



F R I E N D S F O R *Life*

Busselton woman Rita Watts can sympathise with the old woman who lived in a shoe. She, too, has so many children she doesn't know what to do. But that is not about to stop Rita and husband Norval from expanding their large family.

Although it may be somewhat crowded at times, the lack of space is offset by this couple's enthusiasm, energy and dedication. They are also very protective of their special babies - special because they have feathers, fur, flippers or four feet!

RITA and Norval belong to the Busselton-based group FAWNA (Fostering and Assistance for Wildlife Needing Aid). It is one of a growing number of similar groups throughout Australia with volunteer members who care for sick or injured animals. They get no financial reward, but, as Rita says, the immense satisfaction gained by nursing an animal back to health is reward enough.

Rita is FAWNA's co-founder, current vice-president and newsletter editor. In 1984, she and friend Amy Cocker formed a mutual support group for animal carers. About 25 people attended the group's first meeting in Busselton. From there, it began to snowball. People from all over the State started calling, wanting to share information, get advice or establish a FAWNA branch in their town or district.

Today, FAWNA operates from Waroona to Augusta, although its 200 members are scattered from Albany in the south, to Newman in the north and east to Queensland. Like similar West Australian groups, FAWNA retains its autonomy while working under the umbrella of the Perth-based Fauna Rehabilitation Foundation.

Although a recognised and Government-approved fauna rehabilitation organisation, FAWNA receives no



funds. In fact, when they are not caring for animals, sewing joey pouches or building bird cages, chances are Rita, Norval and their fellow FAWNA members are busy raising funds. They do it anywhere and in any way they can, from holding garage sales to picking and selling peaches. Add to that the time spent talking to people and in trying to conquer a mountain of paperwork, and you suddenly realise that what started as a retirement interest for Rita and Norval has quickly ballooned into a full-time commitment.

'Retirement?' scoffs Rita. 'We've never been busier!' But they wouldn't want it

any other way. Their life revolves around a cluttered backyard which is home to creatures great and small.

The master in residence is Molly, a pet galah/corella cross, who, like his namesake Molly Meldrum, is an extrovert. He currently shares his kingdom with kangaroos Possum and Henery, ringtail possums Cuddles and Snugglepot, Johnny the galah, six cats, three ferrets, two ducks, a dozen rats, countless other birds - and a dog. Many other weary travellers pass through seeking temporary refuge, and the visitor's book reads like a Who's Who of the animal world. It includes turtles, a sea-lion, bats, magpies, kookaburras and penguins, to name a few.

For the penguins, Rita and Norval's yard is like a luxury resort, where they feed on fish every day and laze around a saltwater pool provided for their exclusive use. But the two current tenants haven't had swimming or sunbaking on their minds of late. After a whirlwind holiday romance, Tuppence and her mate Flip - a pair of Little Penguins - have been busy protecting their newborn twins. Penguins rarely breed in captivity, so the birth understandably generated much excitement in the Watts' household. Norval, according to Rita, was just as nervous and excited as an expectant father!



Rita Watts often plays the role of foster mother to orphaned animals. This frightened ringtail possum soon had a new home in an old ugg boot.

Photo-Gerhard Freudenthaller ▲

When it is able to look after itself, this possum - like all animals in FAWNA care - will be released back into its native habitat.

Photo-John Green ◀

Norval has a way with birds, which form a large part of the Watts' clientele. He has tamed this pet galah and now spends many hours studying penguins.

Photo-John Green ►

This Little Penguin is one of a breeding pair that is hand-fed on fish. This ready supply of food has enabled them to support their two offspring; in the wild, only one of the chicks may have survived.

Photo-Gerhard Freudenthaller ▶



But while caring for animals can be rewarding, Rita says that it can, at times, also be nerve-racking. Like the time a man brought in an injured bird with one wing hanging by a slender thread. Deciding that the wing was damaged beyond repair, Rita bravely volunteered to amputate it. The operation complete, she then discovered that the man, who had refused to remove the wing, was a radiologist at a major surgical hospital!

Then there is the disappointment when an animal dies. 'It can be heartbreaking,' admits Norval, but - taking a philosophical view - 'we are learning all the time. We take a lot of notes and the experience stands us in good stead the next time.'

Releasing the animals once they have recovered can also tug at the heartstrings. But, for Rita, Norval and all FAWNA members, that is the ultimate aim: to

return healthy animals to their native habitat. It is also required by law. Native fauna is protected under Section 14 of Western Australia's Wildlife Conservation Act and there are severe penalties for the illegal taking of, or unlawful possession of, such fauna. Regulation 28 (2) of the Act does, however, allow people to temporarily care for sick, diseased, injured or derelict fauna until it can be released into the wild, humanely destroyed or handed to a wildlife officer.

That is where groups like FAWNA fit in - and they have the full support of the Department of Conservation and Land

Management (CALM). In return, FAWNA and other groups such as WestWhales, support CALM during a crisis; for example, when there is an oil spill or whale stranding. Their members can be quickly and efficiently directed to areas where they are needed most.

'These groups perform a valuable community service,' says CALM's Chief Wildlife Officer David Mell. 'Caring for animals is an activity best carried out by volunteers. It makes people appreciate fauna and gives them a chance to do something to help. They don't want to stand by and watch animals die.'

Is that why people like Rita and Norval Watts devote so much time and energy to their work? 'Yes,' says Rita. 'When you see someone is hurt, you want to help - and the same goes for animals. We feel we have a responsibility to care for sick or injured animals as most of them are, either directly or indirectly, casualties of the human race. They get hit by our cars, for example; they are not being culled by nature.'

But this 'duty to care' is not the only reason for Rita and Norval's commitment to animals. They admit they put a lot into their work because they get so much out of it. 'We are learning to appreciate and respect animals and the environment we share with them - two things which many people take for granted. At the same time, we meet the most amazing people. The animals have really opened up our lives.'

And perhaps that is the best reward of all for this remarkable couple: that by giving life, they get life in return. □

KYLIE BYFIELD

WHO TO CALL

For more information on wildlife care groups throughout Western Australia, contact the

Fauna Rehabilitation Foundation, the Brand Centre, Camboon Road, Malaga. Telephone: (09) 249 3434.

Interested people can also contact CALM's liaison officer Peter Pennings,

50 Hayman Road, Como. Telephone: (09) 367 0220.



LANDSCOPE

VOLUME 4 NO 4 WINTER EDITION 1989



Effluent disposal ponds from industry disfigure an idyllic strip of coastal land. But restoration work and a new conservation park are planned for the Leschenault Peninsula, near Bunbury. Turn to p.8.



Wood that was once only suitable for firewood can now be used to make high grade furniture. Find out how on p.24.



With spring approaching, the bush beckons...but without proper planning your walk could turn to disaster. See p.40.



A spectacular landscape, with an astounding array of plants and animals lies inland from Jurien Bay. Read about the Mt Lesueur area on p.28.



A population explosion of coral-eating snails threatens the unique reefs of Ningaloo Marine Park. How does CALM plan to counter their attack? See p.14.

C O V E R



In W.A.'s far north, Aboriginal rangers with ties to land now in national parks draw on the traditional wisdom of their people for use in Park management. Photo-Robert Garvey

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