

WILD LIFE

MOVING TO THE NSW SOUTH COAST HAS GIVEN DESIGN ALL-ROUNDER MELISSA MYLCHREEST A NEW CREATIVE OUTLET AND A PASSION FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION.

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Two cute, newly hatched little terns huddle together. "We usually get around 100 nests each season," says Melissa Mylchreest, who is part of a small team of volunteers, along with a national parks shorebird ranger, who look after endangered shorebirds in the Kiama and Upper Shoalhaven council areas. "We monitor and help protect the nesting habitat of the birds to improve the chances of chicks surviving through to fledgling stage, when they have a better chance of escaping danger." **FACING PAGE** Melissa's work focus has expanded since moving from Sydney to the NSW South Coast.



FOR DESIGNER, ILLUSTRATOR and author Melissa Mylchreest, the effects of the pandemic are evident in her life to this day. A small business owner, Melissa's world changed overnight when New South Wales went into lockdown on March 30, 2020. "Everybody just stopped calling, my design business stopped instantly," she says. "It was incredibly stressful."

With no work coming in and her business, King Street Press, in a state of flux, Melissa was forced to take a step back from the hectic life she'd become used to. To alleviate some of the pent-up stress caused by the prolonged uncertainty of lockdown, she started taking long walks near her home in Shoalhaven Heads, NSW. "In the beginning, it was just about moving until I felt better; it was the only way I could cope," she says. "It would take me 15-20 minutes to relax into the walk, then I would start to notice the nature around me, which gave me something else to think about."

Before the pandemic, in 2019, Melissa and her partner Rachel Shaw, both 52, moved from Sydney's Inner West to the NSW South Coast in search of respite from the hustle and bustle. "I was not coping with the noise of the city – the busyness and the traffic," Melissa recalls. "But when we first moved, I was still travelling to and from Sydney every few weeks. It wasn't until lockdown that I was able to slow down."

Although a change of pace was forced on her, the effect of slowing down and spending more time outside was revolutionary for Melissa's mindset. "I went from being very inwardly focused on my issues to being able to see a broader picture. I was involved in the outside world, and suddenly my problems lost their significance," she says.

Turning her coping mechanism into her inspiration, Melissa was soon transfixed by the natural world at her doorstep, realising for the first time that a connection with nature had been missing from her adult life. "As a child, I spent many afternoons in the bush close to our home in the Sutherland Shire," she recalls. "I would climb up and down a local waterfall, watch tadpoles and ducks in the creek – it was my happy place." Everything changed when she left home for the city at 17, where study, then a busy career in magazines, quickly took over and her connection to nature was lost. "Reconnection only happened when I moved, and when my mindset changed," she explains. "I now realise a good life is being happy with what you've already got."

With contentment and connectedness came new avenues of creative expression for Melissa. "While I was out on a walk one day, I came up with the idea to create a passport for local kids, with itineraries and activities to mindfully explore >



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Beauty in the details; "Growing up, I didn't have a way of expressing myself, and I felt like I didn't fit in. All I knew was that I loved the feeling of peace that came from spending time in the bush," says Melissa. "I think a book like what I've created would have really helped me express myself in words and drawings on the page and learn more about the wildlife I was seeing.," "Volunteering has its ups and downs... when eggs or chicks don't survive, it's heartbreaking. But the joy of watching the parents care for each other and their chicks, learning their bird call language when they're alarmed or calling for one another, is unparalleled," says Melissa; collected drawings by local children who participated in Melissa's Draw and Explore workshop, which caters to ages three to 80. "I'll be running more Draw and Explore experiences. I developed the concept for this in-person experience last year and people loved it!" **FACING PAGE** A Far Eastern curlew stands in the foreground, with bar-tailed godwits, pied oystercatchers and terns beyond.





the outdoors during lockdown," she says. "Art is something everyone can do; I think drawing is the best way to really notice the things around you." Mindful exploration is the basis of Rewilding Life, Melissa's passion project aimed at helping children find peace and calm in nature through art.

Around the time she started working on Rewilding Life, Melissa struck up a friendship with her 86-year-old neighbour Rex: "After seeing the work I was doing with my books and bird photography, he asked if I'd be interested in volunteering with the South Coast Shorebird Recovery Program. Little did I know, 25 years ago, *he* was the one who established the protected habitat that we monitor." Sadly, Rex passed away not long after introducing Melissa to the program. However, he had left her in the capable hands of

retired nurse and long-time volunteer Sally Leonard. "Sally is so knowledgeable and generous with her time," says Melissa. "Anything I've learnt is down to her tutelage."

Instead of spending her days exclusively behind a desk, you're likely to find Melissa out monitoring endangered shorebirds like the pied oystercatchers, sooty oystercatchers and little terns in the Kiama and Upper Shoalhaven council areas. "I still have a busy mind, and almost every time I step out for a walk my mind is full of worries," admits Melissa. "But observing animal behaviour, particularly the shorebirds I look after, has deepened my appreciation, respect and empathy for all living things. I'm inspired by their instincts, adaptability, parenting and resilience." *CL*
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CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE "Creating content for kids suits my writing and illustration style, and I enjoy the challenge of creating something that will engage and inspire children to learn and explore on their own," says Melissa; fellow volunteer Valda and her husband, Phil, conduct an annual bird survey at Shoalhaven Heads; feathers, stones and leaves collected while walking; pretty flowers sit among Melissa's books and work resources; a pied oystercatcher forages on the sand; "I want kids to know that animals are just like us," says Melissa; "With *Rewilding Life*, I get to do all the things I love while making a positive difference to others and the environment through my work," she adds. **FACING PAGE** "Within minutes of being in nature, I see something that makes me smile and it puts any negative thoughts or problems into perspective, making them small in the scheme of things," says Melissa. "This morning it was the stillness of the river at full tide with the small islands, so green and lush from recent rain, reflected in the glassy water."



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