

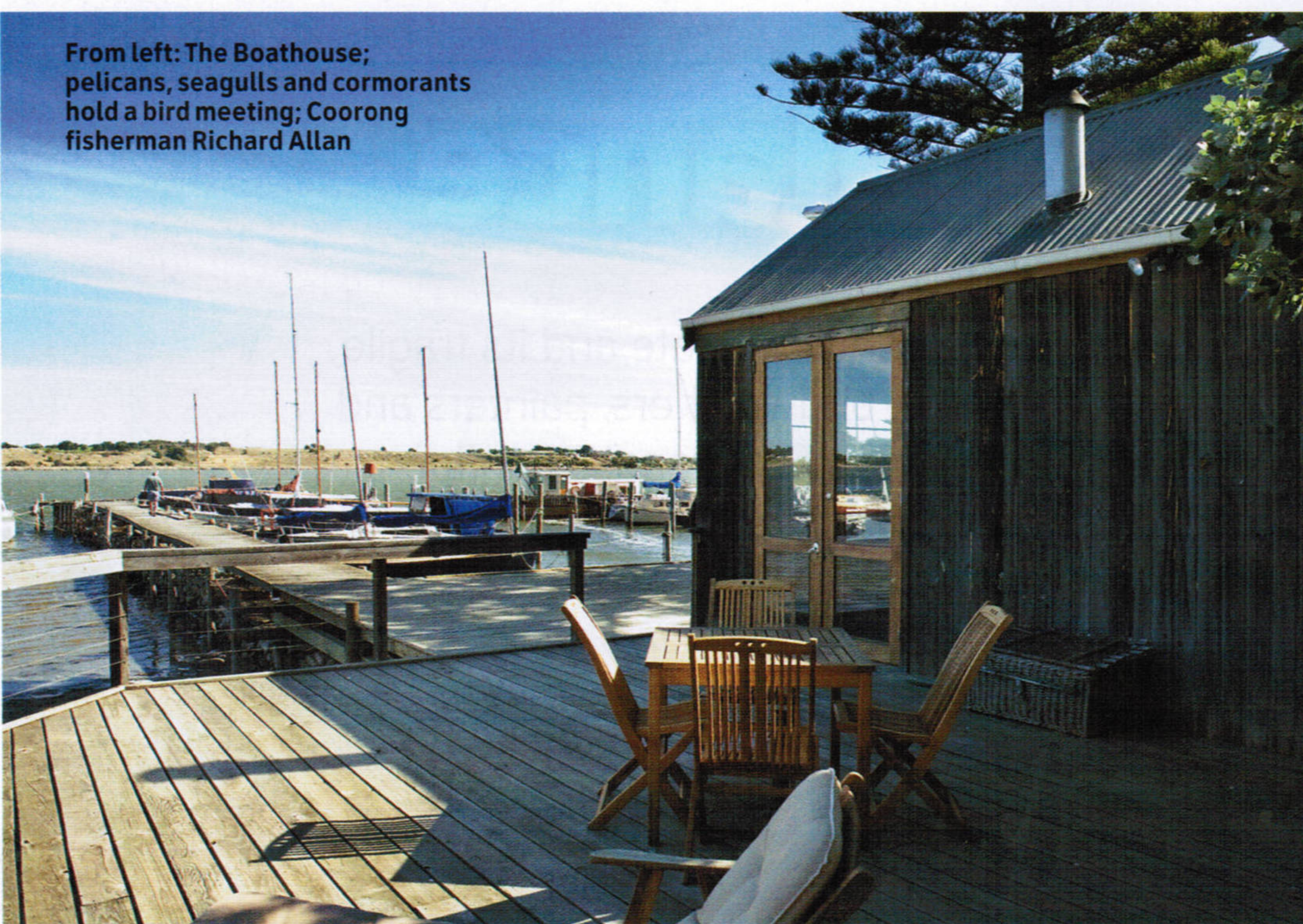
A fine balance

As the gods of climate change ponder its fate and its fragile ecosystem comes under scrutiny, birdwatchers, painters and historians still flock to the charismatic Coorong, a confluence of waterways at the mouth of the Murray River.

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From left: The Boathouse; pelicans, seagulls and cormorants hold a bird meeting; Coorong fisherman Richard Allan



OUT-OF-TOWNERS at this year's Adelaide Festival who saw *When The Rain Stops Falling*, Andrew Bovell's cross-generational family saga, had the same question as they left the theatre: "Where is the Coorong?" Without giving too many clues as to the location of this mysterious and overlooked region, Bovell, who lives nearby on the Fleurieu Peninsula, set several scenes there, emphasising its remoteness. Stretching more than 100km, but just 4km wide, the Coorong is two hours from Adelaide, but feels much further.

Bovell, best known for the *Lantana* screenplay, was drawn to the area by its enigmatic, moody character. "It's an in-between landscape, both evocative and ambiguous, that resonates with Aboriginal and European history, some of it very violent. Now its fate is of great concern, since it has become a hotspot bearing the consequences of the issues around climate change."

Other writers and painters have found the place equally charismatic with its soft light and changing moods. Some have left an indelible portrait of its natural beauty – Colin Thiele's *Storm Boy*, a children's literature and cinema classic, was shot amid the pelican breeding grounds and sand dunes of the estuary, a complex network of wetlands and riverine scrub leading to the pounding surf at the mouth of the Murray.

This is a place appreciated by wildlife connoisseurs – the birdlife includes rare migratory species, such as the red-

necked stint, that have travelled from as far as Siberia. An early morning in the company of local birding expert David Dadd is a rewarding experience. Armed with a long lens and powerful binoculars, he can pick out the many different seabirds and waders feeding and courting at the water's edge, their colonies buzzing with calls. Today they include painted snipes, oystercatchers, avocets, greenshanks and godwits, to name but a few of the 240 species sighted in the area.

The sand dunes reveal their own secrets: middens of glinting white oyster shells signal the long-ago presence of the local indigenous people, the Ngarrindjerri, who had no need for a nomadic lifestyle. As tribal elder Uncle Nev tells it: "There was enough tucker to be found right here, between the sea and the river. We did not need to go looking any further." He explains that "Coorong" is probably a corruption of the local word for "long neck", perfectly describing the lagoon, which stretches parallel to the ocean.

At Camp Coorong south of Meningie, a small museum showcases aspects of Ngarrindjerri culture and traditional landowners offer guided bush walks in the area. Other members of the Ngarrindjerri community have established the Coorong Wilderness Lodge on a spectacular headland at Hacks Point. This is a wonderful spot from which to kayak the waterways, take a bush tucker walk or watch the sunset over the majestic sweep of dunes and the undulating bends of the lagoon, the sea shining in the distance. ➤



Rust never sleeps: old car graveyard at Mundoo Station (above); Ngarrindjerri elder Uncle Nev and Coorong wildflowers (left)



Mundoo Station: black Angus beef up the photo ops; owner Sally Grundy; the smithy has seen better days

A river cruise is the best introduction to the complexity of the landscape and a chance to see some of the region's flora and fauna up close. Within minutes of our mooring at Godfrey's Landing to explore the dunes on foot, emus come down to the water's edge to swim or drink from freshwater pools. Seasonal teams harvest deliciously sweet and juicy pipis or small clams from Ninety Mile Beach to send to fish markets across the country. The traditional method is to dance the twist on the sand, toes digging out the shells. Passengers on the *Spirit Of The Coorong* don't even have to do that. While we're exploring the Younghusband Peninsula, buffeted by winds off the Great Southern Ocean, our captain cooks up a pan of simmering pipis in wine, coconut milk and chilli sauce. The fragrant aroma tempts us back – eaten straight from the shell, they could not be any fresher.

The crew explains the complex and fragile ecosystem around us – its mix of salt and fresh water, the role of the barrages (artificial obstructions) that act as membranes between the two, the changing balance of nature altered by everything from drought to farming, and the new concerns caused by global warming and the vexed and controversial issue of management of the Murray River upstream. Salinity and dredging are the words on everyone's lips.

Anyone who lives in the Coorong has a point of view, because most livelihoods are affected by its rhythms and fluctuations. But no-one has come up with an answer that will keep everyone happy. One thing is for sure: bringing visitors into the area can only raise awareness of the region's natural wonders and boost a farming economy in decline.

On Mundoo Island, a cattle property at the mouth of the Murray, bounded by the freshwater Lake Alexandrina, owner Sally Grundy isn't waiting for politicians to decide the fate of the region. The high-energy farmer and mother is passionate about the history and heritage of the property her husband's family has owned since 1920 (the land has been farmed since the 1840s). After welcoming visitors to the property she jokingly calls Club Mud (Mundoo means "island of mud" in the local dialect), she drives them around the salty pastures of Mundoo and other islands of the 3240ha property, giving a personal perspective on the dilemmas facing locals who live from a land changing before their very eyes. What does not change, however, is her love for the place, or her spirit of optimism about the Coorong.

On the way to the cattle yards, crossing the barrage bridges that separate estuary from ocean, Grundy points out several of the dozen migratory birds feeding at the water's edge, and some of the 85 waterbird species – plovers, sandpipers, stilts, dotterels and Cape Barren geese – that make this an important birdwatching destination. "Look, there's a red-necked stint. They're so small they fit into a wineglass." Weighing about 30g, this hardy wader flies further than the distance ➤