

A CAPRICORN ADVENTURE

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One August more than a decade ago I holidayed on Great Keppel Island and spent a few days in Yeppoon. I liked the relaxed vibe of the town and was enchanted by the unspoilt natural beauty of the island. Indeed, it is a rare luxury to be able to spend a day walking along bush tracks and pristine, white sand beaches and not see a soul. Another holiday on Great Keppel Island and the discovery of Byfield convinced my brother Guy and I, to quit Brisbane upon retirement and purchase some land here for a hobby farm.

Where my brother lived, pine forest and rural land were being replaced by housing estates, and in my inner-city suburb, old Queenslanders were being demolished or jacked-up for removal and green spaces paved over for the construction of apartment blocks, office towers, aged care centres, etc. Inadequate planning had greatly increased traffic congestion, noise and smog. We'd also become increasingly disturbed by modern agricultural methods and the use of chemicals. We yearned to be self-sufficient in fruit, vegetables and eggs. Of course we didn't realise how challenging this would be.

What attracted us to Byfield was that it was invariably green and renowned for reliable rainfall, as well as being the gateway to magnificent Stockyard Point. We soon settled on a pretty 12 hectare block. It was a portion of an old grazing property, a blank canvas, lacking an entrance road, fencing, a dwelling or shed. There was a lot to do but we were eager to get started and spent many hours planning and mapping out a list of projects. However, there were many obstacles.

We were blithely ignorant of the climate extremes of central Queensland. We hadn't lived through a typical long, searing hot summer with average temperatures of 35-38° C or an abrupt 'wet season', which can arrive anytime between November and March. Then, it is not unusual to receive a metre of rain in one week. Torrential rain pounds the shed roof, rainwater tanks fill and gutters overflow. Wildlife invades! Repulsive cane toads emerge, in thousands, to hunt the swarms of beetles and cute green native

frogs, which appear magically on the outside of windows. At night the toads commence their high-pitched, rasping calls which, along with the modulated croak-croak-croak of the frogs, create a deafening cacophony, so that we have to shout to hear each other across a room. Other creepy crawlies that arrive with the wet include Huntsman spiders and an occasional black scorpion, seeking cover inside.

We had to learn to be patient and work with the weather. An entrance road and shed site were priorities but an unseasonably wet winter in 2011 and difficulty sourcing an earthmover delayed us several months. Further, the only practical route had serious drainage issues that had to be addressed with an invert, drains, geocloth and extra gravel. Another unforeseen frustration were the wiry tussocks of giant parramatta grass. These caused the loader to skid, so an excavator had to be brought in to cut out and form the road. It was a challenge, even for our experienced contractor. One Sunday morning we found Ando surveying our driveway and rubbing his chin, deep in thought. Such dedication was reassuring, he wasn't working for us that day, just happened to be passing by. Although slower and more expensive than envisaged, our road is still intact after three floods in eight years and has needed minimal maintenance.

Our private entrance road led to the site we'd chosen for a shed, which was a priority because we needed storage space and some basic living quarters so that we could overnight here. The site was elevated and fairly flat, with a good aspect. Incidentally, this is where the agisted cattle camped at night, so we thought that augured well. We'd spent considerable time designing a shed, one which incorporated a high roof with whirly birds, some insulation, and a full-length veranda protected by an overhang, to mitigate the heat; and, bearing in mind that a cyclone was a possibility, factored in extra steel strength. However, most of the builders we approached were bemused by our requirements, assuring us that Capricornia wasn't in a cyclone zone. Eventually, we found a builder keen to satisfy our requirements and the shed was erected in just three weeks, in a blistering summer heat wave. I marvelled at the endurance of the two middle-aged builders on the blazing roof, which very nearly gave one heat stroke. Of course, they were true blue, born and bred locals, like another contractor, Bill, who insisted on working on the fencing when all we could do was sit in a heat-stressed daze on our veranda.

Our shed had also been designed to accommodate a stand-alone solar system, the roof having the ideal aspect and gradient for solar panels. Like the plumbing, a stand-alone solar system took a lot longer than we'd expected. A shortage of tradesmen during a mining boom made it very difficult and our location, deemed as 'remote' by some, didn't help. It took us months to source our installer Jeff, who worked full-time at a mine, and completed our job between shifts. The system continues to exceed our expectations and we never want to return to the grid.

While all of the above were in train we got to work on the banana project. Why bananas? Well, we'd researched the local farmers markets and talked to the locals and learned that our area had grown very good bananas and citrus for over 100 years. We thought it might be a way of subsidising outgoings. Banana clones were purchased from a DPI laboratory on the Sunshine Coast and grown-on until ready for planting, mid-2011. These arrive the size of bean sprouts and need to be potted up when sufficiently large and tended carefully until they're about 30 cm high and ready for planting.

By then we had hand-cleared a rocky slope covered with lantana scrub and shoulder-high weeds, with sufficient space for about 100 palms. We assiduously tended our palms with fertiliser, water and lots of mulch to address the lack of humus. This was chiefly due to the previous owner's annual burn-offs and extreme rain events. However, the plants would not grow. Thinking the soil was contaminated, we took soil samples and sent them away for analysis and testing. Tests revealed that our soil was severely depleted in nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, as well as most minerals essential for growth. More serious fertilising and the application of trace elements to redress this deficiency, got the palms moving. Then the wildlife arrived: scrub turkeys, bandicoots, wallabies and kangaroos. Up went the solar-electric fencing and rock and wire plant protectors.

Over the years we've learned to live with most of the local wildlife and familiarity has eradicated their fear of us, so we've become companions of a sort. We have a long-term resident kangaroo which grazes in our orchard and camps under the fruit trees during the heat of the day. One morning, when we were having breakfast, a pair of young males confronted each other in front of the shed and started to box, only 20

metres away. We've also observed that when the kangaroos decamp it's a sign that there's a wild dog or pack in the vicinity. Even the raucous sulphur-crested cockatoos, which rip into oranges and other citrus to feed on the seeds, are useful: when they suddenly erupt in a screeching din and flee it's a warning to us and our free-ranging flock to beware of predatory birds like eagles.

However, I don't think we'll ever get used to the snakes. There are so many! At Byfield varieties range from the non-venomous carpet pythons, which eat chooks, cats, even small dogs, to deadly red-belly blacks, king browns and taipans, the very worst. The taipan is the most aggressive snake I've encountered. A few years back Guy, my brother, and I were chased by a taipan which we disturbed in our banana plantation. Another time, I crossed the path of one wriggling towards our dam and immediately it reared up to strike. Thankfully it had a mouse in its mouth, which it wanted to keep. Fortunately, we haven't heard of a death adder sighting for decades.

To return to the bananas, once the wildlife was kept at bay the bananas grew well, so we prepared more land and planted another 200. Within 18 months, in 2013, we commenced selling our bananas at Kern Arcade farmers markets in Rockhampton. This was a novel experience, so we welcomed tips from other stallholders and after a few weeks we had finessed our routine. The market managers, Madonna and Lennie, welcomed new stallholders and helped us settle-in. The pair were super-efficient and could sort 'a situation' fast. Lennie, despite his 3.00 am starts, always had a joke to wake us up. He was also an oral historian of sorts and would often recount amusing anecdotes of the early days in Byfield and its quirky characters. Some levity was always welcome after a week's hard work tending the plantation. We didn't use fungicides, herbicides or non-organic pesticides, so managing even a small plantation of 300 or so palms was very labour intensive.

My brother would slash and rake our pasture for mulch, which I would spread around the palms, to smother weeds and conserve moisture. However, it was also necessary to spend hours each week brush-cutting or manually weeding with a pelican pick. Weeds like cobbler's pegs, burr weed and parramatta grass were particularly stubborn.

At the end of a week we'd then have to allocate time to cut and wash our heavy bunches of bananas, trim off the hands, then weigh and price same before packing in boxes for ripening in a cool room. Come Sunday, we'd leap out of bed at 4.00am, load-up and drive to Rockhampton and set up our stall to start selling at 6.30am, fast and furiously, so that we'd be sold-out by about 9.00am. We always looked forward to that. Occasionally, when we didn't sell all our bananas, we would drop them off next day at Meals on Wheels, where they were always gratefully received.

We advertised the fact that we didn't use non-organic chemicals and our bananas sold well. Customers complimented us on the delicious sweetness of the fruit: unlike commercial growers we did not cut our bunches 'black-green' but waited until they were fully mature.

We enjoyed chatting with our customers and other stall-holders, who taught us much about our community. Our customers were a colourful, lively crowd. The ladies, in particular the Papua New Guineans, Ghanese, Nigerian, Sudanese, Indian, Vietnamese, Filipinas; with their bright cottons, rustling saris and silks, brought some welcome colour and style to the arcade. We looked forward to greeting our regulars and watching their eyes light up when they espied a variety from their homeland, such as plantains, Mysore, Ducasse, Red Dhaka or Senorita. We offered all these varieties, as well as Cavendish and Lady Finger. On the flip side, their disappointment when a favoured variety wasn't available always made us uncomfortable.

After establishing the banana plantation we cleared an area for an orchard and planted about 50 fruit trees. All the citrus have flourished but some of the exotics, like lychees and longans, pine for a wetter climate and only bear well when there are early summer rains. The mangoes and custard apples have also grown well but don't bear every year. Pests from the rainforest bordering our property are an insurmountable problem, so much so that we're now trialling good bugs, which hopefully will breed up over time to reduce the numbers of bad guys.

We also fenced off an area 50m x 50m and built some raised beds for growing our vegetables. The soil there is now much improved from the addition of compost and mulch, as well as fertiliser and trace elements over the years. It is rich in humus and crawling with worms. The challenge here was to grow year-round greens. Research

eventually led us to hardy, tropical varieties like sweet leaf, aibika, and Egyptian spinach, which provide an abundance when winter greens fail. Even better, these greens 'volunteer' summer after summer. However, bandicoots, which have an excellent nose for sweet potatoes and other root vegetables, have necessitated protection of some beds with chicken mesh.

To irrigate the expanded plantation and orchard we had to rely on a small dam, and in 2013 the late arrival of summer rain resulted in the water level falling very low, so low that we feared we would run out of water. Byfield is not renowned for good bores but we thought any possibility was worth a try. After some enquiries we were led to Jack Barnes, a Water Diviner, and his son Allan, alias 'Frog', a driller. Jack, a fit-looking man in his seventies, spent about two hours walking slowly around our land, at times appearing to float. The grass was up to his armpits in places and we feared he'd tangle with one of the many large red belly snakes, but he paid no attention, said they'd get out of his way. As he walked he held two 45 cm 'L' shaped pieces of wire which, from time to time, crossed above 'fractures' in the bedrock, which can denote water. When he sensed water he removed some grass and produced a small rectangle of glass to spin over the dirt, to test for water quality and/or salinity. Three sites, all of which sat above 3 or 4 intersecting fractures, a good indication of water, were identified. A couple of days later Allan arrived with his drilling rig and commenced drilling the first spot. Within a few hours he struck water, not a geyser, but a respectable slow flow of 500 L per hour. The next day he returned to try the second spot. Alas, at 45 feet he struck basalt, which persisted, down, down, down to 105 foot, and there was only a dribble of water, so we settled for one bore.

Ironically, a couple of hours later heavy, purple, billowing cloud rolled in and steady rain began to fall, continuing for two days, to deliver 454mm, sufficient to fill our dam. The summer rains had arrived.

Over the following four months we received a total of 1,367mm. No matter, we don't regret investing in a bore. It has provided an invaluable back-up during some long, dry periods and ensured the survival of our bananas and orchard. At the time, it was especially valuable in view of our failing dam. When we purchased the property the dam was silted-up, leaking and hemmed by large thirsty trees, but the rectification of

this problem remained on our 'to-do' list for five years. The tricky part was getting the dam sufficiently dry to enable a dozer to work. An added complication was the thick mat of hymenachne weed, which had crept down the sides and even over the bottom of the dam during dry periods, trapping moisture. From time to time, when the dam was almost drained, we considered pumping out the remaining water, but were loath to waste *any* water, not knowing how long we would have to wait for good rain. Finally, an exceptionally dry 2019 evaporated every drop and we arranged for an experienced operator, Gavin, to work some magic. Gavin was so comfortable with his dozer that he handled it like a racing car and, in just 3 days, he delivered the dam of our dreams, one better shaped, larger and watertight. However, we had to wait nearly a year for sufficient rain to fill it.

In February 2015, Tropical Cyclone Marcia crossed our land at Category 5 level, packing a 280km/hr+ gale. On that day we cowered inside our shed for the duration of the cyclone's transit through Byfield and played Scrabble. Pounding rain was accompanied by a screaming banshee of a gale which pummelled the walls and rattled a locked roller door open. This really spooked our chooks, whom we'd brought inside for protection. The sound of splitting timber was worse, followed by heavy thumps, as trees hit the ground. Often we caught our breath, or flinched, waiting for the roof to fly off.

Upon emerging we were puzzled by the eerie silence. Then we noticed an up-rooted 20m blackbutt lying on the ground behind the shed. Fortuitously, it had fallen parallel to the rear wall. Our shed remained wholly intact, even the guttering. I think the inclusion of cyclonic strength steel had a lot to do with that, and we still had power, thanks to our stand-alone solar system. However, our driveway was impassable due to a barricade of snarled timber more than 3m high and our public side road and Byfield Road were similarly blocked. It took half a day to clear our driveway and a few community-minded souls used their earthmoving equipment to clear a path through the timber across Byfield Road, thereby providing access to Yeppoon within a day. However, our side road was more challenging. The amount of timber was astonishing and so intertwined that it appeared to have been washed there by a flood. Sadly, a few seagulls had been caught in the maelstrom and flung down on top of this mess. A neighbour, who wasn't prepared to wait for a Council work party, contacted a local

earthmover and this well-meaning individual dozed a path through the mess but, in so doing, speared a massive log through our fence. We certainly did not need that. If he hadn't fled the scene fast I would've given him more than an earful. So, before we could tackle all the other work, Guy had to use the tractor to lift and drag the log clear and erect a makeshift fence to keep roaming stock out. Subsequently, we spent days clearing timber from all our boundary fencing and stacking it in heaps for burning.

In between, we began cleaning-up the banana plantation and orchard. Although our shed survived, our bananas were flattened. It was desolating to behold. Worse, the palms were entangled with bunches, banana bags, props and ropes. In order to salvage our suckers it was essential to untangle this mess and remove the fallen palms, by hacking them in pieces for mulch. For three weeks we slogged away in the intense heat and draining humidity, with iced bottles of water to drink and tip over our heads. We could manage only a few hours early morning and evening. At least we managed to salvage most of the fruit trees by cutting back the split or mangled branches and applying splints and ties.

The eerie silence that descended on the bush after 'Marcia' passed persisted for months. There was no bird song. All the trees on the surrounding mountains had been shredded or stripped of leaves so, instead of green, the ridges and slopes were grey and brown. It took five years for our many magnificent wild birds to return and increase to pre-cyclone numbers, the parrots, galahs, fruit pigeons, raptors, fruit doves, cockatoos, kites, kingfishers, cockatiels, pheasants, curlews, wrens and more. My favourite bird is the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, for its gorgeous, bouffant plumage and graceful flight. When a large flock choose to roost in our corner of blue gum forest and their plaintive cries of 'karraak, karaak' become more voluble than usual we've come to expect some serious rain within two to three weeks.

There wasn't much solace to be had in the sea, either. Lammermoor Beach, my favourite spot for a swim, was a ruin. To gain access I had to slide down a cliff where, previously, there were stairs. It looked like a mad person had taken an axe to the foreshore, mangling long stretches of the casaurinas, while a hungry sea had gouged the dunes beyond recognition, stripping away the dune grasses and vines. The pandanus palm where I was accustomed to leaving my towel teetered on the edge of

a high dune, half its roots exposed. Only the Indian almond trees were sufficiently sturdy to prevail. As for the sea, it was a thick soup of vegetation washed from the foreshore and the Fitzroy River and all sorts of flotsam dredged up from Keppel Bay. The beach acquired an air of despondency, regular users disappeared, it needed time to heal. I missed chatting to other nature lovers and exchanging observations, sightings of the odd croc, our pod of dolphins, a shoal of reef sharks, green turtles or a huge sea snake. Once a stand up paddle boarder told me he'd espied what appeared to be a 'white' dolphin but upon paddling closer he saw that she had rolled over on her back to suckle a calf. How sweet is that?

I, like many others, despaired that Lammermoor and many other beaches, including Kemp and Farnborough, could ever be restored to their original beauty. However, thanks to our wonderful volunteers, who patiently worked with nature, planting and replanting the native flora in the following years, Lammermoor is now completely transformed. In fact some areas are now better vegetated than before 'Marcia'.

Our bananas recovered also and we had sufficient bunches to return to the markets nine months later. However, in March 2017, Tropical Cyclone Debbie crossed the coast at Airlie Beach, lashing us with flooding rain and cyclonic wind gusts. Byfield received nearly a metre of rain. Most of our bananas were either blown over or fell over from root rot after standing in water for weeks. The serious damage sustained now decided us that we'd had enough fun with bananas, so we quit selling mid-2018 and now retain only sufficient palms to supply our needs. Bananas have become a staple food and our poultry are also very fond of them.

Over the years we have indulged in some new hobbies. We've become avid poultry fanciers and learned to make wine. Initially, we purchased six hens for eggs but they soon became pets and we wanted more. We were absolutely fascinated by all that is packed in those little heads. So much for that derogative expression 'bird-brain'. We trialled a few breeds before opting for a mix of heritage breeds that perform well in our climate. Henry, a breeder in Biloela, encouraged us to breed some of our own. This gentleman, who has been breeding poultry since he was a child, is now over 80 and still exhibits birds at state and national shows, winning a boot-load of trophies each year. He is a perfect mentor.

We've had some special birds, including an Australorp bantam broody, 'Clucky', and a Langshan rooster, 'Leggo'. 'Clucky' is memorable for her intelligence and sweet temperament. Early, she demonstrated her value as a broody to the first chicks we raised: ever vigilant and utterly devoted, she stayed with her brood of nine for 13 weeks. However, the following year when we had eggs to hatch 'Clucky' wasn't broody, so we popped them in an incubator. Chicks hatched but they were a bedraggled lot and we were having trouble getting them to drink and eat. Then, one morning, 'Clucky heard the chicks' piteous cheeping in their broody box on the veranda, uttered a loud squawk and flew in like a wild thing. She gathered the chicks under her wings and refused to budge. Immediately, the chicks settled down and flourished. As with her previous brood, in a couple of weeks she had the chicks out on the grass, eating greens, catching insects and dust-bathing. Tragically, 'Clucky' was taken by a feral dog a couple of years later. We were very upset.

'Leggo', so christened because, as a chick, his tiny, fluffy body was supported by comical, disproportionately long legs, is now nearly three years old and reminds me of an old war horse. He is a very handsome, strong bird and has distinguished himself for bravery. Last year 'Leggo' was free-ranging with our flock when a dingo attacked. He acted as a decoy, leapt at the dog, and was bitten. The dog then grabbed a pullet and 'Leggo' took chase. We heard his anguished cries and joined the chase, then espied the dingo, returning to grab another hen. By this stage we'd shepherded the other birds to the safety of their roost, but 'Leggo', traumatised and bleeding, continued to rocket hither and thither around the paddock looking for the pullet. Fearful of the dingo in close proximity, we pursued poor 'Leggo' until we caught him. We comforted him, sure he'd succumb to shock, but after we'd cleaned and bathed his badly mauled right haunch he calmed down and slept. That night, and for the following three weeks, we kept him close in a coop on our veranda. Here, he patiently submitted to our ministrations and spent hours fastidiously preening, including around his very tender wound, which stimulated his circulation and assisted healing.

While confined 'Leggo' became more domesticated, a real pet. Usually, he crowed very loudly around 4.30am, but now he delayed his early morning crow until 6.00am, when he heard our alarm beep. His flock visited daily, brightening his convalescence but, annoyingly, they'd leave their 'calling cards' on the veranda. However, I didn't

have the heart to chase them away. Observant 'Leggo' would watch me cleaning-up after and very soon began muttering and squawking at the hens and, lo and behold, they began to step off to use the lawn.

'Leggo' recovered his boisterous good health, but his eyes show that he still remembers, he's more watchful, ever on alert. When he's foraging with the flock I need only yell his name and he'll crow instantly, communicating their location and that all is well, but if something's amiss he'll sound the alarm and appear pronto with the hens in tow, or hurry them back to the roost. Wild dogs have disturbed our peace more than any other wildlife and it is a continual fear that we'll lose another bird, despite the deterrents we've deployed. It's especially upsetting that dogs have taken some of our best birds.

Our interest in winemaking was sparked one winter's morning at Kern Arcade, when the markets were orange with citrus. Lennie told us how a Byfield identity, Emmanuel Tabone, made orange and mandarin wines for the troops stationed here during WWII. Coincidentally, at that time Guy was given a pile of wine-making books. Full of enthusiasm, he squeezed buckets of our surplus citrus, with every hope of a superb outcome. He'd made enquiries about Tabone's recipe but it was lost in the mists of time, so he improvised and trialled different methods. Disappointingly, the wines lacked flavour and were too acidic. Then, one market day, a couple of regular customers mentioned that they grew grapes and made their own wine, and later gave us a bottle. We were impressed by its rich, fruity flavour. They explained their method and gave us some vine cuttings, which we planted. However, we were sceptical that any vine would survive the wet and humidity of Byfield. Amazingly, three years on, the vines are growing well and conveniently fruit in January which, once one of our wettest months, has become increasingly drier. We look forward to sampling our first vintage soon.

When we visit Brisbane from time to time we're more reassured about our decision to leave. There's nothing there I miss. Sometimes I dream of somewhere more remote, like an island or where there's a bigger sky and infinite space, but what we have here is precious and nirvana is probably the stuff of dreams. We've never worked harder or felt fitter, there's always something new and wonderful, and we're so thankful for the experience. Most importantly we've come to experience that special feeling of

community. We've been made to feel welcome by all those who've given generously of their time to advise and help us – the retired orchardists, friendly neighbours, the volunteer firemen, Lennie and Madonna – and those skilful workers who've made it possible to realise our dreams, like Ando, Jeff, Jack and 'Frog', Bill and Gavin. Yes, Byfield has claimed us.