

Frolicking On The Grass

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My 18 month daughter and I often visit the Royal Botanical Gardens located in the center of Sydney. In many ways they are like the Boston Public Gardens and Commons but even a quick glance tells you they are much more formal - so formal as to be potentially intimidating when visiting with a toddler.

But though it would seem an unlikely fit, the Botanical Gardens have one main rule posted all over the property: "Please Walk On The Grass." I did a double take when I first read it. Really? As in, if I want to get from this rose garden to that shrubbery outcropping by the statue of the little cherub I don't have to take the mile long path? I could just say, skip across the grass?

Yep - skip away. They also encourage you to hug the trees. Generally they want you to frolic. And it's great fun because frolicking in a formal garden feels so scandalous. Plus it's a lot easier to negotiate with a toddler.

My daughter and I are big fans. That said, the gardens are not without fault.

On our first visit to the gardens, I saw a park ranger cleaning one of the picturesque ponds. I went over to chat with him figuring he might offer up some tidbits about the gardens. He didn't disappoint.

The ranger drew my attention to the pond. "This pond is a great example of the biodiversity of our gardens."

"Oh yes?" I responded.

"Yes, well for example you can see," and the ranger motioned with his arm, "all the Ibis - the Australian White Ibis."

The Ibis is possibly the world's ugliest bird. It looks prehistoric and walks like it was programmed by a bad early animatronics movie. Further, they are the color of a bird that could be white if it stopped rolling around in mud. They are the antithesis of the beautiful swans in the Boston Public Garden's pond.

"Hmmm," was the best I could reply.

"They are a real pain," said the ranger much to my relief. "They stink and mess everything up. But," continued the ranger, "they aren't all we have, we have many different species of duck, fish and even eels."

"Eels?" I asked, pulling my daughter's stroller a bit away from the pond's edge.

"Oh yes, giant ones." He pointed down to the water and stared.

I stared too. Suddenly a long, and I have to say fairly large, eel slithered right past our feet in the pond below.

The ranger smiled and said fondly. "The eels are great. They really keep things in check. They're a huge help mostly because they eat the baby ducklings."

"Excuse me!?" I shook my head as if I'd heard him wrong. "Did you say they ate the baby ducklings?"

The ranger nodded happily. “Well not all of them, but quite a few. If they didn’t, you’d be up to your ankles in ducks.”

Again I really could only say, “Hmmm.”

It’s not that I wanted to walk around through a foot of water fowl, it’s just that I thought the enthusiasm he had for the demise of the little ducklings was a bit too high.

But I had underestimated him. He really found his groove in his next statement.

“Course you’ve seen our bats hey?”

“Yes,” I responded, happy to be unshaken by his little announcement. “Yes I have. My daughter and I saw one above her playground a few weeks back.”

The ranger looked at me and got a twinkle in his eye and then said softly. “No, no, I mean OUR bats.” Again he motioned with his arm, only this time up.

What can I say? I was so distracted by frolicking on the grass that I never looked up.

Turns out the Royal Botanical Gardens are home to 9,000 Fox Bats in the off season.

During the summer (now) they have up to 20,000. I believe most were above our heads.

That’s right, there were **thousands** of monster bats swinging right above us.

Naturally, as with all species in Australia, they are not content to be average. The Fox Bat is the largest bat in the world. They have wing spans that have been measured up to six feet. They are huge. They are bigger than many of your pets. Hanging, staring and waiting, as the ranger said with relish, “for evening when they will go hunting all over Sydney and the suburbs.”

And with that, my daughter and I quickly turned a frolic into a scamper and we cut a quick trail directly through a rose garden, over any baby ducks that might be about, and back to the other, bat-free, side of the garden.