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For the Love of the Job

The Babs and Bert Wells photographic collection, numbering 17,470 transparencies, was bought by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in 1994.

These are extraordinary photographs, produced by a partnership between two extraordinary people.

by
Mandy
Clews

The amateur eye may take it for granted, but a professional photographer knows it's a virtually impossible shot. A rainbow bee-eater leaving its nest is captured mid wing-beat, each of its feathers visible in sharp detail, the background showing clear blue sky, green tree and yellow grasses. It's as if this moment—a fraction of a second—froze itself for the camera. This photograph is no accident. It and hundreds of others like it are the result of years of hard work and dedication by international award-winning wildlife photographic team Babs and Bert Wells. The amazing part is that Bert did not pick up a camera until he was 55 years old.

STARTING OVER

Bert Wells first became interested in photography late in life through a hobby course run for staff at his workplace. He describes himself as the dunce of the class, but later, through a long-standing interest in wildflowers and a close friendship with renowned wildlife photographer Michael Morcombe, Bert was encouraged to develop his photographic skills. By 1970, their four children having left the nest, the Wellses decided to take the plunge and retire. After 30 years in a job that Bert said 'bored him sideways', they were ready to embark on a new career and make their love of wildlife photography into a business.

Today, Bert looks back on his role of 'dunce' in that early photography class and remembers a valuable lesson. He says he will never forget how the instructor patted him on the shoulder and told him that in the end, even the best photography was a matter of trial and error.

'Sure enough, when we decided to go professional, we were lucky to get three or four good shots out of a hundred,' Bert says. 'Sometimes you had to accept that the shots you were taking were trial shots, and continually go back and build and improve on what you'd done, and you had to learn early to set the bar pretty high, or you would never be able to compete in the publishing world.'

But compete they did, with considerable success. Bert's membership of the Australian Photographic Society (APS) and the Photographic Society of



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Main: The vivid colours of this shield beetle are captured by Bert's photograph.

Insets: (top) Photographing small species, such as these pygmy possums, was one of Bert's specialities.

(centre) Gould's wattle bat photographed with high-speed flash leaving its nest hole.

(below) A brown songlark feeding its young.

Above: A rainbow bee-eater blasts out of its nest tunnel in the ground. Frozen in time, this image captures what the eye could never see.

America (PSA) enabled him and Babs to submit their work for overseas exhibitions, where they twice earned a rating of fifth in the world by the PSA. Eventually, they established themselves as foundation contributors to the Stills Library of Oxford Scientific Films in England, and to the National Photographic Index of Australian Wildlife at the Australian Museum

in Sydney. These organisations acted as agents for Babs' and Bert's work, reaching publishers worldwide. Commissions also came from the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and from publishers in Japan and Italy.

In the end, Babs and Bert attribute their success to three important decisions. The first was to limit their

Right: Bert's photographic skills captured two honey possums at play—one in flight!

Below right: Up close—the compound eye of a mud daubing wasp. This striking image features in the NatureBase 'Plants and Animals' screen saver.

material to Western Australia. 'We decided to stick with our corner of the world, and do it really well,' Babs recalls. 'We knew we were going to have to spend a lot of time building up our knowledge of the biology of the wildlife we were photographing. A good photo doesn't happen by chance. You have to know your subject in depth, you have to know what you're looking for, where to find it and how it's going to behave, or you're wasting your time. We made Western Australia our focus and scoured every inch of it.'

The second decision was to take no 'ordinary' photos. 'In the early days our business was sustained by the Education Department's demand for film-strip stills,' Bert says. 'Our work was pretty mediocre in those days, and when we stopped supplying the Education Department we made a pretty firm undertaking that we weren't going to take any more ordinary shots. We were going to pursue what was interesting, what was different, what hadn't been done before.'

TEAMWORK

The third and by far the most important decision the Wellses made about their business was to set up and maintain a division of labour within an equal partnership. 'You see a photo of wildlife and if you give any thought at all to how it was taken, you think of a camera with one person behind it,' Bert says. 'It can't be over-emphasised how meaningless the person with the camera is to it all, without the backup of knowledge and support in the field. Not one of these photos would have been possible without the work that Babs put in. Not one.'

Babs describes her job behind the scenes as ranging from camp organiser and cook to porter and field scout. 'We'd be in the bush, in one spot, for weeks at a time getting a shot,' she says. 'The location of the shot might be

A FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIP

A long association between Babs and Bert Wells and staff from CALM's Western Australian Wildlife Research Centre has been productive for both. Babs and Bert not only photographed animals, such as the long-tailed dunnart, sent to Perth from the field; they also joined biological survey expeditions, camping out with wildlife scientists and technical staff and working with them to record the animals of the area under examination.





two or three kilometres away from the camp, and there was heavy equipment, far too much for one person, to be carried all that way. Then while Bert was waiting in a hide or stalking, waiting for hours for the right moment to fire, I'd be out scouting around for the next subject.'

So skilled was Babs at scouting, particularly for birds' nests, that her eagle eye and intuition for finding subjects earned her a reputation among colleagues. Bert describes her as 'a wizard'. 'We used to boast that we could go anywhere, to any spot in WA, and find something exciting and absorbing to photograph, that would keep us interested for hours, even days,' he says. 'Babs' ability to find subjects, especially birds, was uncanny.'

Babs attributes her skill to her love of the subject. 'If you're fond of birds, for example, and I'm passionately fond of birds, you can tell by their calls what they're doing,' she explains. 'You start to know if they're mating or feeding young or just larking about. You just get to know their world as you get more and more experienced at watching them. You know the nest centres them; it's their base and their reason to hang around a particular spot. Once you spot their nest, you have a fix on them.'

A CLOSE CALL

Bab's extraordinary nest-spotting prowess landed them one of their favourite shots, but not without a moment of drama. She had managed to identify, at about 20 metres in the air, the nest of a varied sittella, in a fork of dead wood at the very top of the forest canopy at Dryandra. Bert set about shooting the bird feeding its young, by climbing a ladder to the nest. As he was fiddling with his camera, he didn't notice the

Above left: Babs, deep in spinifex, reporting back to base with her two-way radio after scouting for subjects.

Above right: Bert, high atop three extensions of ladder, sets up a remote high-speed camera focused on a scarlet robin's nest.

Left: Varied sittella photographed in an inverted chick-feeding posture that is characteristic of this species. This shot almost cost Bert his life.



ladder was teetering. Suddenly he realised that the ladder had left the tree and was swinging back. He was about to fall 20 metres to the ground.

'I reached out and it was through sheer luck, will power, and a sort of super-human strength that my fingertips managed to stretch to reach a little branch and pull myself back to safety,' Bert recalls. 'If that little branch had snapped, I would not be here now. It was something I shouldn't have done, letting safety slip. . . . But how else would you get a shot like that?'

It is technically and aesthetically an excellent photograph. The shot shows the bird in the act of feeding its young. Included in the frame is the fork of the dead branch into which the nest is

Top: Bert setting up the 'Wells high-speed special' to photograph the flight of a female Dawson's burrowing bee as it returns to its nesting burrow. (Above) The resulting photo.

wedged—a significant feature of sitella nests—and Bert notes with some satisfaction the good colour balance. 'Even the bird matches the colour of the nesting material,' he observes.

TIME AND MOTION

As Babs was becoming more and more expert in the biology of the wildlife they pursued, Bert too was entering a new dimension of expertise, with the use of the high-voltage, high-speed flash. This was developed from vintage equipment that had been

From top: This sequence of four photographs of the flower wasp's mating ritual won Bert the Scientific Professional Photographer Award.

phased out of use because of its unwieldy weight (and its tendency to electrocute the user). The special technique to balance daylight and synchronise the high flash speed (1/10,000 of a second) with the relatively slow speed of the shutter (about 1/60th of a second) was pioneered by Michael Morcombe. Michael's results in capturing the flight of birds in sharp detail set new standards in the quality of wildlife photography. Very few Australian photographers had both the passion



and the priceless antiquated equipment required for the technique.

Bert took this a step further by designing and assembling modern equipment that enabled sharp, close-up, high-speed flash shots of insects in flight. The 'Wells Special' could be hand-held, or placed on the ground or on a tripod, and fired with a button switch at three frames per second. Many shots were wasted, as the insect flew into and out of the frame, but often a top photograph was achieved. A sequence taken with this unusual array of gear, of a flying male flower wasp attracted to a flightless female, won Bert a Scientific Professional Photographer Award. This winning photographic sequence captured the species' mating ritual—a phenomenon that has never been witnessed close up before or since.

CHARACTER

The 'Wells Special' may be a custom-made marvel of ingenuity, but Babs considers the achievement of the spectacular flight photos to depend equally on the character of the photographer. 'Bert took shots of the burrowing bee that were an epic of

Left: Pollination of the rose mallee by a yellow-throated miner. This image was taken with an obsolete high-speed flash at 1/10,000 sec.

Below left: A pebble-mound mouse emerging from its burrow.

Below: A southern yellow robin landing at the nest to feed its young.



determination,' she recalls. 'He had to lie there on his stomach, stock still, for two hours to get those shots. That takes a rare kind of determination, steadfastness, and patience. You have to have the expertise, but you have to have some very special personal qualities as well.'

The combination of unusual personal qualities that characterises Babs' and Bert's partnership has been vital to the remarkable scope and depth of their work. Babs' knowledge, passion for her subject, and organisational skill provided the perfect complement to Bert's determination, artful eye, steadfastness of purpose, and limitless patience. Added to this winning combination was a profound love of their work.

Babs and Bert have now retired, but the fruit of their labour resides with CALM and can be found in almost all issues of *LANDSCOPE*, and in many other CALM publications. The collection plays an essential part in CALM's community education program, with many of Bert's photographs used to increase awareness of WA's native plants and animals. From nature conservation and forestry to tourism and recreation, the collection is a major resource that is treasured by CALM and all those who are continually captivated by wildlife. Bert's photographs of threatened mammals can be found in publications for CALM's wildlife recovery program *Western Shield*. The collection also provided the foundation for CALM to produce its popular *Bush Book* series—full-colour pocket guides to plants, animals and special places of WA. Similarly, images from the Wells collection can be seen in full colour on CALM's NatureBase website, and in the free screen savers available for downloading across the Internet.

Though professionally Bert has closed the lens of his camera, his many photographs, coupled with Babs' rich knowledge, have left a pictorial legacy for Western Australia and the world.

Mandy Clews is a freelance writer and a regular contributing editor to *LANDSCOPE*.

All photographs by Babs & Bert Wells/CALM.

A RARE MOMENT

The hand-written catalogue that comes with the Wells collection documents the huge range of wildlife and covers more than 20 years of work: mammals, fish, crustaceans, insects, reptiles and plants of every description. Because of their broad public appeal, photographs of wide-eyed furry mammals tend to make it onto posters and into magazines and books, and become the best-known and most widely exposed examples of a wildlife photographer's work. This is as true of the Wells collection as it is of any other. But these are not the challenging or interesting shots for Bert.

'Mammals are a passive subject,' he says. 'There's nothing stimulating about snapping off a roll of film of a bunch of captive sitting ducks. Amateurs can do that, and they're welcome to it. The real art in photography is in getting rare shots, of rare moments.'

One exception to Bert's general disaffection for mammal photography was an occasion when they photographed a long-tailed dunnart that had been discovered in the Gibson Desert. The animal had been thought to be extinct. The specimen was sent down to CALM's Wildlife Research Centre at Woodvale, and Babs and Bert were commissioned with the task of getting it on film.

Rock specimens and sand from the habitat had been sent down with the animal. Babs and Bert set up a mock habitat in their studio, using materials sent and samples of spinifex from Kings Park and Botanic Garden. Night after night they got up at 3 a.m. to catch the nocturnal animal while active. It moved, in Bert's words, 'like greased lightning'. Every time the dunnart darted behind the rocks, Babs chased it back out into view again. Finally they got the shot: tail sticking straight upwards and all in the frame, demonstrating the length of the tail at two-and-a-half times the length of the body. No one has taken such a photograph before or since.



Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

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What does the future hold for our karri forest? Research provides some interesting insights. See page 18.



The photographic excellence of WA team Babs and Bert Wells was driven by a love of the job. See page 10.



'Growing Gnangara Park', on page 35, continues the story of WA's largest proposed outer suburban native parkland.



Many WA women have played important roles in the conservation of our natural resources. Some of them feature in our story on page 41.



Partnerships are important. Many private sector businesses and individuals are active partners in protecting our natural heritage. See page 47.

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COVER

The Dampier collection returns briefly to Western Australia for an exhibition at the WA Museum. The specimens' scientific interest is limited, but their historical significance is immense. The illustration is of the *Sturt-pea*, and Dampier was the first person to collect this unusual but magnificent plant. (See page 28)

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



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