

RAINFOREST EYES

A WALK IN
LAMINGTON
NATIONAL
PARK





It is a **mecca** for naturalists,
but first you need to **learn** to see it.
A little enthusiasm works wonders.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

above: Built up by volcanic activity, carved by erosion, covered in rainforest, cut by waterfalls, the Lamington plateau rewards attentive visitors of any age with spectacular outlooks and unforgettable experiences.

left to right: Some animals are extremely elusive; others are relatively common and easy to spot around the Lamington area. Leeuwin's Honeyeaters (left) will come out into the open to feed on nectar-filled blossoms. Red-necked Pademelons (centre) shelter in rainforests but venture out to graze in grassy areas, especially early in the morning. Bold, inquisitive Eastern Yellow Robins (right) feed themselves and their chicks on insects, arthropods and occasional picnic handouts.

Centre spread (previous page): Lamington's mosaic of sounds, smells and textures includes the quacking call of *Litoria chloris*.



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"...a little exposure to the wonders
of the rainforest can get them
leaping around with excitement."



'Oh, man, that's so cool!'

'No! It's really gross!'

Cool? Gross? It's all in the eye of the beholder on this three-day camp at Binna Burra in Lamington National Park with a group of primary school students from Brisbane. The camp is not just about 'getting away from mum and dad for a few days'. Part of the school curriculum, it's an opportunity to educate children about the environment and instil a sense fun and excitement.

We're two kilometres into an educational bushwalk on a beautiful spring morning, and we've just encountered a Carpet Python.

Off the Net and into the forest

One of the benefits of being a guide in a World Heritage listed rainforest is that so many people are so enthusiastic and interested in the amazing diversity of the forest. As a nature-based guide in Lamington National Park on a regular, casual basis, I have guided hundreds of tours over the past six years for people of many age groups, numerous nationalities and all walks of life. As a casual educator, I often helped facilitate and supervise the various camps at the environmental education centre.

Many of the children attending the camps live close to national parks, state forests or local parklands, but

there are always some who have never experienced the joys of bushwalking or spending time in a forest. They may, however, be proficient in the latest Play Station 2 or X-box and readily admit that most of their spare time goes towards computer games, surfing the Net or watching television. Personally, I feel that this is a real shame.

I found at an early age that for me, the best way to observe or photograph nature is to find a spot, make myself comfortable and wait for the inhabitants to come to me. Using this in my guide work, I ask guests, especially children, to remain silent for short periods at a time and to use some of their senses to experience the joy of birds perched on a nearby branch, pademelons grazing in the undergrowth, frogs croaking, insects buzzing, a waterfall thundering over volcanic cliffs or water running through a rainforest stream, without the background noise of cars, industry. Many guests find the 'wait-and-observe' technique is not only rewarding in regards to the wildlife observed, but relaxing as well. I also recommend long, deep breaths of crisp, clean air to refresh, invigorate and cleanse your lungs and leave you feeling clear-headed.

Nature at its best

Often, at either Binna Burra Mountain Lodge or O'Reilly's Rainforest



Photo © Michael Snedric

above: For some visitors, the rainforest is such a change from their normal, hectic city lives that it takes them several days to begin to relax, to let their senses take in the feeling, sounds, smells and sights of this new and subtle environment. And then, the discoveries begin ...

Guesthouse, guests book in for a walk hoping to see or hear a particular animal. Not always, but sometimes, we have been very fortunate indeed. Some of my own highlights include the frenzied display by a male Albert's Lyrebird, while a female looked on. On the marvellous Toolona Circuit, a Spotted-tailed Quoll nonchalantly strolled past at a distance of only 10 metres. Once reasonably common within the park, the quolls are now classed as vulnerable.

Another reward came after hours of sitting in a camouflaged photographic

hide. While I waited patiently for a male Regent Bowerbird to come to his bower, a male Riflebird (Lamington's only bird of paradise) started his full display only metres from my lookout. He had no idea of my presence and had found an open branch in the sunlight where he could display to any adoring female in the area. The sight of this magnificent bird, wings fanned in display as the sun glistened off his reflective feathers is something I will never forget.

Lamington National Park has a vast array of fauna and flora. One moment

you are walking through the misty rainforest, dazzled by brightly coloured fungi, mosses and lichens. Minutes later, you can be in a sun-blazed stand of eucalypts with Glossy Black Cockatoos calling in the distance, or you can be searching for the rare and elusive Rufous Scrub Bird skulking in the undergrowth of an Antarctic Beech forest where some trees may be 3000 to 4000 years old.

Relaxing into it

While conducting walks along the various tracks, I like to point out



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The Bassian, or Ground Thrush, is not uncommon in the rainforest, but it takes considerable patience to capture a moment when a pair of these active birds are both on the nest together.

the animals I've spotted, but some guests, no matter how hard I try, simply cannot see the critters. I used to be quite baffled by this. Then one day it clicked! Some people had such hectic lifestyles, their minds were still in 'hyperdrive'. On several occasions, guests staying in the park for a couple of weeks initially found it hard to calm their minds but as the days progressed, they started to relax and 'go with the flow'. Some of them, after a week in the tranquil rainforest environment, would come back with amazing stories of the wildlife they had seen.

Generally, adult visitors to Lamington National Park come to enjoy the guided walks and 4WD trips. They fly in from all parts of the globe to search for the park's 130 or so species of birds. Zoologists study various animals, botanists become excited about plants, photographers hope to capture that 'special moment'. Some of my more memorable experiences have included helping IMAX and other wildlife documentary crews, and spending some days with my lifelong inspiration, Sir David Attenborough, while he was narrating a recent documentary.

The snake turns

Children, however, even on environmental camps, sometimes feel they have no choice about being there. Their initial reaction may be boredom or disinterest, yet a little exposure to the wonders of the rainforest can get them leaping around with excitement. Once we had passed the initial 'cool' and 'gross' stages of python discovery on our rainforest walk, a sense of genuine interest and curiosity crept in

amongst the students. We didn't allow them to touch the snake, but they could clearly see its length and the patterns on its body. 'Are they slimy?' the kids asked. 'How big do they get?' Many had seen photos of pythons, or seen images on television, but few had seen a real live Carpet Python. Their interest was piqued. They were ready to discover more. I would rather be enthusiastic than preach to kids on these walks, so I was thrilled to hear a 'thump, thump' just to my left — the distinct 'warning' thump of a Red-necked Pademelon. The girls especially had been hoping to see one of these 'cute' animals on our walk. We were doubly rewarded: not only was there a pademelon peeping at us through the undergrowth, but she had a joey nearby. You should have heard the 'oohs', 'ahhs' and clicks of disposable cameras. The script could not have been written better!

While most students were interested in any wildlife sightings, I was pleased to see a couple of 'junior naturalists' in the making. One particularly observant boy found an amazing array of insects, trapdoor spider tunnels, varieties of colourful fungi and lichens, to name but a few. His passion and enthusiasm seemed to spur on some of the others to be more observant as well. Although it wasn't mentioned during the walk, I could sense that the Play Station 2 and X-box games weren't being missed in the slightest!

While busy pursuing environmental studies at the University of Queensland, **MICHAEL SNEDIC** still enjoys guiding occasionally, on a casual basis, within Lamington National Park. He also spent two years working as a birdkeeper at Sydney's Taronga Zoo.