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Blackhearts: Ecology in Outback Australia

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Source: The Auk, 119(2) : 577-580

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038(2002)119[0577:BEIOA]2.0.CO;2

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The Auk 119(2):577–580, 2002

Blackhearts: Ecology in Outback Australia.—Richard Symanski. 2000. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. xi + 216 pp., 23 black and white photographs, 2 tables. ISBN 0–300–07819. Cloth, $32.50.—Science is a human endeavor, and scientists are subject to the same shortcomings that afflict most humans—jealousy, ambition, ignorance, petty dislikes, intellectual arrogance, and a host of other ills. In *Science as a Process,* David Hull (1988) chronicles the social and intellectual dynamics of the ''systematics wars'' of the 1950s to the 1970s, and how human nature affected the arguments between cladists and numerical taxonomists. Hull's approach was a scholarly one, whereas Richard Symanski's *Blackhearts* takes a much more informal look at the human side of science and how interpersonal issues may affect the practice of the discipline. Symanski, a senior lecturer in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of California at Irvine, has written a book describing six months of fieldwork in outback Australia in 1991. Symanski spent most of this time studying Long-tailed Finches (*Poephila acuticauda*) in the ''Top End''—the northern portion of the Northern Territory and northeastern Western Australia—with his wife, Nancy Burley, and four assistants. They did not have a happy experience, and one of Symanski's aims is to provide a cautionary tale for those contemplating fieldwork in remote locations with untested and unfamiliar assistants.

Symanski begins his story with a brief introduction to Nancy Burley's work on sexual selection in Zebra Finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*) and a description of how the rest of the field team was chosen. He and Burley eventually selected three students from the University of Illinois as members of the field crew, with a fourth hired to watch after their infant son. Symanski and Burley clearly were cognizant of the difficulties inherent in conducting fieldwork in outback Australia and invested much time and energy in selecting what they took to be a team of competent, enthusiastic assistants. Symanski then flew to Cairns and commenced a two-month wander through much of eastern and northern Australia in search of a healthy population of Zebra Finches, which were to be the focus of the fieldwork. Unfortunately, Zebra Finches are nomadic and unpredictable breeders, and Symanski drove thousands of kilometers without locating a decent population. Eventually he and Burley decided to shift their research focus to Long-tailed Finches. Symanski identified Newry Station, a cattle ranch on the border between Northern Territory and Western Australia, as a good base for field operations and the rest of the research team joined him there. At that point, the six participants quickly sorted themselves into two ''teams,'' students and professors, and began to act out their roles in an unpleasant, academic version of ''Outback Survivor.'' Although Burley and Symanski managed to accumulate much useful data on Long-tailed Finches and Gouldian Finches (*Erythrura gouldiae*), the entire tenor of their experience was negatively affected by the behavior of ''the students,'' as Symanski refers to the assistants throughout the book. The litany of the students' purported sins is a long one, and includes disinterest in the research objectives, a lack of energy and enthusiasm for fieldwork, weak communication skills, complaints about primitive living conditions, failure to follow through on research commitments, poor attitudes, and what may best be described as general malaise. The description of those problems forms the core of *Blackhearts.* Thus the subtitle—*Ecology in Outback Australia*—is somewhat misleading, and readers interested in the results of the fieldwork, or how those findings relate to Burley's extensive work on Zebra Finches, will need to look elsewhere.

I have spent much time conducting research in wilderness settings and I am painfully aware of how in-

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terpersonal problems can negatively affect living conditions and compromise research efforts. That is an important point for ecologists to consider when they are planning research projects, particularly those in isolated situations. Thus *Blackhearts* is probably worth reading—although I also feel that it has a number of major weaknesses that reduce the book's effectiveness. First, Symanski allows his anger with the students to affect (and infect) his narrative in unacceptable ways. His anger interferes with his ability to reflect dispassionately on the interpersonal problems that occurred at Newry Station, which in turn may cause readers to draw the wrong conclusions about possible reasons for what happened, and obscure what should be the larger message. Symnaski's main conclusions are that the expedition foundered because (1) he and Burley ''made a major mistake in trying to get close to the students, in treating them like responsible adults'' (p. 194); (2) the students should have been treated more like employees, and less like colleagues; (3) the students, by and large, behaved irresponsibly, erratically, and often neurotically; and (4) the students should have been sent home when troubles first developed. Perhaps each of those reasons contributed to the problems that developed between the students and Symanski and Burley, but for reasons described below I am unconvinced that they were entirely responsible for what occurred.

There also is another message in *Blackhearts*, one that might be paraphrased as ''students ain't what they used to be.'' My feeling is that Symanski's account implicitly (and sometimes explicitly and unfairly) criticizes graduate and undergraduate research assistants in general, not just those who participated in the research on Long-tailed Finches. For example, Symanski writes, ''my sense, and Nancy's, is that based on the numerous stories we have heard about the field experiences of other biologists, misbehaving or errant students of the sort we encountered—peculiarities aside—are not uncommon'' (p. 7). And at one point Symanski states that he must ''resolve to lower my sights (p. 112)'' when it comes to student capabilities. I recognize that research assistants sometimes do not live up to their responsibilities and may behave inappropriately in the field, although many graduate students in ecology could recount horror stories involving ''misbehaving or errant professors.'' And I would add that the undergraduate and graduate students whom I and my close colleagues have employed generally have been reliable, conscientious, and hard-working, particularly in light of the fact that they usually are involved with projects that are not theirs, and also have their own competing interests. It is as if Symanski cannot recall that he was once a student, and likely caused his academic supervisors some frustration, a point that David Perlmutter (2001) makes eloquently in ''Students Are Blithely Ignorant; Professors Are Bitter,'' a recent essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

The message of student culpability is implicit in the title of Symanski's book. Symanski states that the title ''blackheart'' comes from the colloquial name for Long-tailed Finches. However (in spite of a written disclaimer to the contrary), it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the title is a not-too-subtle commentary on Symanski's views on the students' behavior, and the reasons for the difficulties encountered at Newry Station. Any mistakes that he and Burley make are seen as procedural; Symanski seems incapable of looking inward in any honest way and asking how his personality, and that of his wife, may have contributed to what happened. That is a crucial shortcoming, for it may leave readers with the impression that interpersonal problems can be avoided if those organizing a research project only chose their assistants more carefully. Instead, I would advocate the principle that interpersonal conflict is a two-way street that most often involves failings on the part of all parties; supervisors should be willing to look at their own personalities and behaviors, as well as their assistants', when planning and carrying out projects. I suppose that I would have been more inclined to accept Symanski's account if I had encountered any humility on his part, any acknowledgement that his personality could have contributed to what went wrong in 1991.

An important issue with any study employing assistants, especially those conducted in remote settings, is any agreement made beforehand in which responsibilities and expectations are made clear. It seems that Symanski and Burley were forthright in their attempts to describe field conditions in the Outback, and their expectations regarding the students' responsibilities. Yet the students seemed surprised by what they found in Australia, and what was expected of them. According to Symanski, that contributed to the students' reluctance to honor their commitments; it also contributed to Symanski's belief in the students' perfidy. However, I feel that Symanski misses an important point about human nature, and one that those organizing research projects should understand, that people, in their desire to agree, may interpret similar statements in very different ways. Several years ago I undertook a small biographical project (Norment 2000) on Francis Harper, a biologist who conducted research in several isolated places in the Canadian Arctic. In 1947, he needed an assistant to accompany him to Nueltin Lake, a remote field site in what was then the Northwest Territories. Harper selected a young student, Farley Mowat, for the trip and the partnership did not last a month in the field. Why? Both men had strong personalities, and could have been predicted to clash. But what struck me when I read their original correspondence was how the two men interpreted identical statements in very different ways.

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Harper wanted an assistant, Mowat wanted a trip to the Arctic, and both were willing to read whatever they wanted into conversations about expectations. I can imagine something similar occurring between Symanski, Burley, and the students when they were negotiating prior to leaving Illinois for Australia.

Another problem that interfered with my enjoyment of *Blackhearts* is that Symanski is simply too cranky, and a more appropriate subtitle for the book might have been ''*Through Outback Australia in a Bad Mood.*'' Although he had been to Australia prior to the trip, he did not seem to like most of the people he encountered, be they Aboriginals, white station managers and hired hands, administrators, or biologists. He ''hated beggars'' (p. 93). He did not care for some of the research conducted on Gouldian Finches by one Australian ornithologist, or the behavior of her assistants. He apparently resented one ''so-called regional ecologist'' (p. 52), but did not explain the reason for his displeasure. Everything that the students did or thought seemed to bother Symanski, including their passion for photography, their diets, their attitudes about sunscreen and sex, their eagerness to explore surrounding national parks (''a children's treat quickly forgotten'' [p. 134]), their interactions with the wildlife, and their failure to celebrate his son's birthday. He also was offended by the students' reluctance to listen to the knowledge that he dispenses: '' Again and again I tell the students the names of trees and plants, how they have been used by Aborigines. . . and they do not hear me. Or they give me an unmistakably disdainful look'' (p. 124). Symanski also seems to have little use for Australian public opinion, as suggested by his statement on controlling feral goat populations: ''There was no need trying to explain to the public an issue burdened with emotion and precious little sense in terms of what really matters'' (p. 63).

One strong point of *Blackhearts* is that it does manage to convey the contingent nature of fieldwork and the difficulty of working with nomadic animals that have no interest in cooperating with researchers. At first Burley and Symanski's work proceeds fitfully as they attempt to figure out how best to capture birds and the basics of Long-tailed Finch behavior. They toss hypotheses around, and attempt to develop plausible explanations for the patterns that they find. At the same time, I feel that *Blackhearts* is not particularly good at evoking a sense of how Long-tailed Finches behave in the wild, or at depicting the Australian Outback. Having spent about a year in Australia, some of it conducting ornithological research, I was eager to read about a part of the country that I had not seen. And yet Symanski's writing did not convey a strong sense of the land or its human and avian inhabitants. One of the photographs in the book, that of the team searching for finch nests, gave me a stronger sense of the landscape than anything in the text. Part of the problem is that Symanski sometimes makes unfortunate word choices, as in the following passage: ''We won't be distracted in these initial efforts at banding, recording data, drawing blood, weighing birds, measuring wing length and body parts, that Nancy judges worth the effort—data points for hypotheses that thread through her mind like veins of fat through feedlot beef'' (p. 69). Problems with mediocre writing are compounded by two difficulties in the structure of *Blackhearts.* First, the writing style fluctuates dramatically. In parts it reads like a journal and jumps rapidly from travelogue to description of the ornithological research to discussions of the cultural and political ecology of the Northern Territory. The scientific style of literature citations is used when Symanski discusses an area of his expertise, human ecology, but is abandoned when he is discussing the ornithological work, where I would have appreciated it more. Second, although this is clearly a book designed to appeal to a broad, nontechnical audience, Symanski uses terms like ''optimal foraging'' and ''ontogeny'' without defining them.

Finally, some readers of *Blackhearts* probably will be concerned about the truth of Symanski's story and his assessment of blame; were the students represented fairly? What really happened at Newry Station? Symanski writes that he offered the students the opportunity to give their versions of events, but either they did not respond or declined the offer. One should write accurately and honestly, and I imagine that the students, all of whom were given pseudonyms, might claim to be misrepresented. However, there are several reasons why I feel that ''the truth'' is in some ways peripheral to the take-home message of *Blackhearts.* First, as demonstrated in Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Rashamon,* the truth of human events is partly a matter of perspective; different participants will tell different stories. Thus it might be difficult or impossible to determine what really happened between Symanski, Burley, and the students. More importantly, focusing on the truth or falsity of the students' behaviors as described in *Blackhearts* will obscure what should be the larger message: that scientific research is a human endeavor, and projects including ornithological fieldwork can flounder for reasons having nothing to do with research objectives, methodology, uncooperative research subjects, or the environment. Personalities, values, and expectations can all lead to failure, just as they can lead to success. Thus, in spite of the major reservations that I have about *Blackhearts,* I recommend that field biologists read the book, and consider how its story should inform their own work.—CHRISTOPHER J. NORMENT, *Department of Biological Sciences, SUNY College at Brockport, Brockport, New York 14420, USA. E-mail: cnorment@brockport.edu*

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