

## ■ CONSERVATION

## Trek across country only to face late scratching



Close-up ... Australian photographer Jan Latta travelled across China and arrived just in time to snap these panda cubs, and then, below, one takes a swipe. Photo: Jan Latta

**Wendy Frew**  
Environment Reporter

JAN LATTA'S relationship with pandas is like many long-distance love affairs: instant attraction, followed by a long separation and finally, an emotional reunion.

Over the years, there have been other love interests for the Sydney wildlife photographer and children's author: gorillas in Rwanda, cheetahs in Kenya.

But 10 years after first seeing the rare bear, news that 16 cubs had been born at the Wolong Nature Reserve drew Jan back to China last month.

Wolong, in the heart of China's

giant panda range, was set up in the 1980s by the Chinese Government to research artificial breeding and bamboo ecology in a bid to protect the endangered bear.

After a long truck ride along a half-finished highway with sheer drops to a raging river below, Latta arrived at the reserve late in the day and in the rain.

"I was panicking that I had spent thousands of dollars and I would not get my shots," Latta said.

But after scrubbing up and donning a medical gown she was allowed into the cubs' enclosure for just 10 minutes. It was rough love, with one of the cubs rushing

over to play, ripping her medical gown off.

"Their nails went through my jeans. My left leg was completely covered in scratches," she said.

Latta is not completely blind to a panda's faults: lots of lying around and sleeping, a bit of push and shove for a space up the tree, and a reputation for being hopeless in the sack.

"Pandas are not very good at mating. They are only in oestrus once a year for a short time. The male panda can get quite anxious. He howls like a dog but she might not want to do it."

Along with artificial insemination, Wolong staff have boosted cubs' survival rate by

"twin swapping" - alternating newborns between a panda mother's care and staff nursing.

In April, Wolong researchers implanted a global positioning device in a captive-bred giant panda and released it in the wild, the first such release.

Having begun her career in advertising design before moving to publishing, Latta, now in her 60s, takes a trip each year to photograph endangered wildlife for her children's books about animals.

The trips are expensive and in the short term the books do not pay off.

"But I couldn't think of a better thing to do," she said.