



Touched by nature

Never ending story ...

the timeless photographs of
Babs and Bert Wells



As Angela Bartle looks through her collection of old family photos, it is not the snaps of early family holidays that draw her attention – although these are extremely precious. It is the beauty and quality of the photos of Western Australian plants and animals that she sees with a whole new appreciation. These are the photos taken by her mother and father – Babs and Bert Wells – the international award-winning photographic team who started their photography career as retirees and left an amazing pictorial legacy for WA and the world.

words by Tracy Shea

photos by Babs and Bert Wells

As a child, Angela and her three siblings – Jim, Felicity and Penney (dec.) – were taken on regular family trips to the bush, where a love of nature and wildlife became a big part of their lives. But it was not until their father Bert retired in his late 50s after 30 years working at the Repatriation Department that he and his wife Barbara ‘Babs’ started a new life traversing the WA outback photographing its glorious and unique wildlife. Little did they know that their photographic work would have such a profound impact on how Western Australians see the State’s plants and animals.

LATE BLOOMERS

Angela recalls the teamwork of her parents as they found their passion for photography. “Dad didn’t pick up a camera until he was 55, but it opened a whole new world for him and my mother and gave them new purpose after bringing up four children,” Angela recalls.

“When we were young we took for granted what Mum and Dad were doing, but now I can appreciate the patience, teamwork, and largely self-taught skills that went into getting the perfect shot – and they would never settle for less than that.”

Though Bert took the photographs, he insisted that his beloved Babs got equal credit and always said that none of the photos would have been possible without the work Babs put in. He made it a condition of use of the photos that Babs’s name came before his in photo credits.



Babs had an amazing ear for bird calls, and could reproduce them with an uncanny likeness. She could distinguish species by their calls from long distances, and used to scout ahead for the next subject while Bert was taking his photographs.

Babs became an expert in the biology of the wildlife they sought to immortalise, while Bert’s incredible understanding of what was needed, without formal training, was highlighted by his development of the use of the high-voltage, ultra high-speed flash. The results from his equipment made from ‘bits and pieces from here, there and everywhere’ impressed photographers and confounded electronic boffins. As son Jim explains, “Its use was not without some excitement, as Dad described to us that he received many a body-jolting zap while standing waist-deep in a swamp, out-warbling the reed warblers”.

This special technique to balance daylight and synchronise the high-speed



flash at 1/10,000th of a second with the relatively slow speed of the shutter (about 1/60th of a second) was pioneered by their friend, renowned photographer and bird expert Michael Morcombe.

Babs and Bert also forged a strong association with the then Woodvale Wildlife Research Centre (now part of Parks and Wildlife), which saw them photograph plants and animals and join biological survey expeditions to work with scientists and technical staff in recording wildlife.

WORLD CLASS

During the illustrious second chapter of their ‘working’ lives Babs and Bert Wells captured many remarkable moments that saw them receive international accolades, including being twice recognised as fifth in the world for their contributions to exhibitions by the Photographic Society of America. One of their best-known shots,

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Previous page

Main Dawson’s burrowing bee.

Insets anti-clockwise from right Babs scouting for subjects with her two-way radio; Bert Wells; red-capped robin pair with their young; Bert setting up a shot for an image of the Dawson’s burrowing bee.

Above left The coveted transparency collection is housed with Parks and Wildlife in boxes handmade by Bert.

Above An emu with its chicks.

Left and far left A male wasp pollinating an Arrowsmith spider orchid (*Caladenia crebra*).





the photograph of a rainbow bee-eater blasting out of its nest tunnel in the ground (which appears on the cover of this issue of *LANDSCOPE*), is a one-in-a-million image of what the naked eye could never see.

Bert's photograph of a male wasp pollinating an Arrowsmith spider orchid depicts the concept of synergy in nature; the orchid emits a powerful sexual odour similar to that emitted by a female wasp and attracts the male wasp to 'mate' with it, resulting in the orchid being pollinated. Bert's photo captures this moment and helps the viewer learn about the 'tricks' and adaptations used by plants to ensure the survival of their species.

PHOTOGRAPHIC LEGACY

Despite the huge advances in photographic technology since they were plying their craft in the 1970s and 80s, Babs and Bert Wells's images have retained their relevance and continue to 'hold their own' when compared with professional photos taken today, based on the skill required and composition.

By the late 1990s, Babs and Bert had retired, but their photographic legacy found a new home at the then Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) – now Parks and Wildlife – where the photos are used regularly in website design, Facebook stories, education materials, *LANDSCOPE* articles and the department's many publications. The hand-written catalogues that came with the 'Babs and Bert Wells Collection' of photographs cover more than 20 years of work and includes treasured photographs of mammals, fish, crustaceans, insects, reptiles and plants of every description.

In 2001, at the age of 84, Bert again launched himself into unfamiliar territory when he mastered (with some help from daughter Felicity) the use of word processing as well as photo scanning and manipulation, and wrote the autobiographical account of his and Babs's photographic adventures in the bush. The book includes stories of people they met, encounters with strangers and some trips with CALM scientists, all richly illustrated

with their favourite photos. He called this 357-page, two-volume book *The Never Ending Story*, and it was completed and self-published in 2002 as a private family record.

Bert and Babs passed away in 2003 and 2011 respectively, but they left a profound mark on the natural history of WA, and their collection remains unsurpassed as a photographic record of the State's wildlife.

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Top left Western swamp tortoise.

Above left A pair of red-eared firetail finches.

Above A south-west pygmy possum with her young.

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'Touched by nature' is a new feature that tells the stories of people who have used their experiences in nature to enrich the lives of others.