

Christmas Gems



Do you remember last Christmas? How it rained? Lord, how it rained!

It was our first Christmas in the new house and we had insisted it was our turn to host. It was a pleasant enough lunch, the overly careful and polite pleasantness of having our daughter's partners family from the other side of town all gathered round our laden table. A joyful cheeriness underlain by the subtle tensions of competition – does it measure up to the feast they put on last year, whose presents do the grandchildren like best, who can soothe the increasing fractiousness of the overwhelmed toddlers?

And all the while rain pelted down, lightning shattered the turbulent sky over the park and rumbling, house-shaking, dog-spooking thunder heralded even heavier deluges. And all the while I wondered what was happening out there in the park – where was all the water going, would the swamp fill, would the waterfall flow?

At last the polite time arrived for guests from the other side to leave and, as soon as they left, I donned wet-weather gear and trudged into an early stormy dusk with the apprehensive dogs at my heels. Water was streaming everywhere. The main asphalt track was a river.

And suddenly I saw it, my Christmas gem, under a dripping shrub. It had seen me first, of course, and was motionless, hoping I wouldn't notice it as it stood there by the track. The dogs stopped when I did and I raised my binoculars. We stared at each other, my surprise gift and I, and I drank in its beauty breathlessly through my binoculars, for perhaps thirty seconds, then with a few nonchalant stately strides it reached cover, scuttled into the undergrowth and was gone.

What was it? A Buffed-banded Rail, surely. I'd seen them on a trip to Queensland, but it was not on the list of birds ever seen in this park. Joy filled my heart, my Christmas happiness was complete. Nothing does it for me quite like a new bird.

The park has given me a few thrilling gifts through this year, new birds, never seen in the park before, and first seen by me. I send out excited e-mails and birdos come with high hopes and large cameras, and sometimes they can confirm my sightings, but a special serendipity seems to be mine.

Last week, as I made mental lists and the prospect of another polite Christmas – at my daughter's partner's sister's new house this time – depressed me, I received an early Christmas gift, a gem of such special brilliance that it will gladden my heart right through the festive season.

I was drifting along above the lake, hoping for a Silveryeye for my November list, when a tiny red glow caught my eye. A bird with a red head, was it? It was in one of those trees that have enormous yellow fluff-ball flowers, a magnet for honeyeaters and lorikeets, and there is always a smattering of red leaves on these trees. So this would be a Newholland Honeyeater with its head behind a red leaf, of course, ubiquitous bossy birds that they are in the park. But it wasn't, it was a tiny red bird with a red head, busily probing the blossoms with a honeyeater's curved bill. It had to be a Scarlet Honeyeater! But what was it doing here? Shouldn't it be in Queensland? Who would believe me? It moved around in the tree, intent on its feeding and came quite close to me, splendid unobstructed views – there was nothing else it could be. A Scarlet Honeyeater! Wow! And so beautiful, such a bright glowing red that I can find no suitable simile. Brighter far than an Ikea highchair. I didn't only tell my birding mates about it, I told everyone I met, as if I'd won Tatts or witnessed a miracle.