The devils made me do it

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We are curled in armchairs peering through the window of our dimly lit log cabin to an illuminated lawn. We are hopeful a certain visitor will soon arrive. Despite its forbidding appearance and terrifying vocalisations, the Tasmanian devil is a shy creature. If it knows we are here, it will remain concealed in the surrounding forest.

Tucked in the remote Loongana Range in northwest Tasmania, six self-contained Mountain Valley Log Cabins sit amid 61ha of wet eucalypt forest protected by a private nature reserve. The property is home to a plethora of wildlife, including Tasmanian devils and spotted-tailed quolls, most of Tasmania's endemic bird species and even glow worms. As the sun dips behind the mountains, Len, one of the reserve owners, arrives with a bucket of raw chicken and scatters a few pieces on our lawn to entice the secretive carnivores to visit after nightfall. "The facial tumour disease killed about 80 per cent of the Tasmanian devil population, so there is not much competition for food among the remaining devils, and they can afford to be cautious," he explains. "They don't like the full moon." As I ponder the ethics of feeding wildlife for the sake of touristy encounters, Len continues, "To maintain their metabolism, devils need to consume 40 per cent of their body weight each night." I quickly calculate that's more than 3kg of lizards, frogs, birds. Or a single pademelon roadkill carcass to scavenge, with the risk of being hit themselves. So, while the ethics of feeding wildlife remain a



IN THE KNOW

The contagious devil facial tumour disease (DFTD) first appeared in 1996 and, within five years, wiped out more than 80 per cent of the affected Tasmanian devil populations. Two decades later, the scientists discovered the devils were affected by a second contagious cancer, escalating fears of their imminent extinction. Genetic research published last year revealed they were rapidly evolving resistance; natural immunity to DFTD gives the devils a decent chance for a brighter future.

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contested subject, keeping at least some devils away from roads by providing alternative food sources seems a decent strategy.

Just up the road is Leven Canyon circuit, one of Tasmania Parks & Wildlife Service's Great Short Walks, which features dramatic lookouts from the edge. Another 29km away are Gunns Plains Caves. Carved by an underground river, they form a labyrinth of calcite shawls and flowstones, with a small colony of glow worms. Our jolly guide, Geoff Deer, reminisces about exploring the deepest reaches of the caves and discovering at least 36 platypus burrows on the river banks.

Back at the cabins, as we wistfully scan the Leven River for any signs of the resident

platypus, a short-beaked echidna puts on a rare display of nonchalance, waddling across the button grass plain, engrossed in demolishing ant nests and lapping up the insects. I deduce she's a female by the lack of characteristic spurs on the ankles of her back feet. I sprawl on the grass to take in the world from her eye level. She pauses inches away from my face, and I can hear the little sounds she makes, digging so enthusiastically with her front feet her back legs lift off the ground.

After sunset, we resume our silent watch. The stage is set with the moon concealed behind the clouds and a light breeze. We watch pademelons, quolls and brushtail possums pass the window and then suddenly a young Tasmanian devil is in front of us as if materialised out of thin air. Its neat black coat is speckled with raindrops; its cheeky face shows no signs of tumours. Not as brazen as the quoll, it pauses, head held high, and listens to the sounds of the night. Finally satisfied, it steps fully into the light, snatches a piece of chicken and vanishes into the

