

THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 5)

Once upon a time a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine Valley. On a tiny allotment of land, these passionate aviators built an airfield where they practice the art of flying. A few acres of brush have become a beautiful Air Park thanks to the abundance of water and the hard labour of a few individuals.

In winter the Mediterranean Climate lashes the valley with violent rain storms. It is a recurring weather pattern of high pressure followed by cyclonic low pressure systems. The latter sweep the Indian Ocean from the Antarctic Circle to provide a cold, wet respite to the long dry summers. The Serpentine River lazily meanders through the flatlands preventing the valley from flooding. For five months of the year this dale is lush with green and is dotted by water in dams and billabongs. By December however, the countryside is once again parched and remains a tinder box until late Autumn. The grass and much of the beauty of the Air Park survive only because of aquaculture. Water, during the long summer period, is tapped from the many aquifers which are pervasive throughout the Perth Basin. Depending on depth, the quality ranges from foul, warm, brown to crystal clear, cool, sweet water.

At Serpentine, a few True Ratites sank several bores to provide a reliable water supply at the touch of a switch. Hidden in the ground, fountains burst into life at preset times, to flood the park. The choreography of spouting water, fluttering birds, the occasional kangaroo and a deer or two are part of the magic of the park, best seen at sunset or dawn.

The valley has failed all farming attempts including viniculture and aviculture. Not so at Serpentine Air Field where many cultures including those associated with birds and wine are thriving. In part, this has been made possible by the abundance of water. Regretfully there is also a subculture at Serpentine which does not reflect the purity of the deeper aquifers. Like the murky near surface water, contaminated by seepage from septic tanks, this culture is shallow and is polluted by its own waste. An example is the practice of "whistle blowing" which is encouraged by bureaucratic institutions such as the aviation authorities. This Episode is concerned with the opposing forces of openness and secrecy, clarity and confusion. It is the struggle between Light and the Force of Darkness. Fortunately between these, is the mischievous Power of the Magic of the Park.

Ratites avoid the Dark Side. It is a dangerous realm where collisions can occur¹ and bureaucratic injustices prevail. They prefer to fly from dawn to sunset when the Power of Light provides guidance. The latter, which is driven by natural justice, is a higher authority. In matters of dispute however, access to this Power is costly and complex. Fortunately the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds has some recourse to a lesser spirit, the Magic of the Park.

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

¹ Please refer to Episode 4 for the collision between two dithering, doddering ratites.

THE SERPENTINE FLOCK

The Episode of the Aquaculture

The aging population at Serpentine is a matter of concern. The problem is compounded by the fact that Ratites are rare and True Ratites are exceptionally scarce. Regretfully, no effort has been made to attract other members of the species. In fact, some non Ratites are actively discouraging visitors. "This is a private field. Who gave you permission to land here?" is antipathetic to the search for young potential True Ratites. Those who subscribe to such an exclusive creed are indifferent to the survival of the Park and the Flock. In the scheme of transgressions, however, these are only misdemeanors. Nevertheless they are counterproductive and it is up to wise Ratites to show, by example, that this non ratite behaviour is unacceptable. It is a matter of a clear unambiguous wave of the arm. It costs nothing and makes visiting pilots landing at Serpentine feel welcome, irrespective of the number of bounces. Perhaps it may instigate a



potential True Ratite to enquire about membership. Eventually it could become part of the Serpentine Culture. A wave from the air or the ground goes a long way to diffuse conflict. The proof is a big wiggle of the arm which never goes unanswered. Eventually even non Ratites will see the error of their timid waves and the benefit of welcoming all visitors.



A much more serious violation of the Ratite Code of Conduct is gossip. It is part of the hangar flying subculture. It becomes destructive when half truths are used by individuals to promote themselves at the cost of others. "I have been told by a reliable source that he landed on a taxiway and the council did nothing." Is the kind of nonsense that appeals only to fools. If the perpetrator of such gossip were offered no credence he would stop gossiping. The only way to tackle hearsay is to demand that the perpetrator forces the accuser to confront the alleged offender. Any other course of action is counterproductive. Beware of the Magic of the Park. Its mischievous tendency can seek revenge. You will have noticed that the windsock lights flash as soon as they are turned on. There is no warning when they go off. Those who land at Serpentine after dark should know that they are in the hands of the Magic of the Park. Perhaps the pilot who complained that the lights went off as he was flaring may have indulged in gossip.

On the scale from misdemeanors to felonies the next infringement is probably the Perversion of the Progress of the Park. This sin is difficult to define. It is the work of a selfish spirit. Some suspect it is a small minority who refuse to do their share of incubation. There is no doubt however, that a few individuals not only decline to contribute, but demand that others do the same. They use an outdated law regarding perpetuity to defend the indefensible. Again, remedy to this infringement is within the Power of the Park. The birds nesting at Serpentine are a small minority of the Flock. They alone derive all the benefits from the Park, but contribute little more than the birds at large. This imbalance is endangering the

very survival of the air field. Those non consenting birds have a choice. Either accept a modest increase or the democratic Power of the Park will force a more realistic and onerous fee on those nesting at Serpentine. Wise Ratites know that these birds should contribute at least ten times more than other birds². Those who refuse to do so should not ignore the Power of the Park. Before permitting the sale of any nest, the Park can claim outstanding charges.

The worst recorded offence against the Ratite Code of Conduct is whistle-blowing to institutions on the Dark Side. Only a fiend would endanger a Ratite's ability to fly. Only a fool would court the Power of the Dark Side. The outcome can only be grief to both accuser and defendant. It is the act of a Rat. This animal, which is the antipathy of the Ratite, dwells in the dark and hides in shallow foul waters. It is the Devil's lapdog. The Spirit of the Park can not defend its birds from the awesome Power of the Dark Side. The only course of action is frustration of the Due Process by recruiting the expensive services of a Demon³. The outcome is never satisfactory. For all of these reasons all Rats must be permanently removed from Serpentine Air Park.

There is a common thread through ratting, aversion to progress, gossiping and inhospitality. It is a selfish and senseless attitude of those who don't care what happens after they have gone. Birds who feel that way are not Ratites. The essence of amity in the Park is the camaraderie, a big welcoming wave, a good word about someone, the extra effort to improve the field and solidarity against bureaucracy. It's part of the magic which isolates the Park from the day to day hostilities of life. Fortunately only a few birds remain immune from this power.

The Magic of the Park rewards Ratites and attempts to change the ways of other flightless birds such as Moas, Dodos, Penguins and Kakapos. It reprimands the Stool Pigeon and admonishes other transgressors, but It will banish Rats. A suggestion was made to employ a Pied Piper to enchant rats away from the Park into the Serpentine River. Regretfully lack of funds would preclude proper compensation for the service. Like the city of Hamelin in 1284 this stratagem could prove disastrous.

The entire Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds openly rejects those who rat to the Power of the Dark Side. The offender who is hiding among the flock will know when the Magic of the Park is onto him. His reflection in the Serpentine ponds will be that of a rat. Eventually Ratites will discover his duplicity. Hopefully, like other informers before him, he will eventually fade away, seldom to be seen again.



² For details of incubatory fees please refer to Episode 2

³ Demon is a mean lawyer