


People in profile

Story by Samille Mitchell
Photographs by Jiri Lochman





When now-renowned Western Australian wildlife photographer Jiri Lochman submitted an image for possible publication in *LANDSCOPE* 25 years ago, he sparked a long relationship with the magazine that has seen his photographs published in all but three of the *LANDSCOPE* magazines ever to be produced. Along the way, Jiri has built a reputation as one of the country's foremost wildlife photographers. The beginnings for his distinguished career were formed as a child in Czechoslovakia from a love of animals and a strong conviction to fight

Wildlife photographer for what he believes in.

Jiri Lochman

Wildlife photographer Jiri Lochman is not one to gush; he says it straight, to the point. But talk to him about Australian wildlife and you may just note a sparkle in his eyes that belies his depth of feeling for the subject. For Jiri is a conservationist first and foremost. Photography is simply a way to spend time with animals and enlighten others about their beauty and need to be conserved. He'll reject photographic assignments if he feels they could harm an animal. He'll wait for hours, days, even weeks for an animal to show itself rather than scare it out to be photographed. For Jiri, the animals always come first.

Jiri's strong sense of right and wrong was apparent even as a kid growing up in communist Czechoslovakia. At 12 years of age, he staged his first environmental protest by insisting the family do away with Christmas trees—he had calculated how many trees were killed each year simply to adorn households for a few days. His parents complied with his wish, much to the chagrin of his older sister. This early passion for the environment and wildlife led to his first job as a zookeeper in Liberec Zoo.

As a young adult, Jiri had one other passion—song writing. However, the



Czechoslovakian communist regime punished him for writing humorous protest songs by banning him from working in anything but a communist-dictated job. His career at the zoo was over, his passport taken, his future dim. So, in 1977, Jiri and his partner Marie fled their homeland and took up refuge in Austria. They were wed in an Austrian refugee camp near Vienna in the 11 months they waited to be accepted by Australia. They requested Australia for their future home, firstly, because they knew no-one here and could establish themselves independently and, secondly, because Jiri was enamoured of the Australian wildlife.

“The North American fauna was similar to the European fauna and in all of the Czech zoos there were only four or five species of Australian mammals—I wanted to see more,” Jiri says.

New beginnings

So it was that the young duo first set foot on Australian shores in Sydney. With virtually no English language ability, they embarked on an intensive English course before finding jobs—Jiri at a turkey breeding farm and Marie at a caravan park. Whenever they could wangle a day off together they'd set out into the bush. So taken were they with what they saw that within six months the Lochmans had saved enough money to buy their very first camera to capture the sights on film—a Nikon FM, and they continue to use Nikons today. While Jiri describes his first photographic efforts as “terrible”,



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Main The beach stone curlew (*Esacus neglectus*) is a rare inhabitant of remote beaches.

Above Jiri spotted this red-bellied black snake (*Pseudechis porphyriacus*) curled on a little track in north-eastern Queensland and laid himself beside it with his close-up lens on ready.

Left Jiri followed this short-beaked echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*) through wandoo woodland until it climbed into a tree stump hollowed by termites to have a little nap. Jiri waited nearby, and it paid off; he took this image as the echidna checked for signs of danger before leaving its temporary domicile.



Above When feeding is good parrots can be quite blasé about their safety. This male red-winged parrot (*Aprosmictus erythropterus*) definitely liked this native hopbush, as he allowed Jiri to photograph him from a very close distance.

Right Aerial antics of dragonflies are easier to watch than photograph. The graphic flutterer (*Rhyothemis graphiptera*) is one of the most vividly coloured Western Australian dragonflies.



it wasn't long before the photos began to improve.

Another six months later and the couple had scratched together enough cash to buy a car—and freedom. They quit their jobs and set off around the country. They travelled south from Sydney, then via the Birdsville Track to Queensland and to Cape York where they spent four months photographing and exploring the great wilderness. Next they journeyed across the top of the country to Kakadu and then on to the Kimberley, working occasionally to fund their travels. They marvelled at vast wetland plains, hiked among ancient cathedrals of rock and gazed in wonder at Australia's unique plants, insects, mammals and birds. It was a grand time—when few people ventured to these then relatively untouched corners of the country—and the Lochmans revelled in the richness of the natural surrounds.

A home in Perth

Some two-and-a-half years after they set off, the Lochmans arranged to meet a friend in Perth. They reached the outskirts of the city around Bullsbrook at about 2am and decided

to pitch a tent for the night before entering the city the next day. With uncharacteristic effusiveness, Jiri recalls: "When we woke up the next morning we looked out of the tent and there were kangaroo paws all around us, dew on all the plants and everything was in bloom. We felt like we were waking in a paradise." With that first impression of Perth, the Lochmans knew they had found a place to call home.

Keen to establish themselves and continue to indulge their passion for animals, Jiri approached Perth Zoo for a job and it wasn't long before he was working as a zookeeper with the carnivores. But Jiri had his sights set on another part of the zoo—the nocturnal house which housed the Australian mammals he so adored. He eventually fulfilled his ambition but by then photography had become more than a hobby and Jiri and Marie took the plunge by quitting their jobs once again and forging a career from photography. It wasn't long before their stock library, Lochman Transparencies, was born.

Passion for photography

While Jiri and Marie had already been selling photos during Jiri's time at the zoo, Jiri's first paid photographic assignment was for one

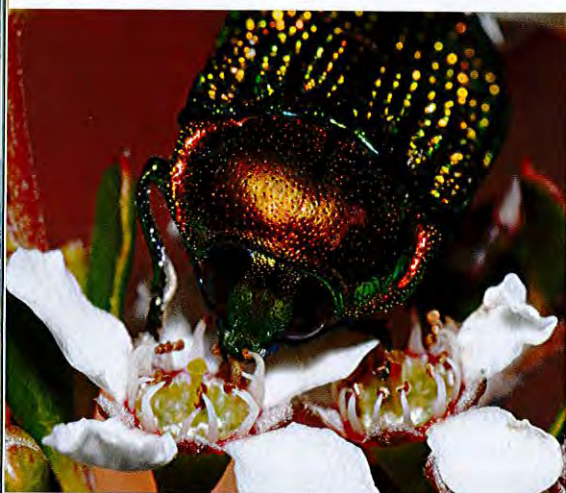
of the Department of Environment and Conservation's predecessors, the Department of Conservation and Land Management. He was asked to photograph Perth lakes for a *LANDSCOPE* article. Jiri and Marie also photographed their first book for the department—the original publication of *Wild Places, Quiet Places* about the south-west's parks and reserves.

He notes a photographic assignment for *Australian Geographic* in Western Australia's Karlamilyi National Park, formerly Rudall River National Park, as a particularly memorable one. "It's all about having the opportunity to be there with the animals, in their environment, and with the people who care," he says.

Not that it's all plain sailing. In fact much of the job is about waiting, waiting and waiting. Jiri refuses to interfere with his subjects, so, rather than flush a creature out of its burrow, he will simply wait—sometimes days—for it to appear. Given the nocturnal habits of many Australian creatures, much of this waiting is at night, with some shift changes in which Marie takes over while Jiri catches some sleep. He remembers photographing southern bush rats (*Rattus fuscipes*) in New South Wales from a hide.



Above Jiri was originally photographing one yellow-footed rock-wallaby (*Petrogale xanthopus*) when the second one appeared and, for the briefest moment, posed allowing Jiri to take this amazing shot.



Left Some Australian jewel beetles, such as this *Stigmodera gratiosa*, have such gem-like qualities that in the past they were sought by jewellers.

Below right Freshwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus johnsoni*) are usually very shy, but this one stayed on the surface allowing Jiri to take a couple of successful images.

However, on this occasion he had already taken lots of photos so decided to leave Marie sleeping and the camera gear unattended while he dozed for a couple of hours. Upon awakening, he returned to his hide, waited for the bush rat to reappear and began to photograph but the flashes didn't fire. He checked the equipment, waited and waited for the bush rat again, and attempted to photograph it once more. Again, nothing. It turned out the bush rat had chewed through the cables while Jiri dozed nearby.

Despite the trials of his profession, Jiri says it's aglow with highlights. He marks being the first person to photograph a live monjon (*Petrogale burbidgei*) as a memorable moment in his career. The recent publication of his book *Wildlife of Australia* and winning an *Australian Geographic* award for excellence in photography, together

with Marie, also rate a mention. But for Jiri the best part is simply being in the bush: "Every time I'm out there with some animal—that's the highlight," he says.

Passion for conservation

While Jiri has no regrets about his career, he is saddened by a decline in wildlife across the country. He remembers visiting the north-west Kimberley in the 1980s and early 1990s and photographing abundant mammal life in many places. However, return trips in the late 1990s and 2000s yielded dramatically different results. He observed that many places where wildlife once abounded now seemed all but deserted. He remembers a sad visit to one of his favourite rainforest patches where he once photographed the northern quoll (*Dasyurus hallucatus*), scaly-tailed possum (*Wyulda squamicaudata*), golden-backed tree-rat (*Mesembriomys macurus*), Kimberley rock-

rat (*Zygomys woodwardi*), common rock-rat (*Z. argurus*) and sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*). However, by 1999 all but the northern quolls had disappeared. "We returned again in 2001 and spent four nights there," Jiri says. "I barely slept, as I was incredibly eager to disprove the sad observation from our previous visit. This time even the northern quolls were gone, we did not see a single one. The nights were eerily silent, no rustling in dry leaves, no movements in the trees, nothing but dead silence."

Rather than deter him from his job, the animals' plight makes Jiri all the more determined. Armed with his cameras, he is doing his bit to help stem the decline. As he wrote in a *LANDSCOPE* article about being a wildlife photographer (see 'Animals in my lens', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1990-91): "The biggest task of any wildlife photographer is to open this sometimes unfamiliar world to those who are interested, and who, for various reasons, may not be able to experience it firsthand. Wildlife photography plays a major role in the conservation of endangered species. For example, few people have seen the giant panda but, thanks to photography, most of us know what it looks like. Without this change of the unknown into the familiar, motivating sufficient interest to save threatened animals would be difficult, if not impossible."

With this belief in mind, Jiri plans to continue his mission to show animals in their most beautiful light. In doing so, he will be playing his part in preserving the Australian animals that first captured his heart in a Czech zoo more than 40 years ago.



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