

Jan Latta

The Australian wildlife photographer tells **Kylie Knott** how a face-to-face encounter with a gorilla set her on a path to helping endangered species.

MY LIFE

NEW CHAPTER I was born in Sydney. I travelled a bit when I was young – as most Australians do. I was in advertising, on the creative side, and my husband was asked to set up a company in Hong Kong, so that brought me to this city. But he left Hong Kong – he wanted a gay life – so that was my first turning point. I stayed here – my instincts told me Hong Kong was going to be exciting. I started a boutique publishing company with two English guys and we lost everything with the handover; people cut back a lot on advertising spending. I wanted to relocate to Sydney but my partners thought it was too far away, so we parted company. When I returned to Sydney I wanted to focus on my children's books.

AFRICA CALLING When I was little – 11, 12 13 – my father loved to take us into the bush, build a tent, chop some trees to make furniture, kill a rabbit and cook it and eat wild fruit like blackberries. We lived off the land. I've always loved tent living ... but I also love five-star hotels. There's no in-between. My love affair with Africa started when I was working on the captions for a photo essay in *Regent* magazine by (wildlife photographer) Karl Ammann. His images were mesmerising. I went to Kenya to visit him. I was sitting in his garden and I saw this cheetah wander by and I thought, "Should I say something?" Cheetahs are inquisitive animals but no human has been attacked by one.

While in Kenya, Ammann took me to Treetops Lodge, in the Aberdare National Park. It's a famous tourist spot and was where Princess Elizabeth stayed in 1952 – she climbed up the wooden stairs a princess and came down a queen (the British monarch learned of her father King George VI's death while at Treetops). The other big turning point in my life came when Karl organised for me to see mountain gorillas in Rwanda in 1994. It was quite dangerous because the war was starting to rumble, but my attitude



was, "Well, I could get run over by a bus". So I went.

I had a life-changing moment when I came face to face with a mountain gorilla. My guide told me there were only 600 left in the world and I thought that was sad. I decided to publish books on endangered animals, for children.

AN UNWANTED ADVANCE The encounter with the gorilla became the inspiration for the *True To Life* books. I wanted each book to focus on one animal – mostly endangered – and the animal in the book would, in a way, talk to the children. If I was going to do genuine true-to-life books then I needed to be with the animals in the wild, to observe them and photograph them. I write, photograph (for) and publish the books.

There are 12 in the series including *Lennie the Leopard*, *Ping-Ping the Panda*, *Ollie the Orangutan*, *Elle the Elephant*.

I got advice from scientists and Karl as to where I should go ... if you're following 50 elephants around you have to have a plan of action. I'd write a script – a wish list of photographs. While in Kalimantan, Borneo, I got charged by a huge male orang-utan. We went to a feeding station where the orphans are fed bananas. Suddenly this male bounded out and all the other orang-utans disappeared into the forest. It was an aggressive male and I was clicking away. He was staring at me and then, through the lens, I could see his muscles tense and he charged – 120 kilos of flying red hair. I jumped out the way and my guide started laughing. The big beast was not interested in me but a

female orang-utan behind me. He had mating on his mind. But later in the day I had this beautiful moment that counteracted that scary one. I got a cold bottle of water out and a mother orang-utan with her baby approached me. She picked up the bottle and with her great big hairy hands delicately took off the plastic, undid the lid and downed it all.

MATES WITH PRIMATES I've read many books on three amazing women who pioneered the study of primates – Dian Fossey for gorillas, Jane Goodall for chimps and Birute Galdikas for orang-utans. I've met Goodall and visited Ngamba Island, in Uganda, which Goodall helped establish (as a chimpanzee sanctuary). I stayed in a little tent and each day we went into the jungle with chimps. The first day this chimp ran up my back – he wanted a lift, he wasn't going to walk.

The challenge for me is to tell the animal's story. When you're staying in a camp you have to get used to all the animal noises; OK, that's a lion roaring and that's a hyena screeching. But one morning I woke and there was a sound I couldn't identify. I opened the flap of the tent and there was a huge elephant outside eating leaves ... he was very big and the tent was very small. He had left a big dollop of dung. The kids love it when I talk about that stuff ... pooh is a very important subject to them.

SLOTH FACTS I'm now making videos and spending a lot of time talking about the environment, in schools. This year I visited schools in Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai. Recently I looked into going to Costa Rica. I was researching the sloth – it's such a wonderful animal – and I found a sanctuary I wanted to visit. I e-mailed my travel agent thinking I could do some shows on the road, but I was informed that if I photographed the sloth then I could not publish a book because (television station) Animal Planet had the rights of all the sloths in that country. That sounded crazy to me.

Jan Latta's *True To Life* Books can be found at www.truetolifebooks.com.au.