

The Tiegs Museum's *Phascogale*

Campbell Phillips

I had delayed my graduation ceremony for nearly half a year, but as it turns out, it was lucky that I did.

Dr Robin Hirst, Director of Collections, Research and Exhibitions at Museum Victoria, was introduced to give the occasional address, unwittingly providing me with the final inspiration I needed for this particular piece. Dr Hirst, a man clearly devoted to his passion, spoke of the relevance of collections and those who care for them. 'We consider ourselves essentially storytellers,' he said. 'We tell big stories through the exhibition of real objects and specimens. It is the objects, the small things, which create the exciting dialogue with people.'

This is a story about those small things.

The Tiegs Zoology Museum at the University of Melbourne has been discussed at length in this magazine before, so I cannot presume to reiterate those details.¹ But for those who have no clear idea of what I am talking about, please imagine a room filled with glass cabinets trimmed in aluminium and filled with animal specimens. The giant skeleton of a moa, that has become almost representative of the museum, dominates the space (illustrated above). Many have heard of the Tiegs Museum, but few of those could



accurately tell you where it is.

For an aspiring zoology major, the Tiegs Museum was a place of wonder for me as a second-year student, way back in 2007. There is such a plethora of species to be found there, preserved in all manner of ways. I have spent hours among that collection during my time at the University of Melbourne, hours spent simply observing the different animals. For me, it is better in many ways than going to the zoo. You can't find horseshoe crabs at the zoo.

On one of my first visits I became interested in one particular example.

The specimen was in a bottle, a furry creature spread-eagled and suspended in solution.

There isn't much the untrained eye can tell about an animal preserved in this way. Superficially it looked rat- or squirrel-like, but on closer inspection the animal could be identified as a marsupial, as some tiny nubs of flesh—its suckling young—hung from the open pouch. A smaller yet similar creature sat within the bottle next to it; it too had pouch young. When I read the labels on each bottle, I found the larger specimen was an example of



Opposite: A skeleton of a moa, an extinct, flightless New Zealand bird, dominates the Tiegs Museum in the Department of Zoology at the University of Melbourne. Photograph by Campbell Phillips.

Far left: An immortalised phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*) with pouch young, displayed in the Tiegs Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne. Photograph by Campbell Phillips.

Left: Preserved antechinus (*Antechinus flavipes*) with pouch young, displayed in the Tiegs Museum, Department of Zoology, University of Melbourne. Photograph by Campbell Phillips.

the species *Phascogale tapoatafa*; the smaller was *Antechinus flavipes* (both illustrated above). To be honest, my eye had been drawn, but my interest did not last long. It was at least a year before I even thought about these marsupials again.

I have been visiting the Strathbogie Mountains since I was 12 or 13. My school favoured a particular site there for school camps. So it was with an air of nostalgia that I went back to the mountains for a weekend as part of a zoology class retreat.

The grass stays green for longer in the higher ranges, but the hills themselves often look bronze rather than green. This I attribute to the darker greys and greens of the eucalypts that swaddle the hillsides, intermixed by the reddish hues of the new growth leaves. I had spent days hiking in the Strathbogies when I was going through school, but I never noticed the sheer plethora of wildlife that exists there. I had assumed the presence of the grey kangaroos, but on this weekend we also saw koalas and swamp wallabies and echidnas wandering the open field below our bunkhouses. The academics who were our demonstrators found and trapped lizards, wrens and bats to show us correct handling techniques.

This was where I was reintroduced to our friend, the

Antechinus. The antechinus is basically an adorable insectivorous mouse with wicked, needle-point teeth. I discovered from the staff that the antechinus had previously received some attention in studies that detailed the breeding habits of the species. It is now widely understood that the male antechinus only lives for one breeding season. He is born, he grows, he goes out into the wide world in the hope of finding a mate—and then he finds her. Unlike in some arachnid and insect species, the female doesn't mean to kill her mate, it's just that he will continue to mate with her until he expires from exhaustion. Talk about a way to go.

Dr Kath Handasyde,² who led the field biology retreat, later invited me to help one of her research students, Achim Eberhart, in his study of the antechinus and the way in which it disperses across the environment. His study aimed to capture data on how these delicate creatures fared when moving between native forest, agricultural land and the pine plantations that have crept into the area. The study was taking place in the same area of the Strathbogies, so nearly six months after I had learned of these unique little creatures, I was given the task of going out and helping find out more about them.

So it was that I found myself rising before the sun to drive out to specific sites where we had laid traps the evening before, checking and resetting each one in the hope of collecting more data. Sometimes I would head out with Kath and Achim. There were some days that I was heading out by myself. It was mostly boring, hot work with little human interaction when I was on my own.

Occasionally an opportunity to speak to the local farmers would present itself. I always found it interesting that the farmers who worked the land right next to where we were capturing these animals had little to no inkling of their very existence. I guess that if they ever saw an antechinus, they might in error classify it as a 'rat' or 'mouse', assuming that it was introduced vermin rather than part of the natural order of the land.

One morning all three of us were out checking a line of traps. The sun was climbing and was quite strong, so I assumed it was nearly nine o'clock. Kath opened a trap and peeked inside, only to look up again in surprise: 'It's a brush-tailed phascogale!' Even with years of experience, her surprise at the find painted an expression of youthful delight across her face. 'These guys are usually extremely good at avoiding

Dr Kath Handasyde demonstrates correct handling techniques with mother koala and joey. Photograph by Campbell Phillips.



these traps—it's part of the reason why there isn't very much known about them. They are quite cryptic, more so than antechinus.'

I assumed this had to be true, as a few antechinus had been known to seek shelter in Kath's property in the Strathbogies. They didn't strike me as particularly shy of humans.

'Phascogales are closely related to the antechinus—Dasyurid family. They're a bit larger though, take a look.' For anyone who doesn't know Kath, her passion for native wildlife is undeniable. I have a photograph of her with a joey koala on her back, her face creased with laughter as the little fellow has just wet himself, soaking Kath's shirt.

I peered inside the aluminium box. At the bottom a grey, furry shape peered from behind its dark, bushy tail. The large, oddly-set eyes and pointed nose were strongly reminiscent of the antechinus we had been catching, but its body was more grey than brown, and had the sleeker shape of a squirrel rather than the rounded shape of a mouse.

We set the trap down near an old eucalypt that we assumed would be one of its den trees, before coaxing it from the trap. It hopped out of the trap and scrambled onto the base of the tree. Here, it turned to stare at us momentarily before darting inside the

tree, hiding within some tiny crack or crevice in the rough bark. It was as if we had caught a glimpse of some special bush secret. We had witnessed something that few Australians ever have the chance to see.

So there it is, the brush-tailed phascogale is almost as hard to spot in the Tiegs as it is to find in the wild. While it is only considered 'near threatened,' the phascogale has been living in a habitat eroded by agriculture and feral pests for more than a century, with the situation only getting worse. I consider both antechinus and phascogale to be among the more beautiful of our native animals, but they may disappear long before the general population is even aware of their presence in the landscape. Perhaps, if we're lucky, someone has had the forethought to preserve one in a bottle before they become extinct.

Dr Robin Hirst's speech was not just serendipitous for my work; it was relevant to everyone. For what is a collection if it is not a record of lives and memories, of knowledge lost and gained? For each of us, there are objects that carry meaning and some of those objects are important not just to the individual, but to society at large. A small marsupial behind glass means a lot to me and to other zoologists, but without the

artifact itself, the memories and the knowledge would seem hollow, or transient.

In Dr Hirst's words, 'I think exhibitions are a lot like our lives. Exhibitions can have sweeping themes, but in the end they are made up of a whole host of objects. Our lives can be seen through the lens of the major phases ... but they are also made up of small events and incidents.'

Campbell Phillips recently completed a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Melbourne. This article began as a creative writing assignment in the School of Culture and Communication. Since graduating, Campbell has been writing freelance, but still finds the time to visit campus, selling computers at 'Next Byte' in Union House.

The Tiegs Museum in the Department of Zoology at the University of Melbourne is a resource for university students, teachers, researchers and school groups. For further information and contact details see www.zoology.unimelb.edu.au/tiegs.

- 1 Anna Coultas, 'Cabinets of curiosities, mystery specimens and a giant bird: A history of the Tiegs Museum, 1887–1959', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 7, December 2010, pp. 35–42.
- 2 Dr Kath Handasyde is a senior lecturer in wildlife ecology, management and diseases in the Department of Zoology at the University of Melbourne.