

## THE SPIRIT OF SERPENTINE (Episode 7)

Once upon a time, but not that long ago, a small group of flightless birds, mostly Ratites, sought refuge from predators in the low scrub of the Serpentine Valley. From a small track of land, parched in summer and flooded in winter, an airfield blossomed because of the dedication of a few individuals. With the aid of wonderful machines these aviators regained the dignity of flight which their ancestors had forsaken for terrestrial traits. The success of the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds and the beauty of the Park have attracted other animals which are challenging the ideals that made it all possible. It is the universal struggle of multiculturalism versus integration. In essence, however, it is nothing more than the perfidy of those who would gain from the labours of others and exploit the misery of the less privileged.

Ornithologists have classified Ratites as Ostriches, Emus, Rheas, Cassowaries and Kiwis. One distinguishing characteristic of these birds is the incubation method. The male with great tolerance, takes care of many eggs some of which may have been inseminated by others. This generosity has allowed other species to gain access to the Park where Ratites are becoming a minority. It is sufficient to look at the flying machines to determine the origin of the species. Clearly some could not possibly claim to be the result of intelligent design. The Park is once again experiencing turmoil. The reason is not diversity but greed, insecurity and jealousy of those who will never become True Ratites.

The Serpentine valley has little to offer compared to Margaret River in the South or the Swan Valley to the North. All commercial efforts such as agriculture, viniculture and aviculture failed because of poor soils and inclement climate. Out of this failure, however, the Serpentine Field became a reality. The land was allotted because it had the value of a pepper corn. The flying activities of these birds hardly affected the sparse population of the valley. Regrettably the peace of the Park is now under attack. The expanding city in the north and its rail link to the south have brought new pressures to the Park. The population density is increasing alarmingly and land has attained speculative value.

A new industry has spawned in the valley. The brick and tile unit on five hundred square meters is replicating at a disquieting speed. Creeping, in a stain like manner, its pace is comparable to the cane toad invasion from the east. Having recognized the problem, the Council of Ratites proposed to minimize the Park's exposure to such perils by limiting the number of nests and dwellers. "Not so", some birds complained: "The more we are, the more powerful we will be". Those who saw the opportunity to gain financially from this expansion shouted: "Down with the committee". Offended by such impudence the Cock and his followers abdicated. In a flash, Penguins, Dodos, Kakapos and others applied for Council. By the time the news became public it was too late for ostriches, emus, rheas, cassowaries and kiwis to nominate. The Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds is now ruled by non Ratites. Will the new council seek revenge? After having lived for so long on the fringe it can now assert perpetual power by changing the Constitution. The ensuing conflict is the subject of this episode.

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

## THE SERPENTINE FLOCK

### The Investment Episode

The prospect of old age is particularly daunting for birds. To live and not fly is the ultimate pain of an aviator. The magic of Serpentine postpones this dreaded time, in some cases for decades. Ratites know the misery of life without flight and they are, for that reason, totally dedicated to the Park. The generous characteristics of this species have enabled other birds to nest at Serpentine. Some of these, however, came disguised. They do not share the same passion and threaten the very existence of the Park.

There is diversity within the Ratite Species. Some suspect a conflict between Emus and Cassowaries was the cause of the abdication of Council. Emus like the Ostriches do not wish to face reality. The Cassowaries will avoid confrontation, but are known to band together in gangs for personal protection. The abdication after nomination had closed, handed power to a few birds who were elected unopposed. They must have known the council's intention to relinquish control. There is clear evidence of a plot which obviously occurred because True Ratites were not vigilant.

How it occurred is conjecture. What will happen is important. Some of the birds, who in the past dwelled on the fringe and more than once were soundly defeated at elections, now rule the flock. They are renowned for the loudest squawks, objections, criticism and discord. With such a history of antagonism, why would these birds flock together to rule? It may be part of some unknown mating ritual which occurs across species of disputable parentage.

The relationship between the Cock and new Secretary Bird is clearly important and worthy of investigation. The latter is found in the Sahara Desert where it feeds on snakes by stalking, because it rarely flies. Secretary is a mispronunciation of its Arabic name and the illusion of literacy because of the quills behind its ears. Its scientific classification is *Sagittarius Serpentarius*. The Cock, on the other hand is generally an adult male.



In this case it is probably of the genus *Casuarus*, a large Australian bird with leathery wattles hanging from the front of his neck. Its defense mechanism is great



speed to outrun predators. Some claim, however, that when cornered, he will kill with his very powerful straight knife-like nails.

Before the recent conspiracy against the Council, these two animals were observed displaying bizarre behaviour. For no apparent reason, the smaller bird would terrorize the larger Cock who would remain totally impassive to the amazement of the flock.

No doubt some interesting encounters will occur in the future. Hopefully, the threat of knife like nails will discourage any predatory attitude by the secretary bird. If that fails, speed will no doubt save the day. Generally the relationship between Cock and Secretary Bird is symbiotic, preordained and cooperative. This is clearly not the case on this occasion. Not knowing who is in charge of the Council is a matter of concern.

Of interest also are two strange birds that, after several attempts at running for council, were finally elected by default and to the displeasure of several Ratites. One seems to mimic Big Bird of Sesame Street. Whilst he appears to be friendly and wants to be part of everything he exhibits schizophrenic signs. Delusion and fantasies of hallucinating dimensions are examples of this social dysfunction. When confronted, he confirms the affliction by negative behavior such as banging implements to the ground. The other strange bird is probably a buzzard. He is reputed to be obsessed about ownership: "It is mine and I'll do whatever it's required to protect my interest." On one occasion he summarily marched several Ratites out of his nest in spite of the fact that his partner had called them for help. He epitomizes the "five hundred square meter block profit opportunity" which has become prevalent in the valley and at the airfield. Gone are the days when Ratites welcomed other birds to their nests for no other reason, but friendship. Now unjustifiable amounts of money are traded for nesting space. The problem is further compounded by the Council which allocates nests to birds who disguise their investment desires by thinly veiled promises to incubate eggs that have no hope of ever hatching.

Two other birds have recently attracted the attention of the flock. Both have made great contribution to the progress of the Park. There is evidence, however, that vanity may have led them beyond the limit of their expertise. For some time one has been the official seed counter. His efforts to ensure that the granaries were adequately stocked have been exemplary. Not satisfied with that glory, he has been gratuitously providing advice on matters ranging from thermodynamics to organic chemistry which have challenged his credibility and exposed his ego. The other bird has recently migrated from a less clement climate, but a more genteel society. Through his piloting and literary skills he has managed to enshrine in the culture of the Park the right of all flightless birds to practice the art of flying. That act alone has made him a True Ratite. His abounding idealism and complete lack of cynicism, however, have made him prey to the dark side. Blind faith in the goodness of all animals including Demons<sup>1</sup> may have jeopardized the very existence of the Park.

Ratites at Serpentine are ruled by Ethics and not Law, which is strictly in the realm of Demons. To avoid conflict, the Rules were written by wise Ratites, such as the Kiwi Bird, in the simplest possible language to avoid legalistic interpretations. Regretfully Moas, Dodos, Penguins and Kakapos continuously attacked the Council of Ratites for not complying with their perception of the Law. In sheer desperation the Ratites scribed a new set of Rules by which the Park could be managed for the benefit of the majority by silencing this squawking minority. The protest was wide among the flock. So deep was the fear of losing nesting tenure that the Ratites in the Council became marginalized. In an effort to quell the criticism the rules were diluted and legalized. The ensuing squawk was so loud

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Episode 5 for further reference

that only one Ratite survived mass resignation from the Council. So it is that the Serpentine Flock of Flightless Birds is no longer ruled by Ratites.

Is the new administration cementing its power by patronage, nepotism and legalism? Within days, with total impunity, nesting allocations were announced by the new council not only to friends, but to themselves. There is evidence that some of the beneficiaries will probably never fly. Fear of nepotism may be justified by the announcements of nesting rights to family members who have not sought acceptance from those who have made the Park what it is today. This is not just a matter of courtesy, but of precedents and a clear test of suitability. Legalization of the process has connotations of correctness, but not justice. The fact that it is legal does not necessarily make it right. Is all this a guise for a predatory plot by a few who aspire to profit from the hard labour of others?

A recently appointed subcommittee has submitted to the Flock a new Constitution. This is nothing more than a diluted, legalized version of the one proposed by the previous Council. "Don't be concerned if you don't understand the words, they are legal. There is no reason why you should not all welcome this wonderful document with open arms." So the flock was told, not by the architect of the document, but by those who admitted having no experience in constitutional matters. There was only one dissenting voice which echoed the words of a very experienced law writer who has recently passed away, but whose spirit still lives in the valley: "Write the Rules before the Constitution".

It only takes a touch of cynicism to reveal that the voting hurdle is the Constitution. The Rules only require a majority which historically has not proved difficult to achieve. In other words, if the Flock accepts the Constitution it will probably have to suffer the Rules which remain unseen. Many have learned, through bitter personal experience, that the Devil is in the details. Will the Flock of Flightless Birds be sufficiently astute to recognize that the Demon could be in the Rules? The danger is greed. Without unambiguous Rules, the Park will continue to slide from Sport to Profit by commercialization of nests, flying contraptions and other business endeavors.

Should a Council, which gained power by default, merit the authority to decide the destiny of the Park? A self appointed constitutional committee, who has approved and submitted a document to the Flock without the basic checks and balances of an independent audit, is also a matter of concern. For these reasons alone, approval of the Constitution before a clear understanding of the Rules may be imprudent.

No doubt most of the participants in these efforts have genuinely dedicated their time and personal resources for the benefit of the Park. They must be commended, encouraged and supported. The final decision, however, must follow the due process of transparency, audit, approval and recommendation by the Council before submission to the Entire Flock of Flightless Birds.

In spite of the dangers noted above, the good will of those who are passionate about aviation will eventually prevail. The others gradually will fade away. In so doing, if they become a little richer, the remaining Flock of Flightless Birds will no doubt be a little wiser.