

2011: Young Cat, New Tricks and Happy Christmas

Dear friends and family,

We have stayed still enough in 2011 to acquire a new young cat and to learn some new tricks.



Our new boss

Polly succeeded to some extent in grounding us, but not quite. When we did stick around, we entertained ourselves by learning some new tricks. More about our travels and our tricks later. But first, Polly. Polly ('put the kettle on') is a 'rescue cat' whose misspent youth in Wagga Wagga landed her in the pound there. She was rescued by Amy and Alec, a young couple in the next Canberra suburb to us, but not before she had contracted the FIV virus (the feline version of HIV). This means that it is important that she is kept away from other cats, for her safety and theirs. So, one of our courtyards now has a delicate fringe of chicken wire and is the cat courtyard, as distinct from the bird courtyard where rosellas and other parrots ask for their breakfast. Meanwhile Polly is oblivious to her FIV status and remains hale and hearty.



Spot the chicken-wire, and the magpies

Polly wrote the flyleaf for a book Geoff produced, *Five Months in 2010*, which is a collection of our travel epistles and photos. It had a grand print run of one. Geoff thoroughly enjoyed being in charge of its production from go to woe. No pesky authors (except his co-author wife) wanting to change things or use the colour purple. Bring your white gloves and we'll show it to you.

Now to the new tricks. Chris worked for the government for the first time in her life. After ecumenical organisations and academia, she thoroughly enjoyed being an area supervisor for the Census. This involved recruiting, training and supervising a happy band of collectors who door-knocked surrounding suburbs and a rural patch as well. It was a great way to get to know the local community.



Security guard for Census materials

Our local knowledge grew further when we both put up our hands to help out with the 'Tucker Box', a food outlet opened by Holy Cross Anglican Church. Our eyes have been opened to the number of folk whose grocery budgets stretch that much further now, not to mention all the food that supermarkets would otherwise waste each week.



Our local MP Andrew Leigh opens the Tucker Box

Chris's rudimentary gardening skills grew thanks to the community garden taking root on the disused tennis court of the Ainslie Church of Christ. Silver beet, rocket and carrots obliged. Broccoli and beetroot ... hmmm? The next challenge is tomatoes and beans and growing the community among the gardeners.

Geoff committed himself to changing the roadside sign at the Ainslie church each week, with Chris as self-appointed theological consultant. Our fame hit new heights when the sign made it on to ABC TV News during the carbon tax debate. ('Are we taxing God's earth too much?') Talking of TV, Geoff applied his gadgetry skills to ours so that we can record, pause and watch programs at our leisure, no longer planning our evenings around the 7 o'clock news.

We got more serious about birdwatching and jumped in boots and all to the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG). Monthly walks and meetings and a autumn camp-out at Scottsdale, a reserve near Bredbo, expanded our knowledge, our bird list and our network of friends. (We side-stepped the camping by sleeping in warm beds with friends Heather and Peter in their cosy farmhouse nearby.) The spectacular birds of New Britain, PNG, came under the scrutiny of Chris's binoculars in October. Why New Britain? We'll come to that shortly. Up above the canopy of the rainforest above Kimbe Bay, local guides showed dozens of spectacular new species in the space of an hour or so.



There are two Eclectus Parrots in this shot taken by Geoff in the rainforest of New Britain

But we realised how much we still had to learn about the avian world when Peter, a birdwatcher we met in The Netherlands last year, came to visit us with his wife, Berry. Peter is the president of the Society of Dutch Ornithologists and he found his peer in Mark, a very experienced COG member who offered to help us show him local birds, Chris travelled with these two gentlemen up into wilderness areas and national parks and expanded her own bird list astronomically in the process. The 4WD, with windows often open so no bird song would go unnoticed, would regularly screech to a halt so binoculars could focus. Stumbling upon a group of CSIRO bird-banders in the Brindabellas, with the Crescent Honeyeater in hand, was a definite highlight. Peter's holy grail, the Superb Lyrebird, was realised seven times over at Minna Murra Falls. When Peter lay flat on his back to see the Topknot Pigeon in the canopy of the rainforest there, the passion of birdwatchers for their work was evident.



Does a Crescent Honeyeater 'in the hand' count for the list?

So, what took us to New Britain? Polly gave us leave to go there to lay flowers at the Bita Paka War Cemetery near Rabaul in memory of Chris's Uncle Frank who went missing as a pilot in World War II. We also visited the spot where his plane crashed at Hoskins. This is a story in itself and if you are interested, you can read it on our website at www.geoffandchris.com/Us/161211.html. Suffice it to say, that this was a very special moment in our family history, long-awaited and realised beyond our expectations.



Sheltering from a downpour at the Bita Paka War Cemetery

That week in New Britain was the extent of our overseas travel this year but Geoff had another new trick up his sleeve. He found an old caravan on a bush block not far from home which has become a much-loved retreat where we can cast off our cares. In many ways, it is a substitute for his old Gippsland property, Wroxham. We can sneak out when Polly isn't looking and take mini-holidays, a night here and there, quite easily. (Fortunately, Polly's preferred cuisine is dry food, grazed at a leisurely pace with no specific meal times.)

Out there in the extended family, more new tricks emerged. In Brisbane, Michael and Bec produced our first twin great-nieces/nephews, Rachel and Lucinda, during our stopover between PNG and home. What with the arrival of Emelia in September (to Simon and Allana), that brought the great-niece and nephew count to twenty-seven. There was much to-ing and fro-ing with family during the year. We travelled to Deniliquin, Melbourne, Brisbane, Moruya and Sydney. Our guests here in Canberra came for anything from heart surgery to gallery exhibitions.

Our old tricks did not gather rust either. Once COG cottoned on to Geoff's publishing skills, he found himself redesigning the bird observation form. He also prepared two books for publication: a reprint of the writings of Tertius (aka Gordon Stirling) and its sequel. He's currently assessing a book on the history of tennis in the ACT. Chris continued teaching and editing for St Mark's National Theological Centre and also spent six months doing the groundwork for a Friends and Alumni Network for them. We both cheered when the Holy Cross fete dawned sunny and hot—that meant record sales for our drinks stall. Geoff is back on the Ainslie Church of Christ board and Chris on parish council, each fostering good strong community while facing the challenge of an ageing congregation.

This summer, we are being grey nomads. (Yes, even Chris has a grey hair or ten, now.) Parents of our Canadian neighbour are cat-sitting for us in between adoring their new grandson next door. Polly has taken to them enormously. So we got to visit Auntie Meg in Deniliquin again to tell her all about the New Britain trip. While we were there, we joined a group of our Canberra birdwatching friends and spotted almost 150 birds in a weekend, including the elusive Plains-wanderer. We've learnt that serious birdwatchers are indefatigable as well as great fun to be with. Now we are back in that Bredbo farmhouse while our friends visit their grandchildren in USA. Next, we are heading up to Brisbane for Christmas.

Next year begins with the splash of Geoff's seventieth birthday. After that, we will begin negotiating with Polly about taking a leave of absence, most likely in the second half of the year. Is anyone out there looking for house-sitters or a house swap? Expect travel epistles.

Now, it remains to wish you all a happy and healthy Christmas and a New Year of peace, joy and a new trick or two.

With our love,