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VALE JIM NELSON

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In this special edition of The Natural News past and current members of the Deloraine/Central North Field Naturalists reflect on the considerable impact Jim has had on our lives, and share some memories of our natural history adventures.

Neil Hoffmann's essay Jim Nelson - A Life in Pots, written for the catalogue for Jim's retrospective exhibition in 2023 gives another perspective on Jim's life.

Finally, I have included an edited version of Jim's article "Why Crayfish".

<https://cnfn.org.au/pdf/natural/45.pdf>

Vale Jim Nelson *Rod McQueen*

Those who have known Jim Nelson for any length of time will feel his departure from us with deep sadness. Indeed, it is due to his initiative that our field naturalist community came into being in the first place and to his tireless efforts and leadership for a few decades thereafter that it grew and prospered. Though his immediate influence waned from 2020 due to illness, his legacy continues to this day. Some of us are directly indebted to Jim for helping us discover, in the company of fellow enthusiasts, the natural wonders of northern Tasmania's unique flora and fauna. His infectious love of the natural environment has had a lasting influence on us all one way or the other. We all owe him indirect thanks for the lasting friendships that we have made in our community.

Few people could match Jim for his almost childlike enthusiasm for living things. If it reproduced and grew, he was interested in it. Naturally, he had his special interests. As a teenager growing up alongside a river in Illinois, he developed a special passion for crayfish of all stripes and sizes. Upon moving to Tasmania in the 1970s with his late



Jim looked closely at so many frogs of different species, that he eventually came to the conclusion that all common froglets (*Crinia signifera*) have a white spot on their rear end and was a good way to differentiate them from other similar looking small frogs. He started calling it 'the white spotted bum frog', much to the delight of young children!

wife, Claudia, he quickly fell in love with our unique crustacean fauna — *Engaeus* (burrowing crayfish) and *Astacopsis* (giant crayfish) — and became a recognized expert in the field. Over time, his interest extended to invertebrates of every shape and size. His other "obsession" was herptiles: amphibians, reptiles and tortoises. Those who attended AGMs in his pottery studio at Weeena will remember the eastern long-necked turtle and the giant crayfish lurking in tanks and the blue-tongued lizard lazing in the annexe.

Today, CNFN annually appoints a walks coordinator to plan the walks program. For a long time Jim shouldered the lion's share of this task, tracking down places of interest to explore. Some were well-known while others, such as Sensation Gorge, Mother Cummings Peak, Lobster Falls, Granta Ponds, and an unlisted tor near Mole Creek, are much less frequently visited. Having a broad general knowledge of all things living, Jim was a treasure trove of information on walks. He was always willing to answer questions and patiently identified walkers' exciting discoveries, even the most humdrum ones he had

identified perhaps dozens of times. To this day, huddles of members examining and discussing an intriguing find are a chief characteristic of CNFN walks.

One of his trademark pieces of equipment was a small spade which he would use to gently “coax” a burrowing crayfish out of hiding which he would then identify for our delectation. I remember one occasion when he dug deep into the sandy sediment of a small, dry creek bed (the author cannot remember what he was expecting to find) and chanced upon a large, fat, soft, white, caterpillar-like creature in the sludge. Who knows what it was? He was quite the magician when it came to finding *Astacopsis*. Often, he would reach under a submerged log or branch and within seconds pull out a startled specimen—to everybody’s delight except the specimen’s.

Jim often visited schools to talk about the importance of environmental stewardship and to regale children with tall tales and true about crayfish, frogs, and tadpoles or whatever else he felt moved to tell them about. He involved himself zealously in environmental projects, such as the Mary Binks Wetlands in East Devonport, and various others the author cannot remember. Those who have visited his Weegeena wonderland will recall the amazing North American arboretum he planted out with his own hands.

On top of all that, Jim was a thoroughly decent human being. Though he did not walk the corridors of wealth, fame, or power, Jim stood out in the things that really matter. He and Claudia were exemplars of hospitality, hosting numerous gatherings in their Weegeena home. After Claudia’s death, Jim continued the custom with Debbie’s help. Who can forget the kitchen table in the cottage sagging under a burden of sun-dried tomatoes, olives, artichoke hearts and every other imaginable pizza topping when we held our AGMs there? Jim even built a pizza oven for such occasions.

Jim was one of those rare souls whom you could not dislike no matter how hard you might try. One of the reasons for this can be traced to the way he treated everybody with the same yardstick of courtesy and kindness. Few people could communicate as readily with people of all ages—children, teenagers, and the elderly—as Jim could. Furthermore, he rarely, if ever, showed any personal hostility towards another person or spoke of them in disparaging terms.

These attributes, combined with his natural modesty and gentleness, made him one of nature’s most easy-to-like people. When Debbie organized a surprise party for him on his seventieth birthday, field naturalists and local residents who wished to honour him for reaching this milestone packed the Weegeena Hall to overflowing. The festive atmosphere was testimony to the affection in which all held him.

Jim’s one quality that aroused any personal pushback was his passionate desire to protect our natural environments in general and crayfish habitat in particular. His determined advocacy brought him into conflict with, well... certain vested interests and government inertia. Being the sort of person who would scale mountains to avoid friction, the fact that he was willing to incur resentment for the sake of a greater good is testimony to his thoroughgoing integrity. Though not easily riled, the cavalier attitude of entrenched government and bureaucracy towards the great outdoors irritated him intensely. His one public display of pique took the form of a bumper sticker on his car reading, “Welcome to Tasmania; explore the corruption.”

Farewell, Jim. Many thanks for your genuine friendship. Thanks for setting us such a sterling example of love for nature and care for the environment. We sorely miss you.

One of the first plants that Jim introduced me to was *Monotoca glauca*. When he told me the name I thought he must have been joking. And so began a beautiful relationship with Jim and my appreciation of plants and the natural environment. Jim added an enormous amount to my life for which I will be forever grateful. Thank you Jim.

Maybe it was just the way he said it.



Monotoca glauca (goldeywood) Photo Philip Milner

Three Hummock Island, October 1999 *Steve Cronin, May 2025*

As a tribute to Jim, I have chosen to describe my 5 day trip to Three Hummock Island in October 1999 with Jim, Sarah Lloyd, Ron Naborcka, Tony Aliano and Zoe Tanner. We did many trips together around our State, but this was memorable as it was so much fun, with conservation work completed by everyone.

We all stayed in the guest cottage, all helping to make meals, cleaning and enjoying the company. The conservation work was to observe the health and viability of the Forester Kangaroo population and set up permanent monitoring transect lines. The flora and fauna surveys resulted in new plant species being added to the island's list, most of which were orchids that were flowering during our visit.

Our trip was extended due to the weather preventing the light plane from arriving as planned. We ran out of food and so it was fishing off the rocks for Wrasse with ice plant salad. Worse still was we ran out of alcohol, no one saw the funny side of that at the time.

On the extra day Jim and I got the two mountain bikes and decided to explore Emerald Swamp in the centre of the island; saner people might have seen an added rainy day as an opportunity to stay warm and dry in front

of the fire reading in the guest cottage, but of course we didn't want to waste a minute to explore and have fun.

It rained heavily all day, and we bush bashed our way into and out of the swamp in water so darkened by tannins that the only way to gauge water depth was a stick to poke ahead of your steps—the blind leading the blind. We were in our element and laughed all day about how wet it was, how hard the bush bashing was and what fun and adventure we had.

Jim was passionate about our fauna, flora and did whatever he could to protect our native species, habitats and ecosystems; we owe him a debt of gratitude for his contribution to conservation.

It has been such a pleasure to have known Jim as a friend and work colleague; I will miss him so much but will always remember the fun times we had and the positive work we did for Tasmania's environment.

[Jim and Tony's articles about the trip to Three Hummock Island including 'Five days on an island' and 'In the footsteps of Garibaldi' are available on the CNFN website:

<https://cnfn.org.au/pdf/natural/6.pdf>]



Jim cycling along the track on the way to Emerald Swamp, Three Hummock Island, Photo Steve Cronin.

DFNG goes west *Tony Aliano*

[The following is an edited version of Tony's article that appeared in DFNG Bulletin Jan-Feb 1999]

It was a windy, drizzly Sunday when Geoff King delivered us (Jim, Sarah, Ron and me) to his King's Run Property. ...

Jim found 3 species of freshwater crayfish, *Geocharax*, *Engaeus lengana* and *E. fossor*. I saw him dig a hole for one such creature. As he was digging, I thought that if it were my job I would seriously consider the possibility that there must be a better way of making a living. But he does it for pleasure! As the hole being dug almost reached the length of a spade in slushy, black sticky mud, he excitedly yells "there it is!", and down he goes, flat on the

ground with his arms disappearing into the filthy mess of a hole. After fumbling around in the muck, he pulled out the mud covered moving lump. By the grin on his face one would have thought that he'd found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow ...

Between the extensive aboriginal artefacts all around us, the flora and fauna along with the perfect weather, it was (to use an expression coined by Jim) enough to 'pop your operculum!'"

Kings Run species list: 115 plants, 43 birds, 2 butterflies, 1 seal, three frogs and 1 unidentified female dung beetle (possibly *Onthophagus*) burying native dung.

Sue Woinarski

I first met DFNG members in January 1992, when Nick Mooney released a rehabilitated Wedge Tailed Eagle. There is a photo of her in Newsletter No. 2.

Jim was always cheerful, friendly, welcoming new members, sharing his vast knowledge and always seeking more. I can see him up to his

shoulder exploring a crayfish burrow.

I haven't seen Jim for some years, but it was a comforting thought that he was in the world somewhere. Now the world has a Jim shaped hole in it. My thoughts are with Deb.

I first met Jim 50 years ago when I worked at the State Library in Launceston and was occasionally the assistant on the ‘bookmobile’ run that went through Deloraine and out to Weeena. Jim and his late wife Claudia were avid readers who I met later during my occasional shifts relieving the Deloraine branch librarian.

Our paths crossed yet again when Claudia (a weaver), Jim and I were all members of the Deloraine Craft Art Professionals. Most importantly, I saw Jim nearly every month after I joined the Deloraine Field Naturalist Inc. not long after its inauguration. This small group of dedicated naturalists was unapologetically political. One of their aims was to have the Gog Range and associated waterways protected from forestry activities because of the impact they were having on the Giant Freshwater Crayfish, *Astacopsis gouldi*.

Ron and I soon become regulars on the monthly walks and were delighted to meet people knowledgeable about so many different aspects of the natural world. I had just started contributing regularly to the Australian Bird Count, and was asked to list the plants at my study site that were flowering at the time of each survey. The expertise in the group well and truly answered my plant questions – and more. Judith Hughes (now at the Tasmanian Arboretum) identified a stinkhorn fungus at our place well before most people even noticed fungi. We were handed a homemade plant press on our first walk, (these people were serious!) and who could forget the fern mnemonics ‘*polystichum the kettle on*’ and ‘*rhumore a love you*’; pity we didn’t always remember the ferns to which they referred! Jim knew much more than just the flowering plants. I learned about frogs, ferns, platypus, and of course, his beloved crayfish.

We learnt botany by keying out plants,

during overnight stays at the Burnie Field Nats cabin at Rocky Cape National Park or our annual camping weekends at Waterhouse Reserve, and we had some unforgettable adventures to King’s Run on the wild west coast, and to Three Hummock Island where we were forced to stay an extra day because of the weather. Fish and sea parsley supplemented our dwindling supplies.

Ever the educator, Jim was able to engage with adults and children alike. He would describe and handle animals with confidence and affection and had that rare ability to impart time and time again relevant information to anyone who would listen. (Those of us who had heard it many times before would find something else to look at!)

Jim was an important mentor to several young people who joined the group soon after it began. Micah Visoiu is a self described “victim” of the back to the land movement whose parents moved from suburbia to the back blocks of The Great Western Tiers. Micah explored widely—and closely—turning rocks and inspecting crevices, searching for anything that moved. One memorable occasion happened when he took a day off school and joined Jim, Ron, Sue Woinarski and me on a day long field trip to Mt Chappell Island in Bass Strait, ostensibly to control the boxthorn that was taking over the airstrip, but in fact to check out the infamous Mt Chappell Island tiger snakes. It didn’t take long before Jim found a snake under a boxthorn bush, held it up by its tail, and then handed it to a considerably shorter 13-year-old Micah for his snake initiation. We could only imagine the horrified look on his mother’s face if she’d seen the spectacle.

I also remember distinctly the day and location when Jim turned young Micah, who had thus far shown no interest in plants, into a budding botanist when he described the

details of several ferns encountered during an outing to Black Sugarloaf. Micah repeated the descriptions word for word to the next group of walkers, who were greatly impressed with his knowledge. During the same field trip, Micah found a velvet worm (possibly *Peripatus* sp.), also to the delight of all onlookers. Micah graduated from University of Tasmania (UTAS) with majors in plant sciences, geography and environmental studies, but maintained his strong interest in zoology and geology. He currently works at NRE and has recently been to Flinders Island to search for Pookila, i.e. New Holland Mouse (*Pseudomys novaehollandiae*).

Finding a group of people with whom he could discuss birds and the Australian Bird Count surveys he was conducting was enough to entice young Andrew Hingston from his quiet life in Jackeys Marsh to a friendly forum where he could share his ideas. Andrew went on to study at UTAS, working with CNFN Patron Dr Peter McQuillan on bumblebees and insect pollinators—amongst other things. Andrew is currently working for the Bruny Island Environment Network as their Project Manager for Threatened Woodland Birds of Bruny Island. He remembers Jim as “a wonderful fellow who did so much to encourage and inspire me on my path from lost young man to professional ecologist (as did you and Ron)”.

When Tony Aliano moved to Weeena he had an interest in plants, but he had much to learn. Jim and Tony spent many hours together keying out the species they found in the local area - and beyond. While Jim honed his identification skills, Tony progressed from the well known, to investigating the tiny species that most people overlook.

The field nats group that Jim and others initiated changed the course of my life. For many years Jim wrote for and was editor of the DFNG Bulletin, forerunner of The Natural

News, always encouraging other members to contribute. I committed to writing regularly, and started with the things I knew best, i.e. birds; Silvereyes, Bassian Thrush and Eastern Spinebills were among my first efforts. I eventually started to research and write about a range of other aspects of the natural world, if only to try to learn about and understand that particular topic myself. This led to writing for other publications, including my own books. After many years, Jim entrusted me as his successor as editor of The Natural News.

How serendipitous that Jim immigrated to distant Tasmania, where the crayfish fauna is one of the richest in the world. Not only have *Astacopsis* and *Engaeus* benefited from Jim's love and care for the environment, which triggered the formation of our group, but his knowledge, encouragement and mentorship touched the lives of the many people who shared his interests and passions. Jim will be sorely missed and remembered with fondness and love.



Those of us who live in similar habitats to Eastern Spinebill will likely be familiar with their repetitive piping call, which some people might find monotonous. I remember Jim telling me that he once counted an Eastern Spinebill calling 60 times. Ever curious and interested in just about everything, he also asked me why they did this.

Jim Nelson - A Life With Pots

Neil Hoffmann

Back in 1971 Fred Olsen, pottery instructor at the University of Puget Sound, Washington State, encouraged a young Jim Nelson to go to Sturt Pottery in Mittagong, New South Wales. Jim was a new convert to clay, and Fred, being dubious about the university system as a training ground for potters, recommended Jim for an apprenticeship to Les Blakeborough, then head of Sturt. In 1972, Jim with his wife Claudia (now deceased) moved to the other side of the world to begin a new life in Australia.

This continental shift sat well with Jim. He had contempt for the America of his birth - Nixon, the Vietnam war and returning body bags, and a country devouring itself by a rampant consumerism all fed his inclination to take flight to pursue his new passion.

After the apprenticeship Jim and Claudia visited Tasmania, when they recognised the possibility of realising their 'Nearing dreaming' in the island state. They were heavily influenced by the "Back to the Land Movement" and self-sufficiency, and Helen and Scott Nearing's book *Living the Good Life*, had helped focus their thinking for a life without the excesses of human living that they considered to be at the root of systemic planetary degradation.

An old ute and three months of looking around delivered Jim and Claudia to Weeena near Deloraine in October 1973. Soon an old dairy became a pottery, a modest cottage a home, and adjoining acreage a farm befitting their dream. Cows, sheep and a very large garden with orchard ensued. It was an exciting time. Tasmania was still relatively unspoiled.

Like others, Jim with Claudia (a weaver), built their lives with limited means. Simple but efficient, Stonerise Pottery (initially Nelson Pottery) was furnished with wheels and kilns that Jim constructed, largely with

scavenged materials. Small returns for effort were supplemented with the knowledge that their careful consumerism was a move away from planet compromising living.

Alongside potting life Jim became increasingly absorbed by the greater realm. An intrepid naturalist and founding member of the Deloraine (now Central North) Field Naturalists, his studio soon became a hub of natural history research. Animals for study were housed in the studio giving Jim's lively clay creations real life company.

Jim inevitably moved to environmental activism. Conviction, knowledge, and a deep caring coalesced into purposeful action. With Claudia, he returned part of their land to forest; organised a large exhibition at Bow-erbank Mill Gallery to help fund the Save The Franklin campaign; worked tirelessly to confound the decimation of the Gog Range forests; was instrumental in having Tasmania's Giant Freshwater Crayfish formally listed as threatened; and more. Education was Jim's way, forever reading, walking, thinking critically, and sharing his knowledge. Anger and frustration were diffused with wandering and wondering time in waterways, forests wet and dry, and rocky or sandy shores.

The species that Jim was working to conserve found their way into his work. Carefully drawn and modelled animals took up residence in robust platters, his empathy and love of his research subjects now becoming central to his making. Objects became much more than things of utility. They evolved into 'pots with benefits', pots that connect us to the natural world. Large platters, powerful and strong, speak of frogs, platypus, and giant freshwater crayfish. In all this, Jim's work took on a more overtly political character.

[This is an edited version of Neil's essay that appeared in the catalogue for Jim's retrospective exhibition in 2023]

I remember Jim telling me that he came to Tasmania after seeing a poster that declared “America—love it or leave it”. OK thought Jim, I’m out of here. Not only that but after checking his atlas, Tasmania looked as far away as possible. Upon arriving he and Claudia set up their modest house with a building for pottery and weaving. This studio space was then occasionally occupied by a tortoise and an aquarium for crayfish.

Jim’s enthusiasm for natural history began during his boyhood in Illinois where he had a mentor. And it was in that environment that he learned about the local “crawfish”. His enthusiasm for these creatures knew no bounds. I remember well the amount of dirt excavated in his attempts to expose and identify *Engaeus* species below their mounds of mud.

As he learnt more and more about Tasmania’s natural history, he generously shared his knowledge and enthusiasm. Greatly missed.



Jim seldom walked past an *Engaeus* chimney without trying to find the animal responsible. Several species presented particular problems, most memorably *Engaeus cisternarius*, which is named after the cisterns it creates above the natural water table. He predicted what species would be present given our location in northwest Tasmania, but the network of tunnels presented Jim with a challenge even he could not overcome. He was forever trying to devise a way of ‘fishing’ for *Engaeus*, which would save many hours of sometimes fruitless digging.



After conveniently finding the Black Sugarloaf *Engaeus* under a log, Jim closely inspected the animal and identified it *E. disjuncticus*, based mainly on the very reduced size of the tail and large front claws. He told us the species name refers to its distant or ‘disjunct’ population. According to iNaturalist, there are records from south of Burnie, west coast, Birrallee and Reedy Marsh. Jim added Frankford to the list of known sites thanks to some digging during a field nats outing.

Why Crayfish?

— *Jim Nelson*

[This is an edited version of Jim's article that appeared in The Natural News #45 May 2010. <https://cnfn.org.au/pdf/natural/45.pdf>]

I have always considered my interests in natural history to be fairly wide ranging. My early interests as a boy consisted mainly of trees, fish (and fishing) birds, turtles, snakes, mammals and insects. I was lucky enough to live beside the Fox River in Illinois, which is part of the Mississippi catchment. The centre of my existence was the river, and I spent much of my free time exploring its wooded islands, watching the birds, learning where various animals lived such as muskrat and the odd beaver, catching snakes, and learning where the different species of fish hung out in order to have a better chance of catching them.

My interest in fishing led me to an appreciation of freshwater crayfish, initially because they were favoured by most fish as food. One of my first important observations about crayfish occurred when I decided at the age of 12 to go into the bait business selling large earthworms called 'nightcrawlers' as well as 'crawdads' (crayfish). The crayfish part of the enterprise failed when I discovered that they are cannibalistic, and cannot be kept together. However, this failure raised my curiosity and I began to look more closely at crayfish habitat in order to discover the niches they retreated to, especially when they needed to moult.

I remember trying to enthuse about this to my friends, and receiving little more than "who cares?", or "do you want to play football?" responses. There was, however, a friend of my father who appreciated my interests. He began to tell me fascinating things about many creatures living in or near the river. He also introduced me to a concept called 'conservation'.

When I was about 15, the area where we

were living managed to attract a manufacturing company to establish locally. Suddenly new housing started springing up everywhere as the town went into considerable expansion. The old sewage system couldn't cope with the expansion so the city fathers in their wisdom agreed to divert the excess sewage into the storm drainage system that emptied into the Fox River. My father objected vigorously to the city council and mayor, but was told this was 'the price of progress'. ... I remember reading in the local paper (The Beacon News, but known as 'be confused') that there was really no problem because a river could "purify itself every hundred yards". As I walked along the river looking at the revolting flotsam, I failed to find any evidence of this "purification", and the dying fish helped confirm my suspicions of the lies told in the name of "progress".

Finally, as the river became little more than an open sewer, we moved away. Later, when I was at university, an environmental activist in the area who called himself The Fox started blocking up the various effluent pipes dumping filth into the river, and gained nationwide attention. He was one of the earliest and most successful environmental activists.

There were numerous rumours about the identity of The Fox. Many years later when returning to the US, I finally found out that he was a school teacher who wrote a very thoughtful book about why he did his actions. He said they suited the times, but encouraged people interested in conservation to find better outcomes. His were polarizing, and he felt that wider education about the environment was the answer. Nevertheless, his activities contributed to public awareness and contributed to the momentum to have a Clean Streams Act that was passed by Congress.

Upon my arrival in Tasmania in the early 1970s, my interest in freshwater crayfish was revived when I discovered the streams in the Mersey River Valley contained the largest

freshwater invertebrate in the world: *Astacopsis gouldi*, the Giant Freshwater Lobster.

In the late 1980s Dr Pierre Horwitz and Dr Premek Hamr declared *A. gouldi* to be in trouble from over fishing and habitat destruction. Our fledgling field naturalists group, carried out a Commonwealth funded study to determine impacts of habitat destruction on the giant crayfish.

In about 1990 I once again encountered a burrowing crayfish, only this time it was in the enthusiastic company of the reigning expert, Pierre, who had done his PhD on *Engaeus* and named many of the species. He impressed on me that there was a lifetime of work to be done gathering information. He suggested that amateur enthusiasts like me were needed to carry out the work. I was hooked.

I was commissioned by the Engaeus Recovery Team to do the distribution work for a Central North species, *Engaeus granulatus*, which led to the species being listed as endangered. Since that listing, a number of colonies have been severely impacted or extinguished by developments, and there appears to be no effective planning mechanism in place that

works on behalf of the crayfish rather than the developer. I have wasted countless hours report writing for the Commonwealth concerning protection measures for various colonies of *E. granulatus*, only to see my work simply ignored. If I could write a pop song, it would be about betrayal of my midnight toil.

...

Tasmania has one of the richest if not THE richest crayfish faunas in the world that includes five unique genera of mostly endemics. This includes the world's largest (*Astacopsis*) and arguably the most highly evolved (*Engaeus*). Observing and learning about these species has given me a great deal of pleasure over the years, while my growing awareness and admiration of their long evolutionary history and adaptation has spurred a sense of purpose to work on their behalf. Trying to make a difference for them has proved to be an ever increasing challenge. In trying to meet this challenge, I was once confronted with the question "But what GOOD are they?" Increasingly, that becomes a difficult question for me to answer for our own species.



Engaeus granulatus, central north burrowing crayfish Photo: Peter Tonelli.



“Tiger, tiger”, detail of one of Jim’s large platters inspired by the natural world.



Jim always immensely enjoyed our picnics and walks at the Tasmanian Arboretum. Photo Deb Kerr