



## Born to be wild

She's led an adventurous and charmed life, from hitchhiking through Africa to living in the Canadian Arctic. It's all a long way from her home town of East Fremantle but, as **Mark Irving** discovers, Lyn Hancock has no intention of slowing down.

Picture: Lee Griffith

SHE HAS TRAVELLED the North-West Passage in a rubber boat, been chased by a grizzly bear, sat in an eagle's nest 50 metres up a tree for nine hours and played foster mother to a plethora of orphaned wild animals such as seals, raccoons and cougars ... it's a lot more adventure than any graduate of Graylands Teachers College in the 50s could reasonably have expected.

But then Lyn Hancock (nee Taylor), who made the transition from Graylands dux and teacher in suburban Perth to intrepid travel writer-cum-author, has adventure writ large in her genes. In the 1890s in London, her paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Wickens, saw an advertisement in *The Strand*. "Migrate to Western Australia," it beckoned. So she did. On a whim. She arrived in WA on her own after her sister got cold feet the night before the ship sailed.

Seventy years later, her granddaughter Lyn also set off to see the world, also on her own after a friend pulled out at the very last minute. The trip had been planned a while. "My grandmother gave me six shillings a week and I saved it every week from age eight to 18 to get away from Australia," she recalls.

Her "escape" came a few years later in April 1960 when ship was the usual means of transport back to the Old Country. Another idea came to her when the ship berthed in Cape Town: why not get off in South Africa and hitchhike to Britain? "The captain wouldn't let me go — it was a very turbulent time in South Africa — but I sent my luggage on to England and jumped ship. I do a lot of things by whim."

You can say that again. Two years later and a week away from returning to Perth and a job at Graylands, she accepted a wedding proposal in Canada on a first date. He was a young wildlife biologist and they were in

his light plane counting eagles above Vancouver Island. "You're the first girl I've taken up who hasn't got airsick," David Hancock told her. "Will you marry me?"

"Met the perfect man," she telegraphed her startled parents in East Fremantle. "Please prepare a wedding for next Saturday."

She duly became Mrs Lyn Hancock and became passionately involved in her husband's work while working as a teacher to support themselves. She got a couple of university degrees, too. Oh, yes, they also started a wildlife rehabilitation centre for injured and orphaned animals.

Then one night David woke up and suggested they steer a rubber boat through the North-West Passage — the fabled sea route through the Arctic Ocean. It didn't quite work out (they got divorced before they were able to complete the marathon expedition) but it did lead to 25 years in Canada's far north. There she made a name as the person to whom government agencies, airlines with in-cabin magazines and companies who wanted their exploits publicised would turn.

"I was there at the very beginning of a lot of things," she says. "I was constantly moving, doing trips all the time. BHP would take me around in their Lear jet while they were trying to get permission to put in a mine — the first diamond mine in Canada. I was very lucky. I survived on my wits and writing every day. I had enough food and I had shelter and if I didn't I'd sleep with the dogs. I had a charmed life."

The peripatetic lifestyle obviously suited her. She happily lived in fishing lodges and tents on the tundra. Now 71, she's back living on Vancouver Island where she juggles writing books and travel articles with giving lectures and writing workshops at schools. Lyn recently gave one such presentation at Liwara Catholic Primary School in Greenwood. She may be in her eighth decade but she shows no signs of slowing down as she enthalls her young audience with the magic of writing about the animals she had cared for in her early years in Canada.

"I survived on my wits and writing. I had enough food and shelter and if I didn't I'd sleep with the dogs." **Lyn Hancock**

Her menagerie was extensive. It started with a young fur seal which washed up on Vancouver Island. The local aquarium didn't want him. "I was teaching, so I took him to the classroom ..."

The event made the local newspaper and before long an orphan bear cub, a raccoon, cougars, an injured eagle were all deposited with the aspiring biologist and wife to care for. "Eventually, we had the first wildlife rehabilitation centre." She had enough cougars to send two to Perth Zoo.

Such experiences led in 1972 to her first book, *There's a Seal in My Sleeping Bag* (reprinted nine years ago), followed by 19 others, including one about a raccoon she adopted.

Canada is home now but she'll be back in Perth again soon. A list of projects here awaits her attention, including two family histories — when she can find time. "I'm just living life to the fullest every day," says this self-proclaimed rolling stone. "But I don't seem to get enough writing done." ❧