was Cock at Serpentine. The Kiwis are nocturnal Ratites with poor sight, but a great sense of smell. Nostrils located near the tip of their slender bills generate sounds peculiar to New Zealand. Some of these birds, island hop via Norfolk and Lord Howe, to land at night, under the cover of darkness. Our Kiwi at Serpentine, identified the incubation problems and immediately proposed to change the Rules. He and his Council were attacked so vehemently by the Common Rheas that they all resigned.



Kiwi Bird

The present Council has investigated the problem again. Some of its members have great experience in the construction, restoration and maintenance of nests. They have concluded that it takes 60 units² to run the Air Park. The birds nesting at Serpentine, in accordance with the existing rules, contribute only 10 units. The rest is sourced by donations and subscriptions by non Ratites who outnumber the nesting Ratites by a ratio of 4 to 1. An example of a non Ratite is the green bird, probably a Kakapo, who is demanding to nest his egg at Serpentine. If the non Ratites are the majority and pay for the major share of incubation, it is inevitable that they will eventually rule. On the Field, there is a young apprentice Ratite who has been collecting warlike machines in preparation for the invasion. He claims that he can hear the non Ratites marching, marching The proposed changes to the Incubation Rules would increase the contribution of the birds nesting at Serpentine from 10 to 30 units which may be just enough to keep the invaders at bay.



Kakapo Bird

² One annual Unit is approximately one Trillion Inch Ounce force (TIO)

Some claim the cause of the problem are the Common Rheas. They bury their heads in the sand instead of facing the dilemma. The wise, Kiwi bird explains that the difference between incubatory requirement and availability is accumulating in postponed maintenance. This is an ever increasing problem which makes the invasion more imminent or the change to the Incubation Rules more onerous.

If you are in doubt regarding these matters, travel to Serpentine any day of the week. There you will find Darwin's Rhea. You'll have to be fast to catch him. To get his opinion may be even more difficult. If you are lucky enough to get his advice follow it, but keep it to yourself. No one will believe he uttered a word that could be construed as derogatory of anyone.

At the next powwow, the Common Rheas through their agent the Moa and his assistant the Dodo, will attack any bird who suggests changes to the Incubation Rules. They do not want the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds to vote on this matter. As in the case of the Kiwi Cock, a decade earlier, they will probably succeed by squawking the existing Council out of office. There is little doubt however, that a vote across the entire Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds would pass such a change. There is also no doubt that such a change is inevitable with or without the invasion by non Ratites.

Whatever the outcome of the next powwow, the extra incubatory power will be found and the necessary improvements will be made. It is the Magic of the field which makes this possible. Under its hypnotic spell the entire Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds, including Ratites, Kakapos and Penguins, come together to help each other in all endeavors of flight. On Saturday afternoon, just before sunset, the magic is most powerful. Perhaps that is the place and the time to hold the next powwow.