

Of Emus and Fairy-wrens – An Introduction

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Malleefowl, Spangled Drongo, Mangrove Golden Whistler, Purple-gaped Honeyeater, Red Wattlebird, Striated Pardalote, Double-eyed Fig Parrot, Splendid Fairy-wren...

As I sit on a plane somewhere over the middle of the Pacific Ocean, a steady stream of exotic bird names constantly stream through my head. I am about half way through my 14 hour flight from Los Angeles to Sydney where I will embark on a year long journey in search of Australia's endemic birds. For the next 12 months, my home will be a Toyota Landcruiser and my address will change nearly daily as I travel far and wide across the Australian continent.

This year is made possible by the Thomas J. Watson Foundation who awards 50 fellowships to graduating college seniors to sponsor a year of travel outside of the United States. Each fellow must propose their own project they wish to pursue for a year in one or more countries around the world. The range of projects that this year's fellows are working on is quite impressive and I strongly encourage a quick glance through their webpage (<http://www.watsonfellowship.org>).

My project focuses on the avian life of the Australian continent. For now my plan is simple - see as much of the Australian continent as possible and use the pursuit of birds as an excuse to do it. Australia has roughly 700 species of birds that are regularly seen somewhere in the country. Out of these, over 300 species are considered to be endemic, meaning their ranges are limited only to Australia. Endemism in Australia borders the absurd with high species counts and nearly unbelievable proportions. Consider the birds for just a moment. About 40% of Australia's birds are endemic. Compare this to the United States where less than 2% are considered endemic, about a dozen species. When considering other taxa like mammals or reptiles, in Australia the ratio of endemic species to non-endemic is at least three endemics to every one non-endemic - and often much higher. In Australia, the chances of seeing an animal or plant that you have seen elsewhere in the world is extremely low. This uniqueness is what makes this country so fascinating to me and why I have chosen to spend a year here.

The 300 endemic birds are my specific targets and I plan to approach them as a subset of the much larger set of Australian endemics across all taxa. These birds are found in every corner of the continent and in every type of habitat. Some are abundant while others are extremely rare. By pursuing these birds, I will have the great fortune to explore the world's oldest tropical rainforests and some of the most hostile deserts, as well as every habitat in between.

In order to help me keep on task during the next twelve months, I have attempted to set up a few simply stated photographic goals. I feel like these are rather self explanatory, building upon each other to help me to push myself to make new and unique images. I have found that many of the more successful images I have made in the last few years are either a new way to look at a common species or tell some sort of story of the bird;

1. Photograph as many species of birds as possible with a specific focus on endemics.
2. Tell a story with each individual image.
3. Use the collection of images as a whole to explore the larger story of Australian endemism and isolation using birds as an example.

In a few hours I will set foot on Australian soil for the first time and begin my journey. This year should be quite an amazing experience and I still can't believe I am actually on my way. I hope that you will enjoy following me as I experience a year abroad chasing a dream. Each month I will write a diary style photo essay for NPN as well as maintaining my own website with a monthly newsletter, a couple weblogs, and lots more images.

For more information please visit the following links;

- Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Foundation - www.watsonfellowship.org
- Of Emus and Fairy-wrens: Photographing Australia's Endemic Birds - www.OfEmusandFairyWrens.com
- Everglades Imagery: Intimate Detail of a Vast Landscape (previous work) - www.evergladesimagery.com

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