

WILD LIFE

A chance encounter with a Rwandan mountain gorilla changed Jan Latta's life forever. More than two decades on, JEN COWLEY finds the acclaimed author and photographer has lost none of her passion for exotic animals or for the education of children that's so vital to wildlife conservation.

WITH her exquisitely rounded vowels, gently expressive hand gestures and elegantly close-cropped silver hair, Jan Latta looks more North Shore librarian than intrepid wildlife photographer. But don't let the genteel demeanour fool you – this adventurous Sydney woman can rough it with the best of them. From wading knee-deep in stinking African mud to sweating her way through steamy Asian jungles, to encounters with sock-stealing baboons, heavy breathing lions and love-struck orang-utans, this author-cum-educator has done it all in the name of wildlife conservation.

As part of a regional tour to promote her series of children's books – aimed at educating youngsters to the plight of endangered species throughout the world – Latta has made a fleeting visit to Dubbo, where she's speaking with a group of spellbound children and equally enthralled parents.

It's after the barrage of questions – ranging from the predictable “What's your favourite animal?” to “Do you ever see snakes?” – that we meet, and I'm still battling the initial visual impression of a kindly, if spritely, grandmother.

I mention this and she laughs politely. She's clearly heard it before.

“Well, yes. But I lived in a concrete jungle in Hong Kong and Japan for 28 years so believe me, I'm at my happiest sitting in the back of a dusty jeep, covered in mud with a scarf around my head, looking at lions.”

IT'S an up-close-and-personal encounter with a mountain gorilla in the wilds of Rwanda – think Dian Fossey and Gorillas in the Mist – that Latta, who has more than 15 children's book titles under her belt, credits with sparking the fire in her belly that doesn't look anything like going out even after 22 years.

“I came face to face with him up in the mountains and that changed my life and my career. My guide said there were only 600 mountain gorillas left in the entire world. I thought that was pretty sad and I knew I had to do something.”

With considerable advertising experience and with extensive contacts, Latta had a number of options when it came to spreading the conservation message, but decided it was the animals themselves that needed to “tell the story”.

“But for the animals to tell their story, I

knew I needed to become a wildlife photographer. So I did,” she says matter-of-factly.

With the benefit of guidance from friend and acclaimed African-based photographer Karl Ammann, the now-former ad-industry exec swapped briefcase for camera lens and embarked on what's been, and is, an incredible journey to success as an educator and conservation campaigner.

“I asked Karl, how do I go about this? He said buy a good camera and come back to Africa to learn, but do your homework on any animal you're going to see in the wild; one, it'll keep you safe but, two, you'll know what the animal's going to do next and that will help get that great action shot.”

The choice to promote the wildlife conservation cause through children's books rather than traditional photographic account or any other genre was easy.

“If we're going to save endangered animals, children are the ones who are going to do it. So that's where we should start. My great reward when I'm talking at schools and festivals is when a mother sends me an email afterwards saying, “I've never seen my son so excited. He wants to do what you do”. That's so special because I know that little boy is going to help save some animals.”

AS any photographer knows, the right gear can make all the difference. But Latta – who has traditionally used Nikon, but is about to switch camps to Canon – says that when it comes to lenses, size doesn't always matter. It's as much about timing, patience and being in the right place at the right time.

She's had the same guide for four of her trips to the Dark Continent and credits the “huge” African with helping capture some of her best shots.

“I felt very safe with Letaloi – I think he could have wrestled a buffalo and won – but his knowledge was priceless. He would get me very, very close to some of these animals. He would know just how long they were going to tolerate me.”

“There's something sort of spiritual, I think when you're out there in the wild, especially in a place like the Masai Mara – it makes you feel so tiny and it just changes your life just being with these seriously endangered animals. It's very special.”

Like many travellers to Africa, Latta – who travels alone, preferring not to join organised

tours if she can possibly avoid it – concedes that at times, it's best to just put the camera down and feasting with eyes alone.

“That happened on the last trip, in fact. We were following a lioness every day and she was drinking from a puddle of water very early one morning. She walked towards me and the eye contact we both had with each other was really quite amazing. She came right up to the Jeep – she was just there,” Latta says, using her arm to indicate a mere metre. “Looking up at me, and me looking down at her. Then she turned, walked the length of the Jeep and went on her way. That exchange was just so beautiful, I didn't need to take a photograph.”

TO the onlooker, Jan Latta leads a charmed life – criss-crossing the world, taking photos in some of the globe's most exotic and romantic locations, looking at wonderful animals and talking about her books and her amazing experiences to spellbound children.

But she's worked hard to carve a unique niche in the cut-throat business of publishing.

“I had a small boutique publishing company when I was living in Hong Kong and working seven days a week. So I only produced three books in that time, and then I lost my entire company with the Chinese handover, so I had to start again in Sydney.”

It was then she decided her own books, and the pursuit of material for her series of educational children's resources, should become her focus.

“So off I went back to Africa and re-designed the concept of the three earlier books. Now I spend half the year talking at schools and festivals and I usually do one major trip a year.”

Over the two decades she's been doing this gig, Latta has seen travel become significantly more accessible, but it's still an expensive exercise. She receives no sponsorship – she's entirely self-funded.

“I have to do everything myself to produce the books, because they need to be affordable. I publish the books myself so that the revenue helps fund the next trip,” she says, adding that the financial return rarely covers the actual costs.

“But this is my passion in life. I don't go

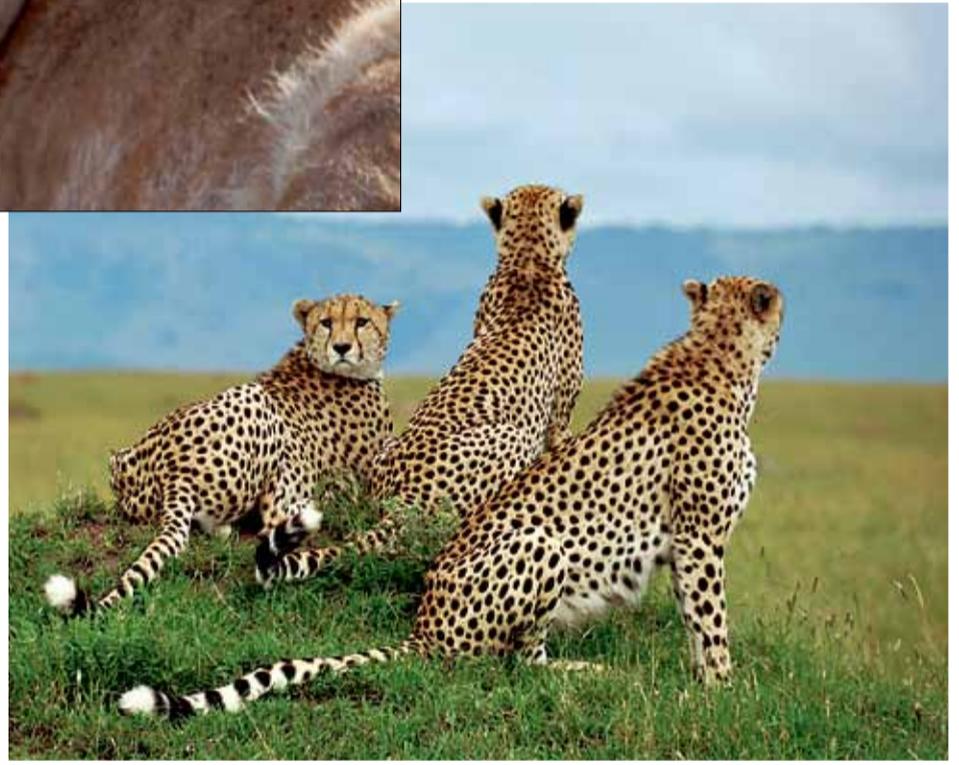
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PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED

on holidays and lie on the beach, this is what I want to do – it's my work, but it's also my leisure. Eventually, hopefully, someone might sponsor me but that hasn't happened so far."

DURING her wildlife photography trips, Latta sees first hand and has come to know more than most about the grave threat to so many of the globe's precious animals. As a consequence, she sees and supports the intrinsic value of zoos – such as Taronga Western Plains Zoo (TWPZ), where later in this visit to Dubbo, she'll be conducting a workshop with children via videolink.

"Zoos play a good role for making children aware of animals to begin with, and that makes them want to learn about animals. But I think the main role of zoos is the breeding programs," she says, citing TWPZ's globally renowned and successful black rhino breeding program.

The conservation of rhinos is as close to her heart as the plight of any endangered species, and she spends much of her "downtime" travelling to China and throughout Asia to spread the conservation message of the threat posed to rhino populations by the illegal trade in their horn. While she's hopeful the message is beginning to gain some purchase with the children she addresses throughout these regions, she's painfully aware that time is of the essence.

"(The turnaround in attitude to the value of rhino horn) most probably won't happen in time but yes, the children I talk to in the international schools are very receptive (to the conservation message) and they're my biggest audience. In one day talking to a school, I can sell more than 500 books, such is the level of interest – and I feel that if they want to have their own book, they want to learn more about that animal – and that has to help."

Latta intends to keep traipsing the planet in search of new material and in a bid to spread the good word on conservation to the next generation of wildlife crusaders – just as long as her back holds out.

"I'll keep going as long as my dodgy back allows me," she laughs, recounting how a particularly hair-raising ride through rural India has left her with a lasting, but unwelcome, souvenir of a tiger-chasing trip to the sub-continent. "I'm wearing a brace at the moment, you know," she smiles.

But it's barely slowed her down, let alone planted any thoughts of retirement. In fact, next on the agenda for this remarkable woman is a trip to Costa Rica in South America, where she plans to begin work on a new project about the sloth.

"It depends on getting the money together, and also on whether I can get permission from the Discovery Channel, which is claiming it has the rights to any and all photos taken of sloths in this particular sanctuary where I need to go. They're doing documentaries there, and while I'm not sure they have the right to make that claim, they're a pretty serious outfit," she shrugs.

"But I have the name of the President of Discovery Channel," she says with those deceptively refined rounded vowels, and smiles that cheetah-taming smile.

And I can't help thinking the Discovery Channel President doesn't stand a chance.

» Jan Latta's True to Life series of children's books are available through her website, truetolifebooks.com.au, or there are copies available for borrowing through the Dubbo branch of the Macquarie Regional Library.



Prospering with cheetahs

ASKED to name her favourite of all the inhabitants in the animal kingdom, Jan Latta pauses not even for a breath.

"Cheetah. Hands down."

And given the incredible photo that's perhaps the best known image of the intrepid wildlife photographer, it's not hard to see why.

The photo – taken in Jan's younger days when she started out on her "new" career some 22 years ago – the photograph remains among her favourites, for having captured what she says was an unforgettable experience.

"It was such a magic moment," she says of the image that adorns not only her website and many of her presentations, but also forms the cover of her book, *Diary of a Wildlife Photographer*, which has recently been updated and re-released.

The shot was taken, in the wild, Latta says, by renowned fellow photographer Karl Ammann, who was both friend and mentor.

"It was back in the days when I was still using film and I'd stopped to change the rolls in the camera. When I looked up, I could see this cheetah coming towards me. I was, of course, quite nervous, but Karl motioned to me with his hands to get down and I instinctively knew I needed to remain calm. The cheetah just sort of flopped down in the grass near me," Latta recalls of the heart-stopping moment.

The following year, when Latta went back to Africa, she prevailed on her friend to see if they could find the cheetah pair again.

"I said to Karl, well, cheetahs are territorial, so if we go to the same area, we might see them again."

And indeed they did. Latta recalls

hearing the low purr of the animals before she saw them.

"I gave my camera to Karl and I just knelt down. That same cheetah just came right up to me again, then its mate did the same. And that's when Karl took that photo. It was taken on the second click of the shutter when the animal turned around because of the sound of the camera.

"It was the most magic moment of my life. You can see how I have my hand on the throat of the cheetah – he was purring so loudly and I was trying to feel the vibration."

Latta says she later learned that one of the pair had been brought to the area as an orphan and had been hand raised by humans before being released to the wild.

"So that, plus the fact that I wasn't frightened, and I remained calm, made all the difference."