HUNTERS & COLLECTORS

Gaiters on and linen bags at the ready, a group of amateur botanists wades through thigh-high moss on Tasmania's Overland Track in search of seeds that might just save a species.

By Kate Hennessy
Photographs by Amanda Thomson

The Tasmanian Seed Conservation Centre-led expedition on Mount Pelion East in Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park.

YOU CAN FILL up there," says our guide, Nic. Several members of the group are already crouched on the creek's mossy banks to bottle its flow. "Is here OK?" I ask, dunking my flask into a rocky pool. We're mere hours into the six-day Overland Track and a bout of gastro would be calamitous. Renowned Tasmanian landscape artist Peter Gouldthorpe, here to paint en plein air when the weather permits, answers breezily. "Oh, yes," he says. "The water needs to be flowing but look" — he gestures all around — "everything's flowing."

I'm the mainlander among a group of stoic, convivial Tasmanians that you'd swear had met before. They talk in outdoorsy jargon of summits, cairns and cirques, and share stories of "ferocious" currawongs from previous trips.

"They can unbuckle simple clips."

"What? They used to just do zips!"

"I found a passport in the bush the other day."

Currawongs on the mainland are not so bold. But neither are our platypuses so big nor our wombats so small, and we drove the devils, pademelons and eastern quolls to extinction years ago. Tasmania can make a mainlander's perspective warp and wobble, as if you slipped through the looking glass when you stepped off the plane.

SET NEAR THE centre of Tasmania, Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park is part of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Covering nearly 25 per cent of the island, this World Heritage Area is one of just two places on earth that meets a staggering seven of the 10 heritage criteria, when only one criterion is needed (the other being China's Mount Taishan).

It is palawa Country. A grievous myth exists in Australia and abroad that the First Nations people of lutruwita/Tasmania (palawa/pakana people) didn't survive European invasion. "We're still here," says Theresa Sainty, a Pakana woman, when I call her after the walk. "It's important that all people understand that we have survived. We are a vibrant community and a great story of strength, determination and the revival of language and of culture. That's the story that needs to be told. Not just the historical picture of 'what they ate' and 'how they lived'."

The Tasmanian Walking Company's guided trips through the tarn-speckled scenery of Australia's premier alpine track would usually include awestruck tourists from Europe, Asia and the United States, plus lots of mainlanders, with locals comprising just two per cent of patronage. But times have changed — and why wouldn't Tasmanians with the means tackle the Overland for a second time? A resplendent third?

Besides, this walk is the first of its kind. Led by the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens botanist James Wood, we are volunteers in an urgent seed-collecting expedition for the Tasmanian Seed Conservation Centre. The centre is part of the Millennium Seed Bank at the UK's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which stores billions of seeds from 190 countries in flood-, bomb- and radiation-proof freezers. The seed bank most people know of is Norway's "doomsday" Svalbard Global Seed

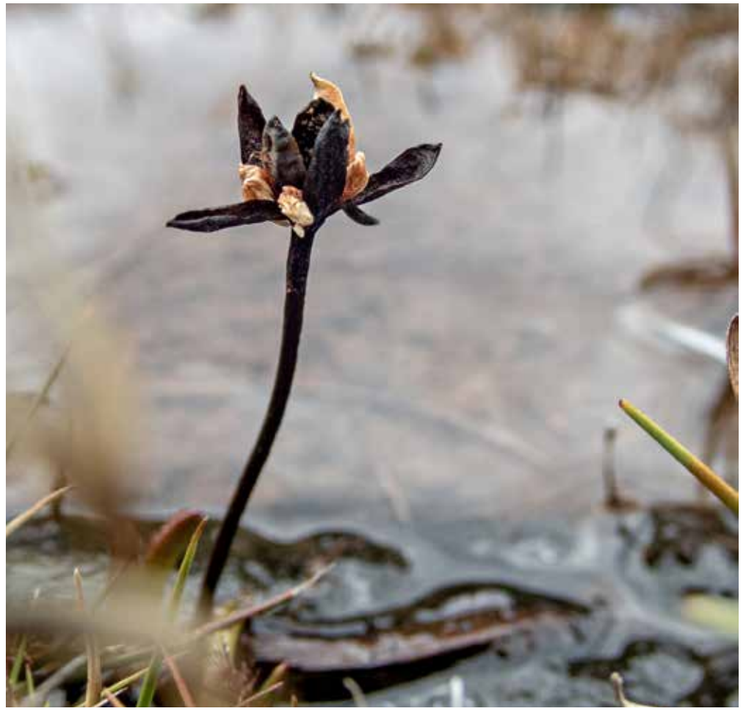
Vault, which is wedged in a patch of permafrost between the Arctic Circle and North Pole. But while Svalbard stores crop seeds, Kew deals with wild plants. Its purpose? To help with restoration when native plant populations collapse.

This scenario played out last year in Victoria. When fires tore through the mountain ash trees on the slopes of Mount Buffalo, the trees — and many other endangered plants — were decimated. Fortunately, the Victorian Conservation Seedbank (known as the "ark" for Victoria's flora) had collected seeds that will be germinated and grown by the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria's nursery team.

But seed banks are not magic. Even viable seeds are useless if they cannot germinate and then thrive in the wild. "I can bank plants but I can't bank an ecosystem," Wood says. "I can't bank the pollinators, the fungi or the bacteria the plants need to grow." His voice is not without anguish as he repeats: "I can't bank any of that."

Climate change is hitting Tasmania hard. Not only is it becoming hotter and drier, many of the catastrophic 2018–19 fires in the alpine regions were ignited by dry lightning storms, which are relatively new to the island. January 2019 was the state's driest month on record, with the mean maximum temperature a startling 3.22 degrees Celsius above average.

Wood and other scientists fear that extinction events may not be gradual. "Species will get outside their climate envelope and just start dying," he says. "We could find the landscape changing very rapidly." When the Millennium Seed Bank began in 2000, climate change was its key driver. Two decades on, "you do feel like you're running out of time," Wood says.



VIEWED FROM ABOVE, the Overland makes its serpentine way through 65 kilometres of alpine moorland, golden button grass that stains the tarns rusty brown, black glacial lakes, ancient rainforests cloaked in moss so green it glows and craggy peaks, including Tasmania's highest, Mount Ossa. In some places the path is glittering quartzite; in others, it's curved wood that's been sliced lengthways and has the knotty, bleached beauty of driftwood.

Day one is a sugar rush of scenery scooped up in greedy eyefuls throughout the entire 13-kilometre walk. Filling my bottle from the streams is bliss enough — an unmediated exchange between demand (thirst) and supply (nature). The clear alpine sky makes the panoramic views pop like a postcard, but for me the fascination lies in the microcosms. Staring into the wind-sculpted flora of a single peaty patch or puddle is like falling through a wormhole into a deep space of symbiotic endlessness.

After using a chain to haul myself up the flinty ascent to Marions Lookout, I see Wood crouched near the cliff's edge examining some rare grooved cheeseberry. Endemic to Tasmania, it has leaves that are spiky like rosemary and squat red berries. It grows only in the shallow soil of Tasmania's rocky western mountains, where increasing aridity is causing it to keel over in the summer. The park's magnificence bears down from all directions — an incongruous setting to hear such sobering news.

Wood hasn't walked the Overland before and seems as struck by its beauty as the rest of us. But he carries a kind of tension, too. "We're going in semi-blind," he says more than once. His only information about our collection "targets" comes from helpful park rangers and hikers who've passed through earlier. But that's the nature of his work. Gaps in a seed bank generally arise for plants that grow in hard-to-access places, which is why we're here.

No road joins the two ends of the Overland, which is currently capped at 24 walkers, each travelling north to south, one-way.

If you break an ankle, you get choppered out. Though it's the weather that's your real foe. The advice from Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service is stern: walkers must come equipped for any condition, in any season. Meanwhile, on a Facebook group dedicated to prep, if a newbie hazards some optimism about the forecast, they're set straight by experienced Overlanders.

"I walked in February, sweating one day, snowstorm the next!"

"We did it on March 1st — the rain was torrential and I got mild hypothermia."

"In March last year the icy wind was coming in sideways, blowing us off the track. Two days later, we got sunburnt."

Seed collectors face extra challenges. "If it's drizzly, picking seeds and putting them in a bag is hard," Wood says. If it's cold, slithering around on your hands and knees generates scant body heat.

DESPITE BEING BEASTS of burden for the group's collective pack weight, carrying indulgences such as fresh limes, our guides glide along the Overland's rooty, rocky, muddy, puddly and flinty path as gracefully as skipping stones on a stream. Their names are Ciara, Vito and Nic. Emanating from them is fortitude gained through much harder hikes than this. They opt for short shorts and single walking poles, their boots as battered as an old baseball glove that never misses a catch. They're much younger than the guests but on our first night, at Barn Bluff Hut, when they break the news that our wine must wait each evening until all guests are showered, no-one flinches. There'll be no mutiny on this ship.

"Walk through the middle," they instruct, directing us through glutinous mud, puddles of unknown depth and horizontal mazes of myrtle beech roots as slick and black as onyx. The challenge becomes fun, fast. The company had advised wearing hiking boots with Vibram soles and they've given me the superpower of sure-footedness.

Much on-track chatter refers to a shrub called scoparia. "It looks like an old lady's perm," the Tasmanians tell me. Scoparia, they say, is the main reason Tasmanian walkers wear gaiters and mainlanders do not. Six days later, I can add leeches and tiger snakes to that list. I see a beauty on day four: fat, black and glossy. "Tigers" are common here but placid unless cornered. Some hikers ask how many I've seen. When I say "just one", they reply, "How many have seen you, though?"

Dawn on day two is quite the awakening. Outside my hut window, a snow gum's bendy treetop whips around as if exorcising a demon from its trunk. Rain splatters the glass. It is a day to stay in but, gaiters on and raincoats zipped, out into the elements we go. Plans to nip down to the lovely Lake Will are abandoned as we press on to Waterfall Valley Hut, buffeted by wind and rain. No botanising occurs. Heads down and humpbacked, our packs sealed in waterproof shells, we trudge in silent single file over the exposed plains.

Top: capsule (left) and leaves (right) of *Drosera arcturi* (alpine sundew), a species targeted by the seed collectors. Left: *Scapisenecio pectinatus* var. pectinatus (yellow alpine groundsel).

The last time our artist in residence, Gouldthorpe, did the Overland, the landscape was snowy white and alight with fagus, a deciduous shrub with scalloped leaves that Tasmanians swoon over. As he tells me about it, he momentarily seems half here in 2021 and half in his previous trip. I get it. I did the end of the Overland as an overnighter in 2015 and it's been pirouetting in technicolour in my imagination ever since. Was the Pine Valley rainforest we slept in really that magical?

So it goes for most travel experiences, I suppose. The memories are not only of the place but of you: younger, necessarily, and marionette to a set of motivations you can't quite recall, making your former self a mystery. Returning is to seek immersion in those inner worlds of memory, too. Which is why it's never the same: because the place may be as it was, but you're not.

THE NOSTALGIA THAT non-Indigenous Australians have for a place they've trekked before might be personal and profound but, as Teangi Brown explains on the SBS travel series "Going Places with Ernie Dingo", it's different for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who are connected not merely to previous trips but also to their ancestors.

"Makes me think about my old people, it does," Brown says to Dingo at Dove Lake on the Overland. Brown is an educator and an Umpila Kaantju Kuku Yalanji Trawlwoolway Bunurong man based in nipaluna/Hobart. He says he connects with wild, remote places in lutruwita/Tasmania because they "look exactly the same as when the old people were here". The Cradle Mountain region is between the nine Aboriginal nations in Tasmania and, Brown says, it "would definitely have been used going across the mountains to trade and see other nations".

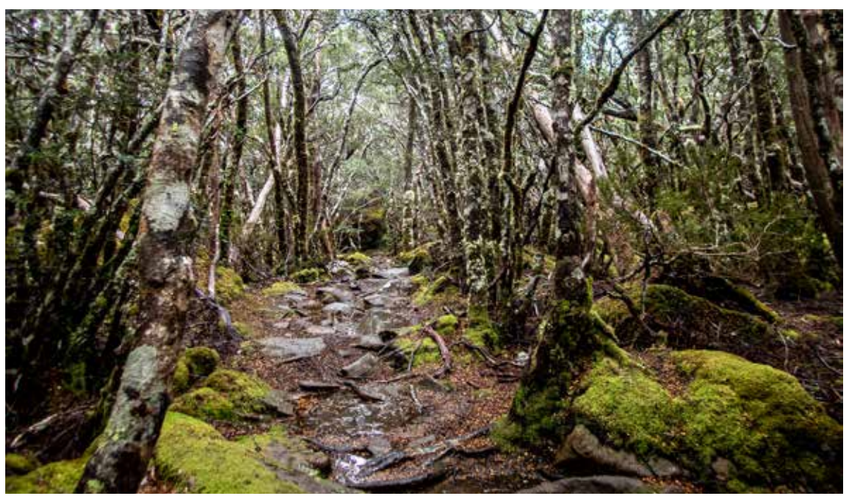
Several huts along the route have a book honouring the Tasmanian nature photographer and wilderness activist Olegas Truchanas, who said, in 1971: "If we can revise our attitudes towards the land under our feet; if we can accept a role of steward and depart from the role of the conqueror, if we can accept that man and nature are inseparable parts of the unified

whole, then Tasmania can be a shining beacon in a dull, uniform and largely artificial world."

But had British invaders respectfully observed the lives of the people in any one of those nine Aboriginal nations, they'd have seen Truchanas' words in action. "When Europeans turned up here, the abundance of the land was still very much noticeable — we hadn't depleted it," Brown says. "They would have burned these button grass plains to promote getting the big kangaroos and wallabies out here. There's this concept that we were nomads and we wandered amongst the bush, but we utilised the land without taking everything all at once. Sustainability? Just look at us blackfellas."

Botany, meanwhile, has a troubled past in Australia. The presence of the aristocratic botanist Joseph Banks was crucial to the British empire's funding of James Cook's 1768 "Endeavour" voyage. Back then, the missions of the Royal Navy were hand-in-blood-soaked-hand with those of The Royal Society, a scientific institution still going strong in London today. Banks sent seeds from the "Endeavour" to Kew Gardens — where the Millennium Seed Bank is based today — and later became the gardens' first unofficial director.

Botany Bay was named by Cook in honour of the flora gathered there and, later, when London's jails filled, Banks advised King George III to establish a penal colony there. "Banks had planted the most productive seed he'd ever handled," Grantlee Kieza writes in "Banks", his biography of the botanist who was so integral to the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



To interpret these histories from an Aboriginal perspective, Theresa Sainty would like to see more palawa/pakana people involved in Tasmanian tourism experiences. "We need to have Aboriginal people telling our stories and interpreting our history and Country ourselves," she says.

WOOD AND HIS assistant hum and ha. A magnifying glass emerges. The bulk of the *Olearia pinifolia* seeds they are examining appear empty. Still, the verdict is yes.I go with Wood's group. The botanist hustles along the duckboard over Pelion Plains so quickly that his three volunteers appear like train carriages tugged along by a steam engine.

The Olearia's white daisies of a few weeks ago have morphed into millions of fluff-covered seeds. We're taught how to harvest the most genetically diverse haul possible and begin circling the treelike shrubs, occasionally plunging into thigh-high sphagnum moss. Ninety minutes later, our linen bags bulge like freshly plumped goose-down doonas.

The next day's mission involves scrambling around the cold dolomite crown of Mount Pelion East. Halfway to the peak, I stop while the others ascend. I've picked up a cold and my body says no, so I find a leech-free boulder and, to the high-pitched white noise of mosquitos, I sleep. When I wake, I let the astonishing view of Mount Ossa and Pelion Plains seep in. There's no crunch of boots, swish of Gore-Tex or tap of walking poles. Just silence and solitude. I peer into puddles and touch prickly heath. The words of the Kaurna Elder Uncle Lewis Yarluburka O'Brien come to mind: "Walk the land, know the country, let the country know you."

Meanwhile, far above, the botanisers scramble around a landscape they later describe as "weather scrubbed", collecting alpine groundsel and alpine sundew. Alpine groundsel is a montane

JENNY SCHORTA

A Tasmanian snow gum on the Overland Track. Opposite, from top: montane rainforest; the path to Frog Flats.

species (it likes cold mountaintops) that is potentially vulnerable in places such as Tasmania because its habitat is shrinking as the climate warms. “There are no higher peaks for it to climb and nowhere further south for it to move to,” Wood says.

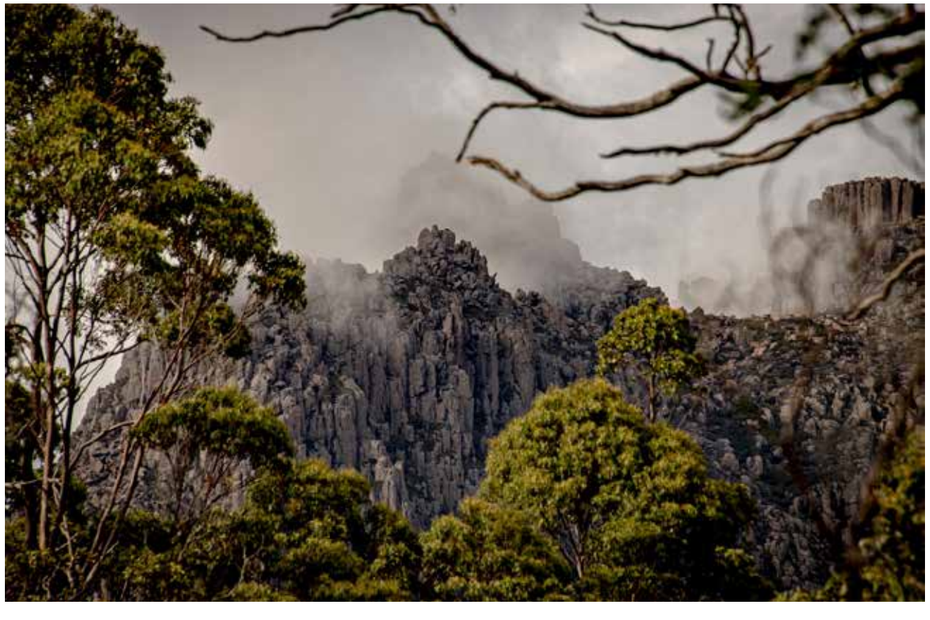
In our packs, where we cram snacks and gloves, each morning Wood places ziplock bags inflated like balloons to try to keep his specimens intact. Ideally, he’d have a herbarium press, a towel and some secateurs, but pack weight must be minimised, so he uses his walking poles to dig up the plants. There’s a gritty “as needs must” air to this expedition that is hard not to admire. It’s startling to learn that Mount Pelion East is one of the most accessible sites to collect montane species in Tasmania. Peaks in the southwest wilderness are ideal too but require longer, rougher hikes or a helicopter. And funds are limited.

Day to day, the excitement lies in the little things. Such as stopping to admire a population of fairy apron in a bog, the purple blooms bobbing despite the still air, as if it were gossiping among itself. On the lowest and muddiest passage of the Overland, called Frog Flats, we admire palm tree moss, glowing moss and some dog vomit slime mould that creeps around the forest floor, hunting for food. For days, we follow paths scattered with the broad white petals of leatherwood tree blossoms, as if we’re about to round the corner and behold a sumptuous elven wedding.

Over dinner, the conversation is plant-based. We learn that while crop seeds have been studied in depth, wild plants have been largely ignored. Many stubborn mysteries remain. “Forty-five per cent of wild seeds have deep, complex dormancies and take a huge amount of time and effort to germinate,” Wood says. When he delves into the concept of physiological dormancy, a few guests drift off for evening ablutions while I, fascinated, jot in my notepad: “Do plants have brains that are superior to ours?”

The topic of bushfires arises a lot. In 2016, blazes decimated a population of pencil and King Billy pines near Lake Mackenzie, some estimated to be 1,500 years old. A project underway will determine whether it’s better to germinate pencil pine seeds in the wild or in a nursery. Seeds for this work were gathered by Wood and his volunteer team a year before the fire.

Clockwise from left: the botanist James Wood; sphagnum moss; *Craspedia macrocephala* (alpine billybutton); the Tasmanian Walking Company guides Ciara and Vito at Old Pelion Hut; Du Cane Range.



ON THE LAST day, as The Acropolis mountain looms into view, I drop back from the group to walk alone and relish my final off-grid hours. Black cockatoos have strewn beheaded banksia through the forest of snow gum, hakea and celery top pine. On the ferry across Lake St Clair I keep my phone turned off, avoiding the flood of notifications until I’ve placed how I’m feeling.

I settle for “changed”. The Overland is a walk that changes you, particularly so given the nature of our journey. I’m awed by the magnitude of the task seed banks face globally, with limited funds, and it has been deeply satisfying to learn about their work and to help.

The guides agree it has been a unique experience. “A lot of people walk through here and don’t even think about it, or just come to see the King Billies,” Nic says, referring to the iconic pines. “But within a centimetre square of alpine vegetation, there’s so much detail. I love that the under-appreciated things have been appreciated on this walk.”

We return to Launceston via Great Lake. A crow flies through the still-scorched bush. The Tasmanians are quiet. “It’s pretty grim,” says one. The rare and non-drought-resistant Miena cider gum is only found in this region, Wood says, and it’s been in a death spiral since the 1980s. The trees were stressed when they burned in 2019 and they’re not showing signs of bouncing back.

I call Wood a month later, on Easter Monday. He’s at work despite the holiday and is elated. The Olearia collection totalled 272,000 seeds: a “phenomenal result”, attributable to the number of hands at work that day. The Tasmanian Walking Company has another seed-collecting trip planned for summer 2022 and Wood has his eye on a rare lily he saw near the track’s waterfalls. “Losing these species means denying generations to come the chance to experience the landscapes that shaped and inspired us,” he says. “I want people to care about these plants.”