

HAVING A BALL IN THE ARCADIA VALLEY– By Stephanie Jackson

A passionate tale of good times in the Arcadia Valley and Lake Nuga Nuga National Park, central western Queensland, Australia

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“The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast,” Oscar Wilde wrote in 1891 – and when politicians, bureaucrats, and religious fanatics strut across the stage, I’m the first to agree with his acerbic sentiment. But as I rolled down into western Queensland’s Arcadia Valley, it was obvious that the outspoken Mr. Wilde had made a verbal blunder, for here on nature’s stage a cast of wild characters played their roles as entertainers to perfection.



My arrival in the valley was heralded by applause as a clap of thunder signalled the approach of a storm that draped its ragged curtain of darkness across the landscape and threatened, with a momentary shower of rain, to bring the first act of an adventure to a premature conclusion. But as I hastily set up camp at Lonesome National Park and the entertainment got under way, it was obvious that here in the Arcadia Valley I would have a ball.

The wind played a haunting tune as it whistled and danced energetically through the forest of eucalyptus, lancewood, and brigalow; galahs and sulphur-crested cockatoos performed their raucous song and dance act among high branches; wrens, finches, and diminutive honeyeaters waltzed among the undergrowth; and a carpet snake shuffled secretively through tall golden grasses. A streak of lightning illuminated the stage as other members of the cast, whose unseen presence was announced with a final roll of thunder, began their performance as the curtain of cloud was slowly raised and the last rays of evening’s sunlight perforated the darkness.

Dingoes howled, a barking owl gave a warning that its nocturnal hunt for prey was about to begin, and a channel billed cuckoo sent its banshee scream reverberating through the damp



air. The sun, taking its final bow, tossed its fading light onto the trees that sheltered my campsite, turning lingering raindrops to cloaks of glittering sequins. And as the choir of birds concluded their song, only a cow with its mournful bellow and an orchestra of crickets were left to lull me to sleep as the ball came to its conclusion for all but the creatures of the night.

Morning’s tattered veil of mist lifted slowly to expose the jagged peaks of the ranges that enclose the Arcadia Valley and beyond which, at Lake Nuga Nuga National Park, some 70 kilometres further north, nature routinely stages a ball to which everyone is invited.

My camper van danced across corrugations on the road that cuts through the heart of the valley, through low woodlands and open plains of golden grasses, until finally the delicate blue waters of the lake appeared like a shimmering mirage of a vast inland sea.

Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, trudging through the valley in 1844, discovered a stream that merged with an extensive swamp, and named it the Brown River in honour of Harry Brown, an aboriginal member of his party. Less than two decades later, nature staged a dramatic performance, and with the aid of a deluge of rain, redesigned the face of the valley, for as a huge deposit of silt blocked the river's progress, Lake Nuga Nuga was born.



The ball was already in full swing when I arrived at the 2,860-hectare forested park that borders the lake. Egrets, cormorants, and darters danced and dived across the vast surface; dragonflies, massive in both size and numbers, performed aerial pirouettes; turtles with coats of emerald algae peered from the water; herons and spoonbills fractured the shallow water's mirror surface with slow and measured strides; swans and pelicans drifted effortlessly past; and on the dead trees and logs that are a conspicuous reminder of nature's dramatic makeover of the landscape, those awaiting their turn to perform preened their elegant plumage and chattered in muted voices.

Unconcerned at getting a little mud between my bare toes, I waded across to the lake's wooded island where another scene was being acted out on nature's stage. Woodland birds, unperturbed by my presence, twittered among shrubs festooned with cobwebs, but a mob of kangaroos, dozing in the shade of the dense foliage and tall grasses, fled in unnecessary haste, providing other members of the cast with their cue to flutter into action. Sulphur crests screamed a warning of my approach and myriad pairs of wings beat a round of applause as waterbirds - ducks and ibis, egrets and cormorants - fled to the safety of the sky before settling on trees like party decorations fluttering in the breeze.

As the curtain of night fell, I settled into a front row seat at my campsite on the lake's edge and watched spellbound as its waters turned from blue to pink, to gold, and ultimately, as a slither of a new moon rose, to an ebony surface freckled with sequins as the stars became its temporary captives. Kangaroos with their joeys emerged from the forest, drank in silence, and bounded back to the darkness where snarls and thuds of their energetic antics blended with the nocturnal melody of a thousand pairs of humming dragonfly wings.

As dawn made its inevitable appearance, I scrambled up the forested slope of Mount Warinilla that shelters the north-western edge of the lake where, according to an aboriginal legend, two Rainbow Serpents have been sleeping since the Dreamtime.

I trod with intimate care along a faint trail, admiring the panoramic view of the water, its meadow of lilac flowered water lilies, and the delicate features of the forest that rapidly enveloped me. But as I watched nature's cast of thousands begin their parade across the sunlit stage that is Lake Nuga Nuga, my 'Oohs!' and 'Aahs!' of wonder were uttered in restrained whispers.

I dared not risk waking the unseen and dozing serpents, for if these mythical creatures strode onto the scene, the lake, so the old tale says, would dry up, bringing the stunning performance that nature has staged in the Arcadia Valley for more than 140 years to its ultimate conclusion. All that would be left to enjoy would be my memories of a day at the ball.