

Encounters with Wildlife  
By Esther C. Baird

Australia is known for things that can kill you. This, of course, is in stark contrast to Beverly where virtually nothing can harm you, well, other than a heart-stopping heating bill. But it's true, the top poisonous snakes and spiders all reside 'down under.' Not to mention the sharks or various toxic jellyfish that can get you in the water.

In the Sydney area, the only thing to worry about is the Funnel Web Spider. Its venom can kill a person in less than 15 minutes. But 'no worries mate', they have an anti-venom for it. That is if you have 15 minutes to make it to a hospital.

Surprisingly, in a country where so many creepy, crawly things can cause such a disproportionate amount of horror, nobody has screens. In Beverly, without screens we might have to fend off mosquitoes and the occasional inquisitive squirrel, but certainly nothing life-threatening. And yet I've never met a single person who didn't own screens.

But when I asked the Sydneysiders about it, the conversation always went like this.

"What? You mean like fly screens? To keep flies out?" The Aussie would ask. I'd reply. "Well, sure, flies but also you know other things, birds, leaves, toxic spiders and snakes - - whatever. Screens are also handy to keep things, like children, in." They'd always look mystified and answer. "Well . . . we really just don't have any flies."

And that'd be the end of it. We couldn't get past the flies.

But one day my third floor neighbor came out into the hallway with a panicked look on her face.

"Are you good with spiders?" She asked.

"I am not, in any way, good with spiders - why? Do you have the super-poisonous-everyone-has-promised-they-aren't-in-Bondi-Funnel-Web-Spider in your apartment?" I asked.

"No," she replied, "just a Huntsman."

"Oh?" I responded. "What's that look like?"

"Come see," she said. So I strapped my daughter into her high chair to keep her secure, and peeked my head out of our apartment into my neighbor's.

The Huntsman, as it turns out, is at least the size of a Tarantula. Seriously. Imagine a spider the size of the palm of your hand. And there it was, perched on her ceiling.

"It's the trees," she whispered. "It got in from the trees and I don't know how to get it out so I called my friend who once lived in the outback to come help me."

She then assured me as she maintained a defensive posture toward the spider, that Huntsmen really were harmless. I assured her right back that any creature for which I needed a 'friend from the outback,' was not harmless and why didn't she consider screens.

She paused and, with an eye on the spider, looked at me quizzically. "But we really don't have any flies here."

Not all of the lethal dangers in Australia come in through unscreened windows. Some were only a risk when partaking in the daily activity of swimming in the ocean.

One afternoon when visiting Bronte beach, 20 minutes south of Bondi, we noted that the tide had left all sorts of seaweed and trash along the beach. Specifically, it was full of what seemed to be plastic baggies, or blue cellophane. It was disappointing given how clean and lovely Australia had been thus far.

But then I remembered reading about what we call Portuguese Men of War in America, and Bluebottles in Australia. They were a small, bag shaped, blue and highly toxic jellyfish.

Marching over to the life guard, with a ball of wet, sandy toddler firmly in my arms, I asked. "Are those blue, bag things all over the beach Portuguese Men of War?"

The lifeguard lazily glanced my way. "Blueys. They're Bluebottles."

"Hmmm." I said with a sudden longing for Lynch Park Beach where I worried about stepping on a sharp shell, or maybe a crab. "They're rather dangerous aren't they?"

Another lazy turn of the head. "They're quite painful and you certainly don't want a bubba," he eyed my daughter, "to be stung by one. It'd be fairly dangerous."

I held my increasingly squirmy 'bubba' a bit tighter. "But they're everywhere! They are all over this beach, shouldn't there be a sign?"

"Well," sighed the guard, "they only sting when they're wet. You could try swimming down at that end."

The guard made a slow, bronzed, fearless gesture to the other end of the beach, about 100 yards away. And then went back to gazing at the ocean for real dangers. Perhaps aliens exploding out of the surf with acid tentacles, but certainly not a few hundred toxic jellyfish.

I reported back to my husband. "Well, they are Bluebottles. But no worries." I said looking at the line of them mere inches from the crashing waves of the largest body of water on the planet. "They are only dangerous when wet."