

## John Landy, naturalist

John Landy loves a good story. You can tell this from his books. They're peppered with little mysteries acted out by an array of colourful characters: Australia's native insects.

Natural history has been a life-long interest for Landy, who is best known as an athlete. In the 1950s he set Australian and world records for 1500 metres and the mile and won Olympic and Empire games medals.

Landy's earliest memories, however, are not of running races. At four, he saw two large, black-and-yellow-striped Banksia Beetles (*Cyria imperialis*) and a Grass Blue Butterfly (*Zizina labradus*) and was entranced by their shapes and colours. His early interest, and that of a number of other boys, was nurtured by FE 'Ras' Wilson, a naturalist and entomologist who had a fine collection of insects, and was responsible for naming several species.

Landy and his youthful fellow naturalists would ride their bicycles from the Melbourne suburb of Glen Iris to the Dandenong Ranges to hunt for butterflies. Later they would discuss their finds with other amateur entomologists.

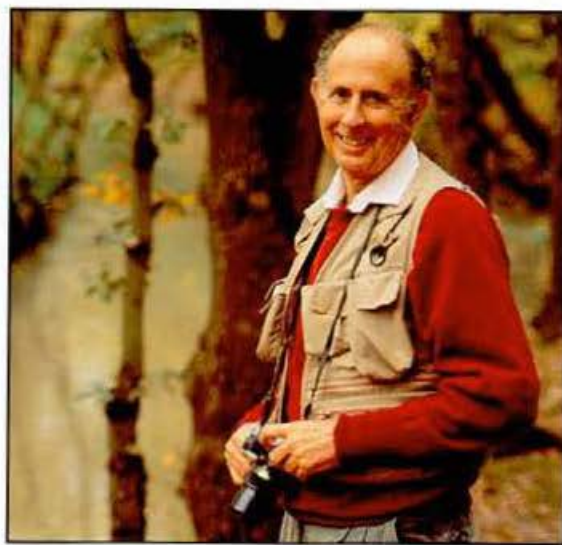
In 1943, they captured the rare Spotted Brown Butterfly, *Heteronympha paradelpha*. Landy returned to the Dandenongs recently to see if the species was still there. To his delight, it was, but in only one of two original locations. Surprisingly, the butterfly had persisted close to a housing development, yet apparently disappeared from a site that is relatively undisturbed. Conundrums such as these feed Landy's curiosity about the environment.

In his two books – *Close to Nature, A Naturalist's Diary of a Year in the Bush*, and *A Coastal Diary, A study of one of Australia's Wildest and Most Beautiful Coastlines* – Landy shares his interest in the landscapes and ecology of Australia's Otway Ranges and Upper Murray regions. His photographs capture the colours and shapes that sustain his love of nature: from a dew-

dropped glow-worm web at dawn, to insects in their many poses of defence and attack, alliance and subterfuge.

*Close to Nature* features photographs taken by Landy near a family property in the 'high country', close to the junction of the Tooma and Murray Rivers in New South Wales. He calls this a place of history and legend.

While researching *Close to Nature*, Landy talked with author of the 'Silver



Brumby' books, Elyne Mitchell. Perhaps some of her knack for storytelling rubbed off, because although he steers clear of fiction, his portrayal of the region and its inhabitants is vivid. Landy's books, however, reflect his love of insects, whose adaptations such as mimicry and camouflage he finds much more fascinating than fiction.

From insects, other animals and plants, Landy learns much about the state of the surrounding environment. All observations are accompanied by explanations of their environmental precursors and ramifications. For Landy, the squabbling of roosting cockatoos is significant because it heralds the approaching sunrise. He also describes interesting historical events such as the Snowy River development, south-coast shipwrecks, and the search for fossils at Dinosaur Cove.

Landy's books express an infinite appreciation of science and the land. He studied agricultural science at Melbourne University and most of his working life has involved agriculture, including positions of research and development manager of ICI's Rural Division and chairman of the Wool Research and Development Corporation. He was a foundation member of the Land Conservation Council, and for five years was a member of the advisory board for CSIRO's Division of Plant Industry. He is on the Australian National Insect Collection Committee, and in 1984 was elected a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science.

Landy says the fragility of Australian soils – their susceptibility to water and wind erosion – and the implications of sporadic rainfall, are now beginning to be fully appreciated by the general public. He says farmers are increasingly adopting practices such as minimum tillage; the use of grass and legume cultivars from Africa and the Mediterranean that are more drought resistant and provide cover for long periods; changed stocking regimes; and crop rotations. He says biological control, particularly of weeds, is very important, but is not the only answer.

Wherever Landy is, he'll take the opportunity to look for insects. And though he's done this in plenty of countries, he can still be amazed by the inhabitants of his own backyard.

Several years ago, while glancing out of the kitchen window, he spotted a stranger on a buddleia plant. 'That is a butterfly not from this area,' he said to his wife, Lynne. Sure enough, it had hitched a ride to Melbourne on palms brought south from Queensland.

'I believe I was the first to notice this visitor to Melbourne, the Orange Palm Dart (*Cephrenes augiades sperthias*)' Landy says. 'And now it appears to have established itself permanently in this city.'

Bryony Bennett