

Tall Forest

A day in Australia's old-growth forests



*A Pure Nature Recording by
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The Tall Forests of South-East Australia.

Massive eucalypts rise from the forest floor, their crowns spreading high overhead. Many are of imposing size and great age. The oldest trees may have been mature long before European people settled this continent. When timber cutters first entered these forests, they found and felled the tallest trees ever known. The Mountain Ash that remain today are still the tallest hardwood trees, and the tallest flowering plants, in the world.

Below them, forming a luxurious understorey bathed in pools of sunlight, are a tangle of shrubs and ferns. Where conditions are suitable, and fire has not intervened, a true rainforest has developed; a cool emerald world closing out the sky above. Here tree ferns, some 15 metres high and hundreds of years old, shade an open and moist forest floor with fallen logs covered by mosses, liverworts and fungi.

We are in an ancient realm. These forest ecosystems have survived the great ice-ages, and contain plants that evolved long before Australia became an island continent. The moss-festooned Myrtle Beech for instance, a common rainforest tree, has changed little from ancestors that thrived some 70 million years ago. Ferns abound, giving us a sense of what the great primordial forests of our planet must have been like.

In those times, such forests probably covered extensive areas, but their descendants, mixed with more recently evolved eucalypt species, are now restricted to cool and moist mountain areas in South East Australia.

These forests are home to an amazing diversity of creatures, some found nowhere else and reliant on localised habitats. The complex relationships and interdependencies of these living communities are only just beginning to be understood.

Morning -

We begin our forest journey in the coolness of pre-dawn. The air is humid, heavy with the scents of the forest. A small mountain stream flows through the undergrowth, gurgling softly.

Track 1: The Forest Awakens

10.20

First light dimly filters into the recesses of the forest. Eastern Yellow Robins, usually the first birds calling, greet the dawn with their loud "Chaf, Chaf" and piping calls (0:00), and also a soft scolding chatter (especially around 1:44). The cascading trills of a Grey Fantail (0:19, 0:34, 0:52...) and the "chew-ee, chew-ee, chew-ee" of a Satin Flycatcher (0:44) join in.

A group of Kookaburras, particularly vocal at dawn, make contact and affirm territory (1:04 & 2:55), and a family of Powerful Owls return to a secluded roost for the day - a juvenile calls as it flies overhead (1:47 & 1:49).

White-naped Honeyeaters create a pleasant mewing chorus in the background (from about 3:15 on, but especially around 8:30). Other forest inhabitants also begin the day, including a Grey Shrike-Thrush (3:08, 3:15, 3:23...), a Golden Whistler (3:37, 3:40, 3:44, 3:51, 3:56, 4:02...), a White-throated Tree-creeper (7:23, 7:32, 7:38, 7:45...), a King Parrot (8:20) and Superb Fairy-wrens (4:55, 5:01, 5:33...). A pair of White-naped Honeyeaters chase each other through the trees with "chip!"s and a rapid chatter (9:28-10:10).

Track 2: Sunlit Canopy

11.47

Shafts of sunlight stream through the early morning mists. The resounding whip crack call of a male Whipbird carries through the trees (0:00), and the female immediately responds (0:03).

A clear descending whistle signals the presence of a Bassian Thrush foraging nearby (0:50, 1:11, 1:28 & 1:42), and a King Parrot flies overhead (1:00-1:07) and begins a

clear piping from a high perch (1:17-1:44), before flying off again (2:12 - 2:16). A Fan-tailed Cuckoo trills nearby (1:55, 2:00...), while a Crimson Rosella can be heard giving a triple note call in the background (2:36), and way in the distance, the "Chock!" of a Red Wattlebird (2:17).

A pair of Rose Robins watch for insects, softly "tic"ing (2:39, 2:42, around 2:49, 3:08, 3:12, 3:19 & 3:25).

Fluttering from bush to bush, two pairs of Golden Whistlers contest adjacent territories, displaying and calling repeatedly (from 3:30 to around 6:40), while a Grey Shrike-thrush calls in the background (3:16, 3:23...). Later, a juvenile Pilotbird can be heard scolding in the undergrowth (6:42, 6:44, 6:48...), also the beautiful three-note call of a Spotted Pardalotte (especially around 7:22...) and the rasping of a White-browed Scrub-wren (...7:36...).

As morning has progressed, Crescent Honeyeaters have gathered to feast on Gippsland Waratahs in full bloom, their metallic "Egypt!" and "Choc-chip!" calls ring through the forest (...7:49, 7:56, 8:07...9:28, 9:37...).

Overhead, an old tree creaks in the breeze (8:23...), one of its hollows home to a pair of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. They take to the air, screeching (9:59, 10:04, 10:10...), and flying off with slow lazy wing beats. A pair of Grey Shrike-thrushes call to each other (9:47), and in the background can be heard the high soft chittering of a flock of Brown Thornbills.

Track 3: Garden of Ferns

8.11

A pair of White-browed Scrub-wrens hop animatedly among the undergrowth with scolding and buzzing calls (0:00...), and in the background may be heard, first an Eastern Spinebill (0:32 to 0:38) and then a Flame Robin (around 0:47, 0:53, 0:59 on). The pair of Grey Shrike-thrushes are still calling musically nearby.

From among the ferns comes the clear ringing "Guinea-a-week" call of a Pilotbird (2:14, 2:26, 2:35...), picking over ground newly disturbed by a Lyrebird. A Satin Bow-erbird displays, softly churring and imitating local birds from its bower on the forest floor (3:34, 3:50 imitating Kookaburra?..., 4:32..., 5:10..., and another 'Kookaburra'

softly at 5:33...).

Grey Fantails flutter in and out of the bushes with sweet, soft contact calls (4:30, 4:48, 4:58, 5:08...), and a pair of Gang-gang Cockatoos fly high overhead (6:48..., 7:47...) with wonderfully scratchy voices. The beautiful soft twittering (around 7:13...) is the pair of Grey Fantails, chasing insects close by.

Afternoon -

Track 4: Lyrebird Gully

8.58

The ferny understorey is the haunt of the secretive Superb Lyrebird. From its earthen mound hidden in the undergrowth, and with its filmy tail shimmering overhead, the male gives a breathtaking display, accompanied by an extraordinary repertoire of mimicry. In his extended medley, snatches of imitation (Pilotbird 0:07, King Parrot 0:10, Whipbird 0:17, 1:02 & 1:42, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo 1:05 & 1:59, Crimson Rosella 1:09, Grey Currawong 1:33 & 2:57, Grey Thrush 1:48, Kookaburra 4:04,...) are interspersed with loud melodious song (0:37..., 1:10-25, ...), alarm calls (4:42) and various buzzes and clicks (2:04 - 2:32). Another Lyrebird can be heard in the distance.

Nearby a Rufous Fantail hawks for insects, giving its high, cascading song (3:02, 3:13), while Pilotbirds and White-browed Scrub-wrens forage nearby.

Gentle rain begins falling, as our Lyrebird concludes his display by imitating a Grey Currawong (7:30), following which the authentic character flies overhead uttering a ringing "Kling-kling!" (7:47 & 7:54).

Track 5: Rain in the Forest

4.49

The rain becomes heavier, dripping off leaves and nourishing the forest, while a flock of Brown Thornbills glean through the trees. An Olive Whistler repeats a plaintive "Eeeeu-whit!" (0:43, 0:49, 0:54,...) and single whistle (2:55, 3:03,...). Presently one of the most colourful inhabitants of the forest appears, a male Pink Robin, giving his repeated tinkling call from an exposed perch (4:18, 4:24,...).

Track 6: Enshrouded in Mist

5.08

After the rain, everything is cloaked with thick mist. Great trees are silhouetted in the fog, and sounds carry eerily through the forest. Several Fan-tailed Cuckoos blend their trilling calls (0:00,...). You can also hear them giving mournful whistles (esp. around 2:10) and occasional exclamatory calls (2:26, 2:32...).

A White-browed Scrub-wren may also be heard buzzing in the background, and later another forages close nearby (2:48 on), giving a brief burst of song (4:31). A Crimson Rosella takes flight (0:40), a Yellow-faced Honeyeater gives a cheery 'chick-up' (4:15 & 4:24), and a pair of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos fly past (4:54...). We love their laughing 'cackles' (4:58).

Evening -

Track 7: Last Light

3.49

As day moves towards dusk, a characteristic symphony of evening sounds begins. A Grey Butcherbird gives its beautiful and melodious song (0:02, 0:14 & 0:38), while a Pied Currawong calls its name, flying high above (... 1:03, 1:11..., 1:49, 1:55... 3:08 & 3:10). A Kookaburra is half-heartedly imitated by a Lyrebird (1:29...), before a full chorus of them begins in the distance (1:58...). An Eastern Spinebill (2:15, 2:31, 2:45, 2:52) and a White-throated Treecreeper (2:56) call nearby, and the Lyrebird imitates the Currawong (... 3:42).

The piping of Yellow Robins concludes the day (some scolding around 0:52..., and piping from about 1:21, esp. around 2:30 on).

Track 8: The Gliders Emerge

5.02

As the transition into night continues, the forest becomes the haunt of nocturnal animals. A Boobook Owl wakes up with lazy calls (0:00... and esp. 0:35...), eventually picking up its "Mo-poke" call (0:58, 1:01...), one of the most well known of night sounds in the Australian bush. Others may be heard in the far distance, from adjoining

territories.

The pale light of the moon illuminates huge trees all around. From away off comes the electrifying cry of a Yellow-bellied Glider (1:32). From their roost in a tree above, another pair emerge for their nocturnal feeding. About the size of a small cat, these animals have a membrane of skin between hind and fore limbs, allowing them to glide from tree to tree. They often shriek before launching themselves (1:46, 3:14), continuing their cry in the air before landing on the trunk of another tree and scrabbling up among the loose hanging bark (2:00-2:12, & 2:24), muttering occasionally (2:50, 3:08). It is amazing to look up and see these extraordinary animals silhouetted against the stars as they soar sometimes large distances between trees.

An Owlet Nightjar begins a soft yapping (2:52, 2:57, 3:01, 3:06...), before a Mountain Brushtail Possum, or Bobuck, approaches and scrambles in the branches overhead, its huffing call belying its timid and gentle nature (3:46..., 4:08...).

Track 9: Spirit of the Sooty Owl

4.20

Echoing through the forest come the unforgettable cries of a pair of Sooty Owls, often described as sounding like a 'falling bomb' (0:01, with reply from nearby mate 0:15). They are rare birds, dependent on large areas of undisturbed forest, with tall Eucalypts rising from dense rainforest gullies. They require secluded roosting hollows and a plentiful supply of prey, and thus their presence indicates a healthy ecosystem. They begin uttering a variety of chattering whistles in animated conversation (0:32 on), eventually moving in closer and settling in a tree just overhead (1:44). It is a great privilege to have these rare birds perched calmly, so closely nearby, and filling the night with their wondrous voices.

The Owlet Nightjar is heard again, this time giving its more usual call, a trio of rasping "chet"s" (2:21), and another glider launches itself from a tree nearby (3:07).

We conclude as the Sooties move off into the depths of the forest (3:44...)

Field notes to accompany the nature sound album
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and including as part of a CD case.)