Steve and the Buried Ball

By James Shang



Clancy was flying over the sand dunes when a tremendous rustling rose from the trees below.

Scratch, scratch, shuffle.

A spray of dry leaves scattered across the ground.

Clancy landed on a low branch and leaned forward.

Beneath him, a bush turkey was working his way backwards through the undergrowth. His dark feathers shuffled, his yellow wattle wobbled, and his strong feet sent leaves flying towards a heap behind him.

“Hello down there!” called Clancy.

The turkey lifted his red head. His eyes were wide and bright, and he wore an enormous smile.

“Hello up there!”

“What are you doing?”

“Building my mound.”

Clancy looked at the heap of sand and leaves beneath the shady trees.

“By yourself?”

“Yes. I’ve only just moved here. I’m Steve.”

“I’m Clancy.”

“Pleased to meet you, Clancy.”

Steve reached forward with one foot and raked another footful of leaves behind him.

“Plenty to do!”

Clancy stayed for a chat. Steve chatted happily too, but his feet hardly stopped.

Scratch, scratch, shuffle.



A few days later, Clancy returned to the same branch.

He looked down.

Where there had been a heap, there was now a great mound. It spread beneath the trees and rose so high that Clancy couldn't see Steve on the other side.

"Steve?"

"Over here!"

Clancy followed the sound of scratching. Steve came around the mound with a dry leaf caught on his back.

"Hello, Clancy!"

Clancy flew down and walked around it.

Then he walked a little farther.

"Have you built all this since I was here?"

Steve stood tall, his yellow wattle hanging proudly over his chest.

"I've been busy."

"Mud is good!" said Clancy.

Steve looked at the mound, then down at his feet.

"What's mud?"

"Dirt mixed with water. Soft and squishy."

Steve studied his carefully gathered leaves.

"There isn't any in here."

Clancy chuckled.

"I meant your mound looks great! My friend Raffy says 'Mud is good!' Sometimes we say it too."

Steve's smile widened.

"Would Raffy like to come and see it?"

"He would," said Clancy. "But he's a mudskipper. He can come onto land, just not this far from the water. He needs to stay wet."

Steve peered between the trees towards a strip of blue sea.

"Could I go and meet him?"

"Come on," said Clancy. "I'll show you."



They followed the sandy edge of the dunes, leaving the crisp rustle of dry leaves behind.

Ahead, mangrove roots twisted out of the ground. Little pools shone between them, and the air smelled of salt and damp earth.

Beside one pool, Raffy was wriggling into a glossy patch of mud.

“Raffy!” called Clancy. “This is Steve.”

Steve hurried across the damp sand.

His first step into the mud made a soft squish.

He stopped.

Slowly, he lifted his foot. Sticky brown mud clung between his toes.

“Oh!”

He put it down and lifted the other.

Squelch.

Steve laughed.

“It’s gooey!”

Raffy raised his eyes above the edge of his muddy hollow.

“You’ve found a good patch.”

Steve spread his toes. The mud squeezed between them.

“Does it always stick to you?”

“Mostly,” said Raffy.

He wriggled out, leaving a smooth little slide behind him.

Steve watched, wide-eyed.

“You’re covered in it!”

Raffy looked down at himself.

“Yes,” he said happily.



A small dog came racing along the firm sand, his ears bouncing with every stride.

“Raffy!”

Kevin skidded to a stop. Behind him came Patrick, a long, low dachshund following an interesting smell, and Wally, a fluffy labradoodle carrying a blue ball.

Clancy introduced their new friend.

“Steve’s built an enormous mound behind the dunes.”

Wally put down his ball.

“Do you dig?”

“I scratch,” said Steve.

He stepped onto the loose sand and swept one foot backwards, leaving a long scrape.

Wally’s tail wagged.

“I dig.”

He planted his front paws and scooped out a sandy hollow.

Steve leaned closer.

“Good feet.”

“So are yours,” said Wally.

Kevin nudged the ball between them.

“Want to play?”



Wally rolled the ball to Patrick, who pushed it towards the wet edge where Raffy waited.

Raffy planted his fins.

One good shove, and the ball bumped across the sand.

Kevin was after it in a flash.

He caught up, swung around and sent it rolling back. But the ball struck a little ridge, bounced sideways and dropped into Wally’s sandy hollow.

Kevin bounded down after it.

Sand slipped beneath his paws.

He reached for the ball, and more sand slid from the edge.

Kevin stopped.

The hollow was still there.

The ball wasn’t.

He sniffed beside one paw, then the other.

“It was right here!”

Raffy skipped along the wet edge for a closer look.

“Can you see any blue?”

Kevin lowered his nose.

“Only sand.”



Patrick followed the ball's shallow track to the hollow. He sniffed along the edge, then stopped beside Kevin.

"Here," he said.

Wally began to dig. Sand flicked backwards between his paws.

Steve's feet shuffled.

"I can help with that!"

Wally moved beside him, and Steve reached forward with one strong foot.

Scratch, scratch, shuffle.

Dig, dig, dig.

A little shower of sand landed beside Clancy. He hopped farther away.

"I'll watch from here."

Steve scratched again while Wally scooped away the loosened sand.

A small blue patch appeared between them.

"There!" called Raffy.

Steve stopped his foot. Wally brushed away the last of the sand, and Kevin pulled his ball free.

He shook it.

Sand sprinkled from his whiskers.

"Got it!"



Wally looked into the hollow, then at Steve.

“You’re very good at scratching.”

“You’re very good at digging.”

Wally scraped another pawful of sand.

Steve scratched beside him.

Kevin waited with the ball in his mouth.

Dig, dig, dig.

Scratch, scratch, shuffle.

Kevin put the ball down.

“We’ve found it, you know.”

Two heads lifted.

“Oh, yes,” said Wally.

Steve was still smiling.

“Lovely sand, though.”

Kevin nudged the ball towards Raffy, and the others followed it down to the firm, wet edge.

Steve stepped into place beside Wally.

Squish.

He looked down at his toes, then across at Raffy.

“Mud is good!”

A little more about Steve and his friends

Steve’s mound

Steve is an Australian brush-turkey, also called a bush or scrub turkey. Male brush-turkeys scratch together leaves, soil and other plant material to build nesting mounds. Warmth from the decaying material helps incubate the eggs.

Oceanese

Raffy and his friends invented Oceanese so different animals could talk to one another. It spread from their ocean friends to land animals too. In these stories, sounds, movements and expressions help friends understand one another. Oceanese is make-believe.

Look again

Murray found a quiet spot beside a root while Steve met the dogs. Can you spot him in picture 4?

Care for their home

Watch wild birds from a distance and leave their mounds undisturbed. Take balls and other belongings home after playing at the beach.

Our ocean. Our planet. Our friends.

Let’s look after them together.

Raffy’s Ocean Friends is a fictional series created by James Shang. Raffy and his friends were developed for this series, inspired by the animals and waterways of Australia. In their world, they invented Oceanese so different animals could talk to one another. Story and characters by James Shang. Illustrations created with generative AI and developed through author-directed revisions. © 2026 James Shang. All rights reserved.

Thank you for reading!

We hope you enjoyed Steve’s story and your reading time together.

Visit raffysoceanfriends.com for songs, games and colouring in. There’s more fun to share with Raffy and his friends!



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