

## Lobster tales



writer *TERRY MULHERN*

# Dr Crayfish

photographers *PETER DOMBROVOSKIS, LEE HAMR and PREMEK HAMR*



*Premek Hamr and his first lobster specimen,  
Inglis River near Yolla, 1985  
photo Lee Hamr*

Premek Hamr is affectionately known as “Dr Crayfish” by the students of Upper Canada College in Ontario. The school is older than Canada itself and has educated many of Canada’s political elite. Think of it as England’s Eton College wrapped in a maple leaf. Hamr’s nickname alludes to a former life as an internationally respected freshwater ecologist. And although he’s been teaching environmental science at UCC for more than 20 years, he still finds time to get his feet wet doing field work and remains the go-to guy for ecologists from all across Canada seeking authoritative identification of freshwater crayfish specimens.

One of Hamr’s current projects is the conservation of the white crayfish (*Faxonius propinquus*) in Lake Simcoe in southern Ontario. Although there is considerable urban development along much of the lake shore, there are secluded parts where the woods stretch down to the water. Reflections of white pine, hemlock, maple and beech ripple on



*Lake Oberon*

*photo Peter Dombrovskis, reproduced with the permission of Liz Dombrovskis*

the surface of quiet bays and inlets. The Wyandot (Huron) people called this lake *Ouentironik* – Beautiful Water.

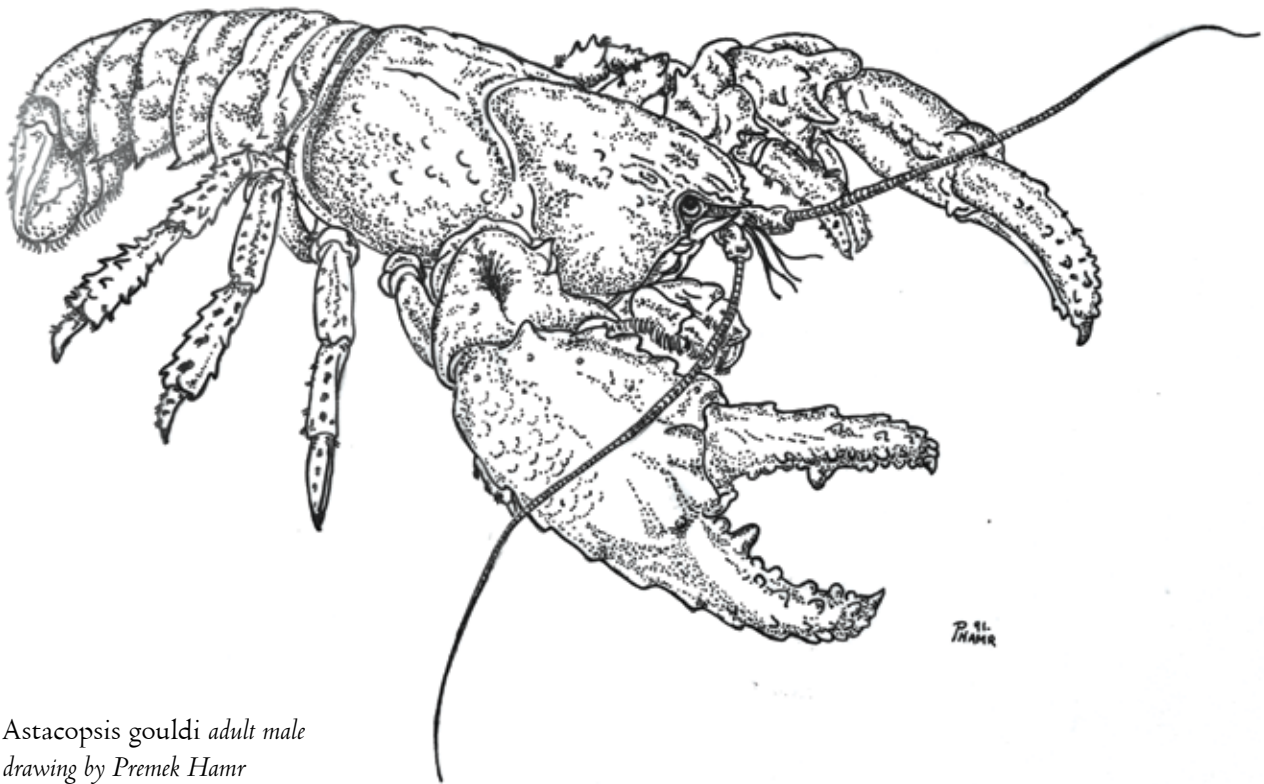
Half-way around the world, there is another lake that is special to Hamr, and it too could justifiably be called “Beautiful Water”. Lake Oberon sits high in the Western Arthurs in the south-west wilderness. The lake is perched on the slopes of the range, the water cupped in a spectacular amphitheatre carved out of a ring of jagged peaks by a glacier, thousands of years ago. Compared to the forests of Canada, the vegetation surrounding Lake Oberon is almost unworldly: pandani, scorparia and nothofagus reflect from the lake surface. Beneath the water,

small, golden-brown fish dart in and out among the aquatic plants growing in its cold water.

If it wasn't for “Dr Crayfish” – these little fish would be extinct.

...

As a young biologist, Hamr became entranced by a picture in a textbook of the giant freshwater “lobster” (*Astacopsis gouldi*) that lurks in the rivers and streams of northern Tasmania. In 1984, on a wing and a prayer, he sent a letter to Dr Alastair Richardson at the University of Tasmania in the hope of studying these incredible creatures. One year later, he stepped off the plane in Hobart and began his PhD research.



*Astacopsis gouldi* adult male  
drawing by Premek Hamr

Hamr was surprised at how different everything was here. “I didn’t recognise anything. In the bush, it was like being on another planet. I felt like one of those early explorers – Joseph Banks or Charles Darwin.”

His project involved studying the distribution and reproductive habits of three native freshwater crayfish species, including the lobster. He caught, measured, and weighed specimens from all across the state. As a result of his research, this quietly spoken Canadian has probably seen more of Tasmania than most Tasmanians ever have or ever will.

After Hamr graduated, he stayed on in Tasmania working for the Inland Fishery Commission, as the IFS was known at the time. He was appalled that the endangered lobster was being hunted into extinction. But he was told that “if you want to change regulations, you have to prove they’re wrong”. So, he did. His research into their slow reproduction and susceptibility to habitat loss and overfishing helped force the policy changes that protect them today.

We owe Hamr another debt of gratitude. From 1990-92, he headed the IFS team tasked with saving that little golden-brown fish that now thrives in Lake Oberon. Since the end of the last ice age, Pedder galaxias (*Galaxias pedderensis*) lived only in the “original” Lake Pedder and the small mountain streams that fed it. It had evolved in isolation, protected by the extreme remoteness of its home. Then this little fish’s world changed cataclysmically. In 1967, the Hydro-Electric Commission started construction of three mighty dams. The Huon River was dammed south of Lake Pedder and the Serpentine River was dammed to the north. A third dam to the south-east was needed to block the escape of the rising water.

By 1972, the dams were finished, and the valleys began to fill. The original Lake Pedder, with its famous pink quartzite sand beach, was drowned. Half a century later, there is still much bitterness about the short-sighted decision-making that allowed this to happen.



One of the last original *Galaxias pedderensis*  
photo Premek Hamr

As the original Lake Pedder started to disappear beneath the surface of the enormous impoundment, so did the *Pedder galaxias*. Initially, the fish's range expanded as the wide basin filled. This let them temporarily spread into the adjoining Lake Gordon. But the introduction of trout into this closed system of artificial lakes signed the galaxias' death warrant. By 1990, *Pedder galaxias* were so rare, drastic action was called for. The remaining wild fish were to be caught and relocated to a safe haven.

Premek Hamr led the mission to save the *Pedder galaxias*. On November 1, 1991, Hamr released the last wild adult fish – just 20 – into Lake Oberon. This was followed by 11 of Hamr's "test-tube babies" – fish he'd raised in a tank in his lab.

For five long years, no *Pedder galaxias* were seen. Hamr fretted that instead of saving the fish, he'd single-handedly caused their extinction. Then, seemingly against all odds, new *Pedder galaxias* were caught in Lake Oberon. The trans-location had been a success. Now there are thousands of *Pedder galaxias* in Lake Oberon.

...

Hamr was born in Tabor, Czechoslovakia. His father was a diplomat, and he spent his early childhood living in Ghana and Turkey. But the 1968 Russian invasion changed everything, and he and his family fled the communist regime and escaped to Canada as political refugees.



Release of *Pedder galaxias* at Lake Oberon, 1991  
photo courtesy of Tasmania Parks and Wildlife

Hamr's mother was an artist, and he has inherited that talent. Beautiful and detailed sketches of animals and plants are a feature of his scientific work. Hamr was collaborating with his friend, wilderness photographer, Peter Dombrovskis, on an illustrated book about Tasmanian flora and fauna when Dombrovskis' untimely death intervened. Dombrovskis' hauntingly beautiful photograph of Lake Oberon is probably as close to this magical place as many of us will get.

Hamr feels an affinity to all the countries he's lived in, but Australia has a special place in his heart. His wife, Lee, also a biologist, joined him here. They travelled extensively around the country in their beat-up Suzuki enjoying a "seven-year honeymoon down under". Their two children were born in Tasmania and Premek Hamr has been back several times to catch up with old friends and his PhD mentor, Alastair Richardson.

"I still love getting off the plane and smelling the gums and hearing the magpies. In Canada, it's pines and blue jays. I'd know which home I was in, even if I was blind." I asked Hamr whether his time in Tasmania had changed him. He answered, "Definitely! It made me more adventurous, self-reliant and self-sufficient." He credits his time here with making him into "a real environmentalist" who deeply appreciates nature and its fragility. It also made him see the "value and magic of life". He had several near-death experiences. These included



*Premek Hamr being interviewed by a TAS-TV crew at Lake Oberon, 1991  
photo courtesy of Tasmania Parks and Wildlife*

close encounters with snakes, helicopter flights in atrocious weather and a serious car crash that he miraculously survived.

Early on the morning of March 7, 1990, Hamr and an IFS colleague were towing a boat up the Brooker Highway on their way to do some field work. At Granton, a driver coming the other way fell asleep at the wheel after coming off a night shift at the New Norfolk pulp mill. One person in the other car died and two others, including a small child, were badly injured. Hamr and his colleague walked away with just a few cuts and bruises – even though upon impact, their boat had sliced through the back of the ute and punched its way into the cabin. The point of the bow stopped between their heads.

...

Like everyone, I'm looking forward to the end of the pandemic. One big reason is that I want to

meet "Dr Crayfish" in person. I'd really like to shake his hand and say thank you for all he has done for Tasmania.

Getting to know Premek Hamr and hearing his story has certainly brought something home to me. Life often exists on a knife's edge and can be easily snuffed out. Individual lives – as well as species and ecosystems. Sometimes, I feel depressed and frustrated with the state of the world and how selfish and uncaring humans can be. But Hamr's work and dedication to ecology gives me hope. Caring for the environment is important. Seeking knowledge is worthwhile. And most of all, one individual *can* make a difference. ■

*TERRY MULHERN is a writer and academic. He has lived in Victoria for more than 20 years but, like a swift parrot, he migrates every summer across Bass Strait to north-west Tasmania.*

