



Wait-a-While
Rainforest Tours

WHERE THE RAINFOREST MEETS THE STARS

*A Journey Through the Wet Tropics Rainforests
of the Atherton Tablelands*

PAUL McLELLAN

COPYRIGHT	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 1 — CAIRNS AND TRINITY INLET	11
CHAPTER 2 — LAKE BARRINE.....	79
CHAPTER 3 – YUNGABURRA & PETERSON CREEK.....	147
CHAPTER 4 – THE FOREST AT NIGHT	191

Introduction

If someone had told the young lad growing up in Birkenhead, England, that one day he would spend his life wandering through one of the oldest rainforests on Earth, searching for platypuses, tree kangaroos and possums beneath a sky filled with stars, I would never have believed them.

Australia was another world.

It was a place I'd read about in books and seen on television—a land of coral reefs, strange animals and seemingly endless open spaces. Growing up in an industrial town on the banks of the River Mersey, it felt about as far away as the Moon.

Yet somehow, life had other ideas.

Training as a marine engineer gave me the opportunity to travel the world. It also taught me something that has stayed with me ever since. Every machine, no matter how complex, works because hundreds of individual parts perform their own small task while contributing to something much greater.

At the time I thought I was learning about ships.

I now realise I was learning how to observe.

As a boy growing up in Birkenhead, one man fuelled my dream of visiting Australia more than anyone else—Jacques Cousteau. Like millions of others in the 1970s, I sat fascinated by his television documentaries. Through his films I discovered coral reefs, colourful fish and an underwater world that seemed almost beyond imagination. Long before I ever set foot in Australia, the Great Barrier Reef had already captured my imagination.

Those childhood dreams eventually brought me to New Zealand, where I built a new life and became a New Zealand citizen. Then, in 1999, I came to Cairns for what I thought would be nothing more than a holiday.

I never left.



Before discovering the Wet Tropics, I worked as a scuba diving instructor on the Great Barrier Reef

For the next ten years I worked as a scuba diving instructor on the Great Barrier Reef. In many ways, I was living the dream that had begun in front of the television watching Jacques Cousteau as a boy.

But dreams evolve.

After a decade of diving, I wasn't twenty-five anymore. It was time to think about building a more settled life. I wanted a home of my own, a little more security and a career that didn't depend on spending every day out on the water.

So, I swapped my wetsuit for a shirt and tie.

Eventually I found myself managing a large employment services company and later became its Chief Executive Officer. On paper, it looked like a successful career move.

But something was missing.

I'd exchanged the natural world for meetings, budgets and offices. The work was rewarding in its own way, but every day I found myself missing the outdoors. I missed the reef. I missed sharing nature with people. Most of all, I missed the feeling of finishing a day's work knowing I'd spent it somewhere extraordinary.

I knew I wanted to find my way back.

Then, in 2013, an opportunity appeared. Wait-a-While Rainforest Tours was for sale.

Buying a small rainforest tour company wasn't the obvious career move. It was a gamble, and more than a few people probably questioned my sanity.

It turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made.

I came to Tropical North Queensland because of the reef.

I stayed because of the rainforest.

Looking back now, I've spent more years exploring the rainforest than I ever spent on the reef. I never expected that to happen, but I wouldn't change it for the world.

People sometimes ask whether I'm a biologist.

I'm not.

I'm an engineer who somehow ended up making a career explaining the natural world.



Now I spot animals in the canopy instead of the reef

At first glance that might seem an unusual combination, but I've come to think it has been one of my greatest advantages. Engineers are naturally curious. We like understanding how things fit together, why they work and what happens when they don't. That same curiosity has guided me through thousands of hours in the rainforest. I don't need to know every scientific paper ever written. What matters to me is understanding enough to explain this remarkable place in a way that anyone can appreciate.

Over the years I've watched people arrive knowing very little about the rainforest. An hour later they're pointing out birds they would never have noticed, searching for movement in the trees, listening for frogs instead of talking over them and standing in complete silence while a platypus glides across a creek.

Watching that transformation has become one of the greatest pleasures of my life.

But over those same years, I've also witnessed another, far less welcome, transformation.

When I first began guiding in 2013, wildlife encounters were simply more frequent. Platypuses were easier to find. Tree kangaroos appeared more often. Possums, frogs and many of the smaller creatures that once seemed like regular companions on my tours are now encountered far less often. One afternoon proves nothing, but after thousands of afternoons and evenings spent in the same forests, the pattern becomes impossible to ignore.

That saddens me.

It's a change I never expected to witness, and one I find increasingly difficult to ignore.

This rainforest is still an extraordinary place, but I can't help wondering what it will look like in another ten or twenty years if we don't value and protect it.

That is why I wrote this book.

Yes, I want to share the beauty of the Atherton Tablelands and introduce you to its remarkable wildlife. But I also hope to leave you with something more—a genuine appreciation of just how precious this ancient rainforest really is.

Because people protect what they value.

And they value what they understand.

Perhaps that's because I still see this place through the eyes of someone who wasn't born here.

England will always be where my story began.

New Zealand gave me the opportunity to build a new life. Australia gave me a home.

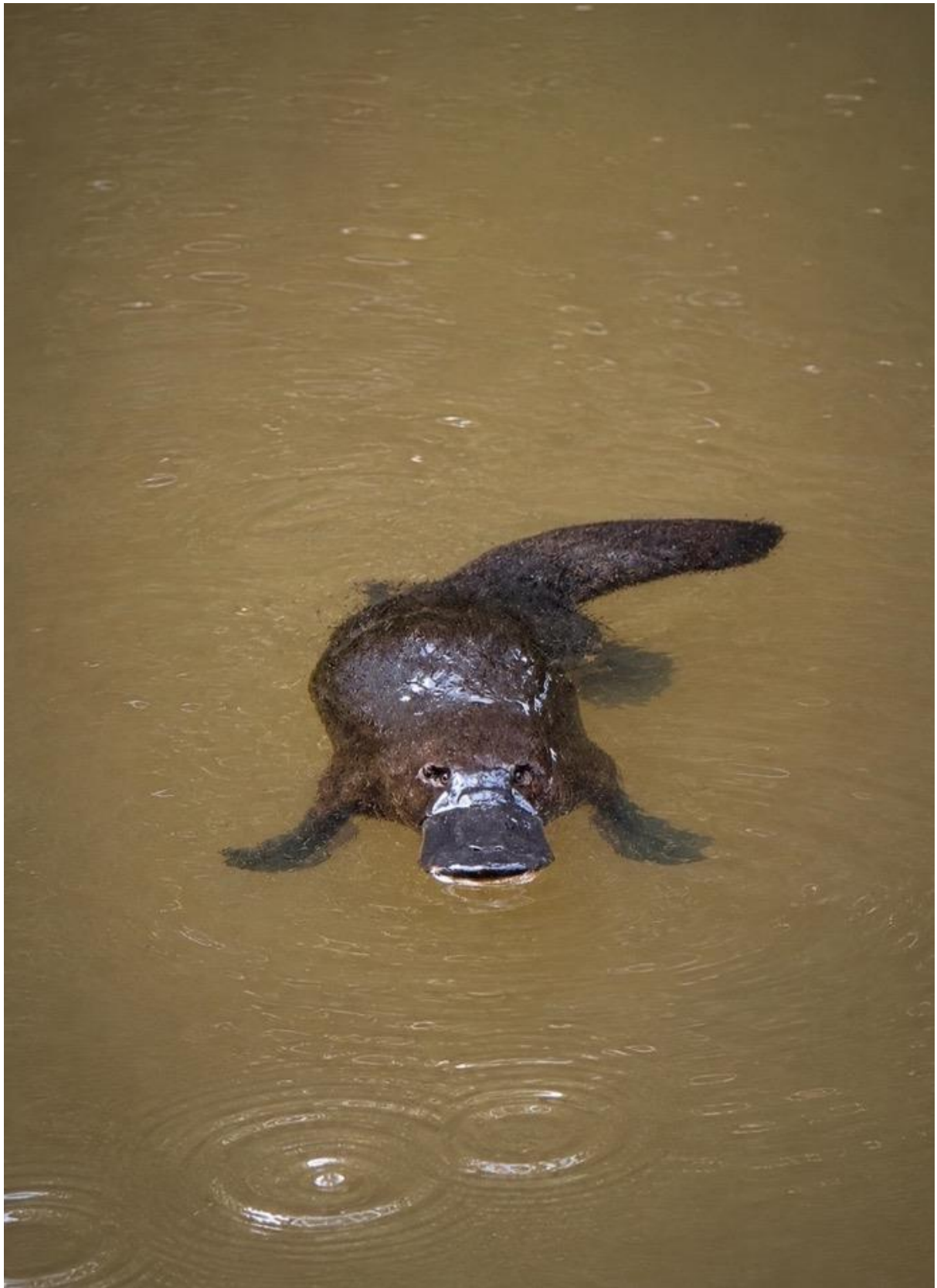
Even now, after all these years, there are afternoons when I drive up the Gillies Range towards the Atherton Tablelands and still can't quite believe my luck. As the tropical heat begins to ease, the rainforest comes alive. Animals become more active, the light softens beneath the canopy and, before long, the daytime creatures begin to disappear as the forest prepares for its nightly change of shift. I've experienced that transition thousands of times, yet it never loses its magic.

As daylight fades and the first stars begin to appear above the rainforest canopy, I'm reminded that, even after all these years, that sense of wonder hasn't faded.

I hope, as you read this book, you'll discover why.

And I hope that, when you reach the final page, you'll not only have learned something about this remarkable corner of Australia, but you'll also understand why it is so important that we protect it.

Welcome to the Atherton Tablelands, where the rainforest meets the stars.



The Cassowary



Southern Cassowary in tropical rainforest habitat



Cassowary scat containing rainforest seeds

While they have a reputation for being dangerous, cassowaries are generally shy and avoid people. Most incidents happen when they are fed or feel threatened.

In a healthy rainforest, they're far more likely to slip away unnoticed, continuing their quiet work as the gardeners of the rainforest.

Despite their reputation, the southern cassowary has been responsible for only two recorded human deaths in modern history—one in Queensland in 1926 and another involving a captive bird in Florida in 2019. Attacks do occur, but they are uncommon and are usually linked to people feeding cassowaries or provoking them, which changes their natural behaviour.

Cassowaries are shy, solitary birds that prefer to avoid people, and the risk they pose is extremely low when they are respected and left alone.

The cassowary is often described as dinosaur-like, and that's not just a throwaway line.

Modern birds, including cassowaries, are the living descendants of dinosaurs—specifically a group called theropods, which included animals such as *Velociraptor* and *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

The connection isn't simply that cassowaries look like dinosaurs—they belong to the same evolutionary lineage that survived when most dinosaurs disappeared. You can still see that heritage in their anatomy.

Cassowaries have powerful muscular legs and a large dagger-like claw on each foot, features that strongly resemble those of their theropod ancestors. Their feathers are more hair-like and reduced than those of flying birds, while the casque gives them a distinctly prehistoric appearance.



Cassowary foot showing the enlarged inner claw

The casque itself is still the subject of debate. Various ideas have been put forward, including protection for the head, display, and even acoustics. More recent thermal imaging studies have shown that the casque is highly vascularised and acts as a heat-regulating structure. When the bird gets hot, it can release body heat through the casque, and when conditions are cooler it can reduce heat loss. That has led scientists to wonder whether similar structures on some dinosaurs may also have been used to regulate body temperature.

So, when people say cassowaries are living dinosaurs, they're not far wrong. They are a modern branch of a very ancient lineage that is still walking around today.



Close-up showing the casque, blue neck and red wattles

Sounds of the Forest

Taking a walk along the trails amongst the plants and trees, you quickly become immersed in the sounds of the insects and birds around you.

The rainforests of the Atherton Tablelands are as much heard as they are seen. Around the crater lakes and shaded creeks, a layered chorus builds throughout the day, with each species occupying its own place in the soundscape.

By late morning, the cicadas dominate.

The harsh, rasping call of the Black Prince forms the foreground, while a higher continuous hum from greengrocer-type species fills the background. As the temperature rises, the combined sound becomes a dense, almost electric wall of noise that seems to come from every direction.

Cutting through that backdrop from deep within the forest comes the explosive call of the eastern whipbird.

The male begins with a long, drawn-out note before finishing with the famous whip-crack. These days, many people compare it to a laser blaster from *Star Wars*.

The call is a request for the female to answer.

Her response is a short whistle, so when she replies you hear three distinct sounds in quick succession. Sometimes the male has to call several times before she answers.

We know how that feels, don't we boys?



Eastern Whipbird

Another voice that catches people's attention belongs to the green catbird.

Usually hidden amongst dense foliage, it produces a drawn-out wailing sound that can seem almost human as it echoes through the trees.

Sometimes it genuinely sounds as though it's saying, "Meow."



Green Spotted Catbird

Down in the lower and middle layers of the forest, the grey-headed robin contributes a quieter note to the chorus.

Its soft, regular "beep... beep... beep" may not be as dramatic as some of the larger birds, but once you notice it, you realise how often it punctuates the background.

Though I must admit, it's one of the most annoying sounds in the rainforest. It repeats the same note endlessly!



Grey-headed Robin

The golden whistler provides a completely different sound.

A clear, ringing whistle cuts through the background chorus and often seem to come from shaded perches hidden somewhere amongst the foliage.



Golden Whistler

Then there's the machine-gun rattle of the Lewin's honeyeater.



Lewins Honeyeater

Honeyeaters are among the most active and conspicuous birds of the Wet Tropics rainforest. Their long, brush-tipped tongues are specially adapted for feeding on nectar from flowering trees and shrubs, making them important pollinators. As they move from flower to flower, pollen clings to their feathers and is carried to the next blossom, helping many rainforest plants reproduce.

Although nectar is their favourite food, honeyeaters also feed on insects, spiders and fruit, particularly when raising young. Their lively calls and constant movement add energy to the forest, and their presence often signals that trees are in bloom. From the tiny Brown Honeyeater to the larger Lewin's Honeyeater and Yellow-spotted Honeyeater, these birds play a vital role in keeping the rainforest healthy while providing some of its most familiar sounds.

Taken together, these sounds create the voice of the rainforest.

Even when the forest appears still, it is rarely quiet. Especially in summer when the cacophony of sound reaches its peak when the cicadas are in full voice.

Spotlighting



At night the forest reveals its secrets

Spotlighting at night turns the rainforest into a kind of slow, deliberate search.

My preferred technique is to use a headlamp with a red light. Red light disturbs animals less and is also much easier on your eyes.

You move quietly along the track, just glancing around.

At first, it's just:

Trees.

Leaves.

Branches.

More darkness.

Then something catches your eye.

A tiny reflection.

A red glint that doesn't belong.



The red eyeshine of a tree kangaroo reveals its position in the canopy

Eyeshine.

It's a very effective way of locating animals, and it's all driven by the laws of physics. If the animal is looking in your direction, the light enters its eye, reflects off the back of the retina, and travels back out again, so you see a bright red speck glowing in the dark.

It might be a pair of tiny pinpoints low to the ground.

It might be a brighter glow high in the canopy.

Either way, your attention immediately locks onto it.

The catch is that only the person wearing the headlamp can see the reflection. Light travels in a straight line, so the eyeshine is only visible when your eye is directly in line with the light source.

This is why headlamps are so easy to use. The light stays with you whichever way you turn your head. If you use a hand-held torch, you must keep it directly in front of your face to see the eyeshine.

Another part of the trick is patience.

Sweep too quickly and you'll miss almost everything.

Slow down and the forest begins to reveal what was there all along.

As you follow those reflections, shapes start to appear around them.

A possum frozen on a branch.

A pademelon standing motionless in the undergrowth.

A frog shining back from the leaf litter.

Sometimes the eyes are all you see.

Sometimes an entire animal slowly materialises from the darkness around them.

Many creatures simply freeze and hope you haven't noticed them.

Others realise they've been spotted and disappear almost instantly.

One moment they're there.

The next they're gone.

What I enjoy most about spotlighting is that it changes the way people look at the forest.

During the day, your eyes are drawn to the big things—the giant trees, the birds, the views across the landscape.

At night, everything becomes smaller and more focused.

The Curtain Fig Tree



Anyone thinking about the movie "Avatar"?

The Curtain Fig Tree near Yungaburra is one of the most impressive natural landmarks on the Atherton Tablelands.

What makes it so striking is the vast curtain of aerial roots hanging from its branches all the way to the ground, forming a living wall that looks almost like a waterfall frozen in time.

Most visitors arrive expecting to see a big tree.

What they don't expect is the scale.

Standing beneath it, you begin to realise you're not really looking at a trunk anymore.

You're looking at an entire structure built from hundreds of roots that have gradually become a forest of their own.

A Very Unusual Fig

Like many strangler figs, this tree began life high in the canopy.

A bird or flying fox dropped a seed into the branches of another tree, where it germinated and began sending roots towards the ground.

Normally, those roots eventually reach the soil, thicken, and form a framework strong enough to support the growing fig. As the fig expands, it gradually surrounds its host tree.

The Curtain Fig appears to have taken a very different path.

The first host tree seems to have died and collapsed before the fig had fully established its support system.

Ordinarily, that might have been the end of the story.

But instead of crashing to the forest floor, the dying tree fell into a neighbouring tree.

That accident kept the young fig suspended in the canopy.

Given a second chance, it continued growing and eventually enveloped the second host as well.

As far as we know, this is the only known example of a double strangulation by a fig tree, making the Curtain Fig unique.

The tree we see today exists because everything went wrong...

...and somehow still worked.

The Living Curtain

The curtain effect comes from the huge number of aerial roots hanging from the branches.

Rather than merging into a single trunk, many remain separate as they descend towards the forest floor.

The result is a draping veil of roots that gives the tree its name.

In the filtered rainforest light, particularly when viewed from the boardwalk, the whole structure can seem almost unreal.

A Keystone Giant

Beyond its size and appearance, the Curtain Fig plays a vital role in the rainforest.

Fig trees are often described as keystone species because they provide fruit at times when little else is available.

That makes them an important food source for birds, flying foxes, possums, and many other rainforest animals.

When a fig tree comes into fruit, it can suddenly become one of the busiest places in the forest.

Connection to Country

For Rainforest Aboriginal peoples of the region, including groups such as the Yidinji people, large fig trees were important landmarks within Country.

They provided food, shelter, shade, and places to gather.

Even today, standing beneath the Curtain Fig, it's easy to understand why trees like this become landmarks.

Not simply because they're enormous.

But because they seem to hold the rainforest together around them.

And when the forest finally gives way to open country, there is one last spectacle waiting overhead.

Where the Rainforest Meets the Stars

Sometimes...it's not just about the forest.

Out on the Tablelands, on a clear, moonless night, the sky doesn't just sit above you—it opens.

Without the Moon to wash it out, the darkness deepens and the stars begin to multiply until it feels as though the whole sky is alive.

Then the Milky Way appears. Not faint. Not distant.



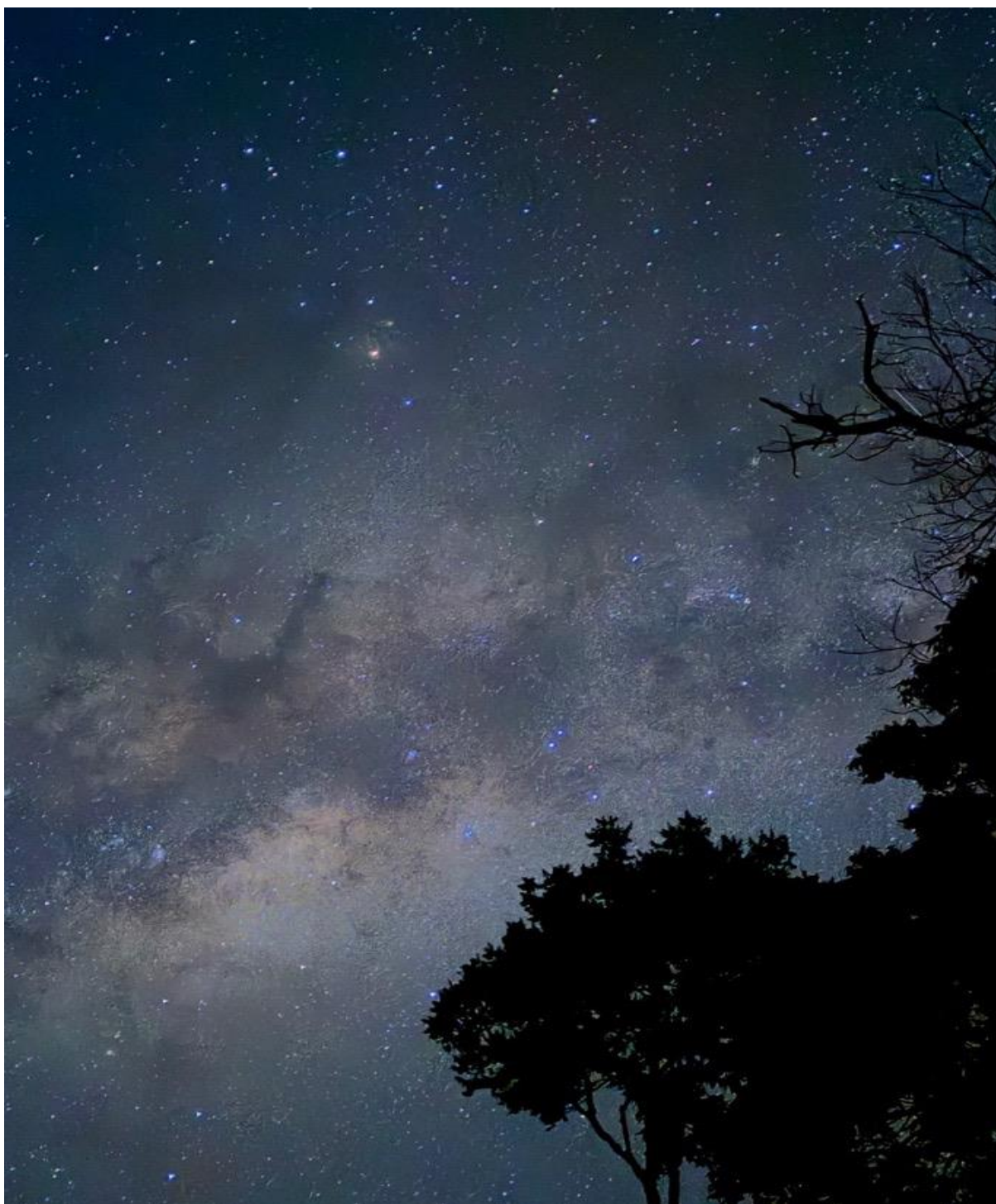
But as a bright, textured band stretching from horizon to horizon, like a river of light flowing overhead.

It's not just something you look at. It's something you feel.

During the cooler months, the constellation Scorpius stretches across the night sky, its unmistakable curve leading the eye to Antares, a red supergiant around 550 light-years from Earth. If Antares were placed where our Sun is, it would extend beyond the orbit of Mars.

Just below Antares lies the brightest part of the Milky Way. Here we are looking towards the centre of our galaxy, some 26,000 light-years away. The dense star clouds and dark dust lanes reveal billions of stars packed into the galactic core.

On clear winter nights, the Southern Cross hangs above the rainforest. Beside it is the Coal Sack Nebula, one of the darkest naked-eye nebulae in the sky. For generations, the Southern Cross has been used to locate true south and remains one of the defining features of the southern hemisphere.



Antares, the red heart of Scorpius, shines above the dense star clouds surrounding the centre of our Milky Way

Loving the journey? [Click here to unlock the full 250+ page book.](#)