



Bush Buddies and Scaly Mates

by Rhianna King

Bush Buddies and Scaly Mates – two of Perth Zoo’s Close Encounter experiences – take visitors behind the scenes to meet some of WA’s favourite native animals.

Each time I go to Perth Zoo I marvel at how it’s possible to get within a few metres of animals that you would normally have to travel many kilometres (and oceans, in some cases) to see, just five minutes from Perth’s CBD. And Perth Zoo’s ‘Close Encounters’ program offers visitors a number of different opportunities to go behind the scenes, and get even closer to some of the Zoo’s most popular, and engaging, residents.

UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Recently, I joined a ‘Bush Buddies’ and ‘Scaly Mates’ session, which are designed to provide participants of all ages with the chance to meet some of Australia’s native animals (of which the Zoo houses 121 species). The sessions were held in the Discovery Yard – an area tucked away just inside the Zoo entrance and not normally open to the public, and were hosted by discovery activity leader Claire Gaskin. Once inside the first of two gates at the



ready to start our Bush Buddies session, we discovered that Nolga was as happy to see us as we were to see her, as our arrival heralded a feed. We held out branches of woolly bush and hibiscus for her to nibble on and were able to pat her and feel her soft fur.

During each session, Claire used both the Noongar and English common names to refer to the animals. Each animal had its own given name too. Depending on what day you're there, you'll meet Jarrah, Fern and Ivy the tammar wallabies, and Kai or Tarlin the echidnas as part of the Bush Buddies session. Clove the shingleback skink and Wayne the woma python come out for the Scaly Mates session, which gives visitors the opportunity to meet some of Zoo's resident reptiles.

FUN FOR EVERYONE

I have been lucky enough to do a behind-the-scenes experience at Perth Zoo before, when a group of friends chipped in and bought my now-husband and me an interaction with one of the Zoo's Sumatran tigers as an engagement present. This was an experience I will never forget; coming face-to-face with one of the world's most powerful animals was just incredible, and having the opportunity to meet one of the keepers charged with looking after it made the experience even more special. While I would never dream of inquiring how much the gift cost, this was undoubtedly a 'top shelf' present, reserved only for special life events. However, at just \$10 per person per session, Bush Buddies and Scaly Mates are an affordable way for people to enrich their visit to the Zoo. And it would make a terrific birthday or Christmas present; gift vouchers are available online or by contacting the Perth Zoo.

Each session lasts 15 minutes, which is perfect for families. The interactive and hands-on format provides participants with a memorable experience, but they are ideal for younger children who have a shorter attention span.

The keepers who host the sessions are adept at tailoring their talk to the needs of the audience and catering to

differing ages, and they are generous with their knowledge and more than happy to answer questions. Occasionally they are interrupted by the squawks of the black cockatoos in the nearby cage who insist on letting you know they're there. But this only adds to the 'Aussie charm' of the experience.

The keepers are also seasoned at introducing reptiles to those who need a bit of help warming up to them.

Perth Zoo runs the Close Encounter programs as part of its work to engage and educate the public about wildlife conservation. And they're proving very popular – last year more than 9000 people took part. Nine of the 12 experiences are accessible to people with mobility issues and other disabilities.

Left The 'Bush Buddies' and 'Scaly Mates' sessions cater to visitors of all ages.

Below Clove the shingleback skink.
Photos – Perth Zoo

Do it yourself

Where is it? Perth Zoo is a five-minute drive from Perth's CBD at 20 Labouchere Road, South Perth WA 6151

Bush Buddies is held at 12.15 and Scaly Mates is held at 12.45 on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturdays. The maximum group size is 12 people.

Each session is \$10 per person and children aged under 12 must be accompanied by an adult ticket holder (16+). Children under two can attend this experience for free. This fee is in addition to Perth Zoo entry fees.

Contact: For more information, call the 24-hour information line on (08) 9474 3551 or visit perthzoo.wa.gov.au



Hear more about the Close Encounters at Perth Zoo

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife Service's 'LANDSCOPE' playlist on YouTube.



Discovery Yard – a system designed to keep the animals in and unauthorised people out, Claire implored us to do a 'tail check' whenever we took a step. This provided some insight into just how close we were going to get to the animals.

She then entered the yard and gave Nolga, the resident western grey kangaroo, the command "station". Nolga took her cue and hopped over to a position in the centre of the yard, which enabled us to enter safely. Once we were inside, and