My Wild Backyard: Life Beyond the Verandah – by Julie Spencer

My home on Magnetic Island nestles against the bush, and I love living here, surrounded by nature. Each morning, I'm awoken by a cacophony of bird calls—no alarm clock needed. Drowsily, I rise and shuffle to the back verandah, cuppa in hand, and settle into my favourite spot: an old couch bathed in the first rays of sunlight.

Cradling my cup, I gaze up into the gumtrees. Currawongs call melodiously to one another as they swoop through the branches, their wings slicing the air with rhythmic swooshes. Overhead, a large flock of sulphur-crested cockatoos circles, screeching like rowdy schoolchildren. In a nearby tree, a family of blue-winged kookaburras erupts into raucous laughter, triggering a chain reaction from a rival family in the distance. A curlew darts across a grassy clearing, crying out before vanishing into the undergrowth. The piercing calls of rainbow lorikeets grow louder as a small flock zips past, shrieking and chattering in a whirlwind of colour. Nearby, the deep, resounding *whoop whoop whoop* of a pheasant coucal echoes through the trees.

These are my morning greetings.

I sip my tea and scan the block beyond the fence. Agile wallabies often graze there, quiet and watchful. If I move suddenly, they raise their heads and lock eyes with mine, staring silently before bounding away. Once, I spotted a cheeky fella inside the chook pen, helping himself to the chicken feed. No wonder the grain was vanishing so quickly!

A pair of orange-footed scrub fowl patrol the bush fringe, scratching through the vegetation and flicking leaf litter behind them. Their nest mound lies about fifty metres from our fence, though they rarely venture into the yard. I don't mind—I've heard tales of their garden havoc: mulch flung far and wide, beds ruined. We already have our hands full with our chooks!

During breeding season, the scrub fowl become fierce defenders of their territory. Twigs snap and calls ring out as rival pairs crash through the bush, chasing each other, leaping, wings flapping, legs kicking, feathers flying. It's a dramatic spectacle to witness from the comfort of my couch.

As the sun climbs higher, the bush quiets and the morning chorus fades. The light brightens, the temperature rises. Wallabies retreat into the shade, and curlews melt into the thickets. In their place, the daytime regulars arrive. Skinks emerge to sun themselves on warming rocks before scurrying back into the leaf litter. The buzz of insect life intensifies as butterflies and bees flit through the garden. The loud hum of a solitary carpenter bee's wings announces its purposeful foraging. Blue-banded bees, with striped blue and black abdomens, move among the Ixora flowers, feasting on nectar. I smile at the iridescent flashes of the blue Ulysses butterfly and the green Cairns birdwing as they flutter past—fleeting jewels in the sky.

Red and blue dragonflies hover like tiny helicopters near the pool, landing briefly before darting away. Sometimes, a rainbow bee-eater swoops down with a chirping trill to snatch an insect from the water's surface. Occasionally, I hear a loud splash as a bird—usually a currawong

or kookaburra—uses our pool as a personal birdbath. With a flutter and splash, they emerge bedraggled and proud, perching on the fence like soggy sentinels.

Blue-winged kookaburras are daily visitors, often gathering in family groups. I've counted nine perched along the fence and trees, their eyes sharp and curious. Sometimes one swoops down to hop across the lawn, pecking at tiny black beetles that surface after the sprinkler shuts off.

But my heart belongs to the olive-backed sunbirds. I love watching them flit from flower to flower, twittering to one another. Each year, they grace us with a nest on the verandah. I watch in awe as the female constructs her masterpiece using only her beak. Unlike nest building, both parents share the task of raising their young. I delight in spying them flying back and forth, feeding their hungry babies.

A pheasant coucal also frequents our yard, stalking through the undergrowth with stealth and intent, hunting lizards and insects. When startled, it flutters high into the trees, clucking as it goes.

When the callistemon and grevilleas bloom, the garden becomes a nectar haven. Helmeted friarbirds, honeyeaters, and rainbow lorikeets descend upon the flowers, chattering in noisy celebration.

Just beyond the fence stands a towering gum tree with a hollow midway up one of its branches, home to a pair of rainbow lorikeets. Fiercely protective, they become vocal when prying eyes get too close, vigorously chasing away intruders—cockatoos, galahs, even kookaburras. On another branch sits a currawong's nest made of twigs. One morning, I heard a loud grunting—it was a male koala straddling an outstretched branch. The currawongs and lorikeets were unimpressed, swooping at him in outrage all day. Unsurprisingly, the koala had moved on by the next morning.

Occasionally, the backyard hosts slithering visitors: a yellow-bellied tree snake sunning on the footpath, a carpet python winding along the railing, and sometimes a death adder curled beside a rock. A timely reminder to tread carefully—even when descending the back steps.

As dusk falls, flocks of cockatoos circle overhead, screeching as they fly home to roost. In the distance, barking owls begin their *woof woof* calls. Flying foxes swoop past, silhouetted against the sunset sky. Sometimes, a microbat flaps through the open verandah doors, doing a lap around the lounge room before flitting back into the night. Geckos emerge to feast on insects gathering near the ceiling light, and my favourite nightly visitors—the green tree frogs—come out to perch on the porch. One has even taken to dipping into our fish tank—a quirky and charming sight.

Sometimes, a brush-tailed possum knocks over a flowerpot as it scurries along the rail, a baby clinging to its back.

On rare nights, I spot the enchanting green glow of fireflies flickering in the dark. As I step outside to find more, I hear the crash of undergrowth and the *thump thump* of wallaby tails as they bound away. Groups of curlews cry out with such fervour it sounds like a bushland party.

But of all the visitors, the one I treasure most is the echidna. One quiet evening, I sat on the garden bench as it foraged so close I could hear its snuffling breath. It nearly bumped into my legs.

When I finally drift to sleep each night, it's to nature's lullaby of insects, frogs, geckos, owls, and curlews. I smile to myself in the dark. I love living here on Magnetic Island.
