A photograph of two finches, likely Australian finches, at a water source. One finch is in the foreground, facing right, with its beak open as if drinking. The other finch is in the background, facing left. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding environment. The background is a warm, reddish-brown color, possibly a sunset or a fire. The overall mood is serene and natural.

Holiday with a heart

Taking part as a paying volunteer on a 'science safari' with Department of Environment and Conservation scientists proved an exhausting, yet rewarding, experience for two long-time *LANDSCOPE* subscribers. Here they share their experiences in the field on Lorna Glen former pastoral lease in the rangelands of Western Australia.

by Win and Ernie Walker

We've been subscribing to *LANDSCOPE* magazine for 25 years and had always wanted to join a *LANDSCOPE* Expedition but our farm in Burekup, about 20 kilometres east of Bunbury, kept us too busy. It wasn't until we sold up and moved to Augusta that we finally found the time. Unfortunately, by then the expeditions had ceased, so we were thrilled to hear about a similar participative-style 'science safari' which the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) was running in partnership with a commercial tour operator.

This new 'voluntour' would visit Lorna Glen, a former pastoral lease near Wiluna now managed for conservation, for 10 days in May 2012. As paying volunteers, we'd have the opportunity to help DEC scientists release golden bandicoots (*Isodon*



auratus) into the wild for the first time in that area as part of the *Operation Rangelands Restoration* project. Also, a large percentage of our tour fee would be donated to DEC to help with its research and conservation projects.

We're both in our 70s, love nature and really liked the idea of going on a holiday that would enable us to give something back. By joining this trip, we could help the scientists, indulge in

our favourite hobby of birdwatching, bring our own caravan, have our meals cooked for us, meet some new friends (both human and animal) and make a donation to a worthy cause. So we signed up for our first 'voluntour'.

North-bound

Travelling at a leisurely pace, we made our way to Lorna Glen, a remote homestead about 1,100 kilometres north of Perth, not far from the famous Canning Stock Route. Situated on a vast swathe of scrubby, rocky land in a semi-arid area, Lorna Glen was once a successful sheep and cattle station. Today it provides a base for keen scientists and a handful of visitors. It offers rustic but comfortable facilities consisting of a wooden bunkhouse adjacent to the original homestead with 'loos', hot showers, a communal kitchen and a small research laboratory.

Along with two other couples, we 'voluntourists' set up our tents, caravans, camper trailers and dining tent in a camping area in the bush, a short walk from the bustling hub of round-the-clock scientific activity at the homestead. After meeting up with the rest of the group and with our hosts Jan Barrie, Jeremy Perks and Rebina Criddle from award-winning tour company Global Gypsies, we took a stroll to explore the area around the camping area, homestead and airstrip.

The rusted, abandoned farming equipment brought back memories of our own beloved farm.

Previous page

Main Zebra finches are among the varied birdlife at Lorna Glen.

Photo - Jiri Lochman

Insets

Left The semi-arid landscape at Lorna Glen.

Right DEC's Christine Fleay with a mala pouch young.

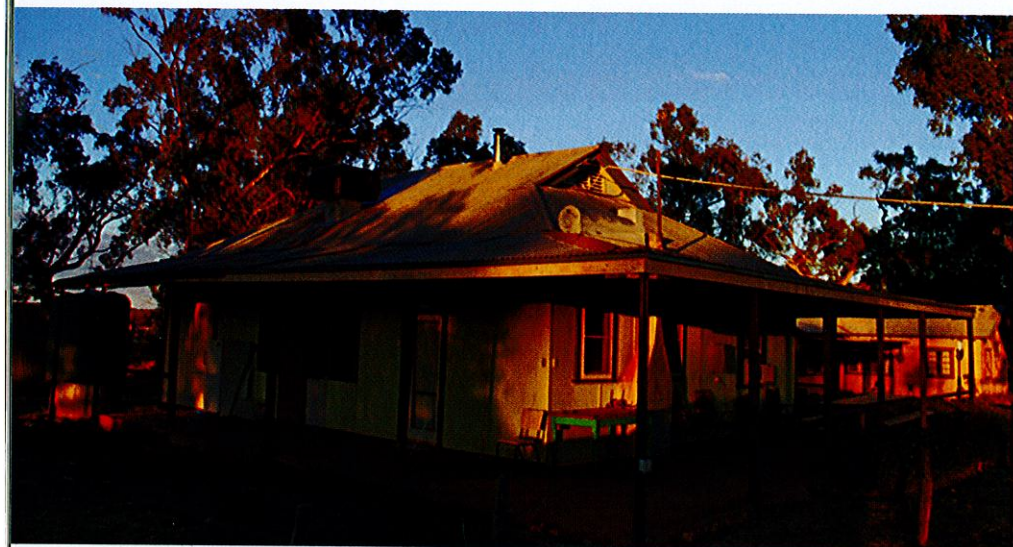
Photos - Judy Dunlop/DEC

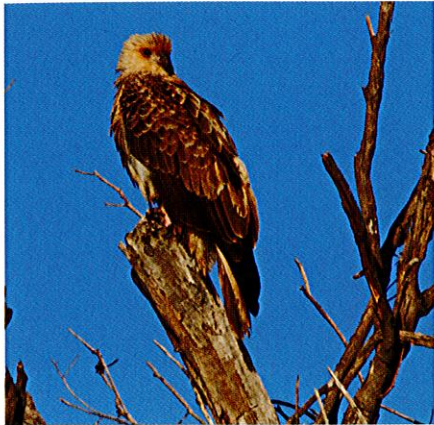
Above left Lorna Glen homestead.

Photo - Simon Cherriman

Left 'Voluntourist' Win Walker tracks animals by listening for the soft 'beeps' indicating they are alive and well.

Photo - Jan Barrie





Above Whistling kite.
Photo – Simon Cherriman

Right 'Volountourist' Ernie Walker releases a golden bandicoot.
Photo – Jan Barrie

Below right A boodie pouch young.
Photo – Judy Dunlop/DEC



It made us sad to think that many of the younger generations would never experience the wonderful lifestyle we had so enjoyed on the land, but we were pleased that DEC was putting this lovely property to such good use.

Science is hard work

After the first of many excellent dinners, we got stuck into the hard yakka of helping the scientists.

The DEC team was led by senior principal research scientist Keith Morris, assisted by scientists Colleen Sims, Tamra Chapman and Madison Read. We were so impressed by the team—they were all experts in their respective fields, such lovely people and totally dedicated to wildlife conservation and rehabilitation.

Keith explained the background to the *Operation Rangelands Restoration* project and the program for the next few days and gave everyone a list of tasks—we never realised how much work a scientist has to do. It's certainly not all about cuddling cute little creatures—much of it is undertaking repetitive animal measurements, entering data into databases, cleaning or repairing equipment, and attending to the ever-present email requests. Keith pointed out that the focus of our attention,

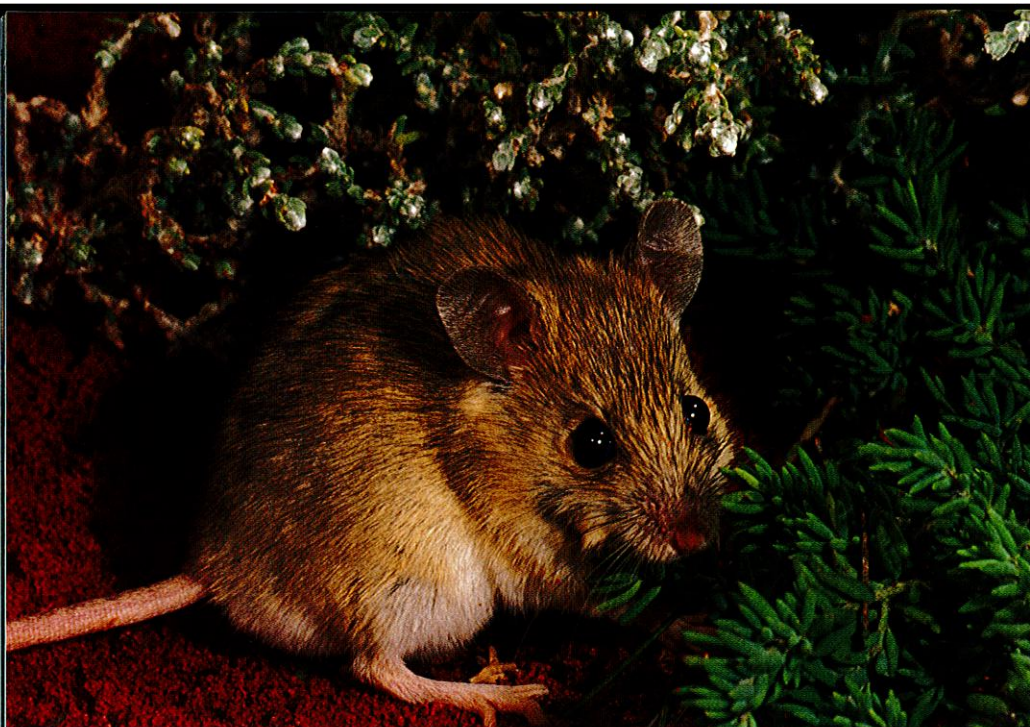


the golden bandicoot, was now mostly extinct on the Australian mainland and only occurred on a few offshore islands. The bandicoots at Lorna Glen had come from Barrow Island in 2010 (see 'Giant steps: industry and conservation make history through Gorgon', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2010).

During the tour we helped with a range of jobs including cleaning, baiting and setting traps; retrieving captured animals; transporting animals back to the laboratory; recording their

weight, gender and other information; attaching radio-collars and microchips to their tiny bodies; and, of course, releasing them and tracking their progress.

We also took soil and flora samples at boodie (*Bettongia lesueur*) warrens to determine moisture and nutritional value; helped map and measure these warrens; set up cameras ('critter cams') to record overnight animal activities; and assisted the Lorna Glen managers,



Left Shark Bay mouse.
Photo - Jiri Lochman

Above Two golden bandicoot pouch young.
Photo - Judy Dunlop/DEC

Tony Woods and Rowena Connolly, with various property maintenance tasks such as boundary fence inspections.

Our days usually began at dawn and didn't finish until dusk, when we enjoyed well-earned drinks and snacks around a campfire, followed by a delicious dinner and a debriefing. In between our 'voluntasks', we took time out to go four-wheel driving, have a bush picnic at a waterhole, enjoy sundowners at a beautiful rocky outcrop and birdwatch.

To our delight we had numerous sightings including a crested bell bird (*Oreoica gutturalis*), western bower bird (*Ptilonorhynchus guttatus*), zebra finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*), black-faced cuckoo shrikes (*Coracina novaehollandiae*), wood swallows (*Artamus* sp.), white-browed babblers (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*), rufous whistlers (*Pachycephala rufiventris*), button quails (*Turnix* sp.), barn owl (*Tyto alba*), numerous honeyeaters and parrots as well as wedge-tailed eagles (*Aquila audax*), kestrels (*Falco cenchroides*) and whistling kites (*Haliastur sphenurus*). It was birdwatcher's heaven, although the highlight of the trip was releasing the bandicoots into the wild.

Catching the critters

But first we had to catch them! After considerable preparation, we began setting the 'traps', which weren't at all like the traditional steel snapping variety we had pictured. We used two varieties: one an Elliott box type trap, the other a Sheffield cage trap—we called them 'bandi-coops.' More than 100 of these were set inside an 1,100-hectare fenced enclosure

designed to keep feral cats and other introduced predators out.

The animal was enticed into the trap by a sweet peanut butter and oatmeal treat. Once inside, a small wire door dropped down, preventing the creature's escape. Our target captives were golden bandicoots but we also caught boodies, brush-tailed mulgara (*Dasyercus blythi*) and Shark Bay mice (*Pseudomys fieldi*).

We set the traps at night and needed to be up before sunrise to retrieve the occupants and quickly transfer them to the lab for processing. With our help, the scientists then recorded a range of data and, in some cases, attached radio-collars or microchips in readiness for their release and subsequent monitoring. Over the 10 days of our tour, we captured more than 200 animals. All were weighed and measured, and all but 48 of the bandicoots were released back into the fenced compound.

There was much excitement when the 48 bandicoots were finally due for release back into the wild, outside the fenced enclosure. After dinner one evening, rugged up against the cold, we drove to a bush location called Possum Lake. Our vehicles were full of bags containing bandicoots caught the previous night who would soon be set free on a dark moonless night when they would be safest from predators. Afterwards they would be observed and monitored to see how they were adapting to their new environment.

We gently removed our furry little friends from the vehicles and carefully

carried them to a preselected spot among spinifex grasses and acacia shrubs. Then, crouching on the ground we released them, one by one, and watched them scurry away in the darkness to their new lives in the wild. It was a wonderful and rewarding moment and we wished them well as they began their journey. Then, over the next few days, we helped monitor their progress using sophisticated radio-tracking equipment. It was a tremendous thrill to hear the electronic beeps indicating that 'our babies' were alive and well, and that our efforts had been successful.

We had such a good time on our first voluntour that we decided to join a similar Global Gypsies trip in November to the Yongernow Malleefowl Centre. There is also another DEC science safari scheduled to Lorna Glen in 2013.

Win and Ernie Walker are long-time LANDSCOPE subscribers and nature enthusiasts. They were paying volunteers on the science safari, run by Global Gypsies in conjunction with the Department of Environment and Conservation.

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