My Life In The Zoo

The diary of Lyn Hancock, who somehow manages to be not only a housewife but also a mother to an amazing array of animals

Weekend Magazine
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A typical day for Lyn Hancock is often exhausting, but never dull. Top, L to R: The coatimundis (this one is either Pixie or Pete), Gypsy the gibbon and Bubu the bear demand Lyn's attention; Gypsy swings in the kitchen without regard for crockery; and could Lyn be telling the fur seal: "Sam, you made the pants too long?" Bottom, L: Scarlet the macaw hangs out with the wash and, R, cougar Tom watches intently as Lyn splashes in the bath.

Photos by Dave Hancock

WHAT DO I do with a day? It's a constant puzzle. When I was a full-time teacher and only a part-time housewife, animal keeper, writer and secretary, I used to envy the "lucky" housewife who could spend all day at home. What a lot she must get done. Now that I am in that category myself, I am always wondering where the day has disappeared.

Scene: The Hancock home and "Wildlife Conservation Centre", in Saanichton, near Victoria.
Time: A typical day.
Main characters: Gypsy, the gibbon (orphaned when her mother rejected her and broke her arm); Bubu, the bear (orphaned when some loggers burned out her den and her mother ran off); Chimo, Chica and Tom (month-old cougar kittens also rejected by their mother); Scarlet, a macaw (50 years old or more. She loves my husband and hates me); Sam, a fur seal (washed up on the beach six years ago); Pixie and Pete, two smart coatimundis (appealing creatures with long inquisitive noses); Porky the porcupine (who has a gargantuan appetite); Pierretta, the Canada goose (who came one day but won't go away); David, a husband (who comes and goes — mostly goes, doing his bit to save the world); me, the wife.
Supporting characters: Ducks, eagles, falcons, sea birds.

7 AM

Bubu the bear, on the back porch, wakes me up with her penetrating cries for breakfast. She is caged at night as she has the disturbing habit of climbing the shelves in the pantry. Bear cubs cry disconcertingly like babies and require just as much attention, probably more. I lie in bed and listen to her cries for half an hour then give up and get up. From her perch on the TV set, Scarlet the macaw whispers her morning soliloquy as I dress.

"Hello. How are you? What's your name? My name is Hancock." As I leave for the kitchen to prepare the bottles, she calls out a shrill "Goodbye". Gypsy swings into action as I pass her pen, and tries to strangle me into stopping, by reaching through the wire and winding her long arms around my neck.

In the kitchen I plug in the electric kettle to boil the water for the cougar formula, sterilize the bottles, then mix in the vitamins and calcium additives with the milk. A big bottle is prepared for Bubu; medium bottles for the three cougar kittens; and a little bottle for Gypsy. While the bottles are being warmed, I put Scarlet, with her day's supply of sunflower seeds and water, onto her perch in front of the house where she can spend the day talking to the beachcombers and rock hounds. On the way back to the kitchen, I turn over the barn owl and falcon eggs in the incubator and check the temperature.

8 AM

I feed the cougar kittens. Chimo drinks eagerly and purrs like a motorboat as he nestles into my hand and sucks on my arm. Chica needs coaxing and Tom has to be force-fed to get the right amount of nourishment.

I change Gypsy and wash her in the sink, getting

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Gypsy creeps into bed and curls up. She squints out of one eye to see if I'll let her stay

washed myself in the process. (I haven't house-trained her in the usual sense like dogs and cats, so she wears diapers.) Then with Gypsy clinging to my back I pick up Bubu on the porch and try to stand upright under her onslaught for the bottle. The three of us continue to the compound where Gypsy and Bubu play around my legs and get in the way while I try to do the chores. Sometimes I stumble from pen to pen dragging one bear and supporting one gibbon.

8.15 AM

I cut up the fruit and vegetables for Porky and the coatis, Pixie and Pete, who chitter to me in welcome as they walk tightropes upside down in their enclosure. With Bubu and Gypsy following behind me and a bucket in each hand, I first feed Pixie and Pete who climb all over me as I open the door. They are the most inquisitive creatures I know. Their long noses ferret into my hair, my ears, my nose. They have an excellent knack for opening doors. But after finding them sitting on the ledges of the falcon pens one day and looking down onto the falcons which they had displaced, we devised a door system which has so far withstood their ingenuity. They are warm, friendly creatures but impossible to keep in the house, because they are so active and curious. Last time they paid a visit they chewed right through the telephone wire and I was cut off — literally. Porky would like attention too, but how do you pet a porcupine? Next I feed the pigeons, the ducks and Pierretta the Canada goose.

Recently a Japanese television network sent over a team to Canada to interview David for a teach-in on pesticides to be held at Tokyo University. Part of the interview was filmed in a field behind our research centre while Dave was strolling along with Bubu. Most of the sound had been taped the previous night — before the producer, the only one of the team who could speak English, had rushed off to Texas on an urgent assignment.

The two gentlemen who were left communicated mostly in bows and smiles. Imagine their surprise when out of the nearby woods ambled a goose. It was Pierretta on her morning stroll. After a monologue of honks from Dave, the goose joined the conversation and ambled along home with the bear. I am sure Dave will be labelled the Konrad Lorenz of Canada when the film is shown in Japan — The Man That The Wild Geese Follow!

Back to the preparation room to fill a bucket with at least 25 pounds of herring for Sam the fur seal. He shares a very large swimming pool with some sea birds and a California gull who originally had a broken wing but stays around now because he probably never had it so good in the wild.

About this time Bubu usually gets into some kind of scrape. Bears have a nose for trouble. She tries climbing up the wire sides of the sea-bird pen. Climbing up is easy and a stroll on top of the roof looking down at the other animals is fun. But how does she get back?

First she leans her nose over the edge and looks down. Now how did that ground get to be so far away? She then turns around and tries to dangle her back legs over the edge, keeping a strong grip on the roof with front feet. No, that's no good either. Perhaps by running up and down along the roof she'll find a better place that's closer to the ground. By this time her cries are so pitiful I get a ladder and rescue her myself.

The birds of prey are next. I hack up the chicken into pieces suitable for the size of each bird. A messy job, but I've come a long way since that first time when I would close my eyes, put one hand behind my back, and madly mangle away. Gypsy usually watches all these operations from her stranglehold on my neck, so I have to put her forcibly onto the ground when I feed the birds. As many of these species are endangered in the wild, and Dave is hoping to breed them in captivity, I prefer not to upset them by barging into their enclosures with bears and gibbons. Yesterday's remains are collected, water is renewed and new food is placed on the ledges. Baldy, the eagle with the amputated wing (amputated because some hunter shot it) kacks out her morning greeting.

Most important now is cleanup time, when all the utensils and buckets are scrubbed, the floor is swept, the garbage collected and the chicken and fish laid out to thaw for the following day.

9.30 AM

Bubu and Gypsy follow me back into the house. Protesting volubly, they are deposited in the pen in the living room while I skim through some housework and prepare the bottles for the second cougar feeding. Gypsy is the most playful, swinging on the ropes and along the bars while Bubu climbs up on the middle shelf and falls asleep — oblivious to Gypsy, who kicks her occasionally with her swinging feet.

10 AM

While I have a cougar in one hand and a milk bottle in the other, the phone rings. A local school group wants to come out on a field trip. Details are discussed and written down.

I am just about to sit down with the second cougar when the phone rings again. Could David address an anti-pollution group the following month?

10.30 AM

The door bell rings just as I am massaging the rear end of the third cougar to encourage it to make a bowel movement. Mother cougar would encourage bowel movements as she groomed them. Cougar in hand, I go to the door. It is a visitor who wants a bucket of water and the use of the phone.

11 AM

The mail arrives. I pick up some bottles and papers left by the previous day's throng at the beach, deposit them in the garbage can, then go into David's work room to sort out the mail. Scientific journals are quickly catalogued, articles of importance are marked and clipped for Dave's attention, photos are viewed and classified.

Noon

I realize it is about time I had breakfast so I grab my favorite meal, malt bread and cheese, in one hand, and I sterilize bottles and nipples with the other.

I give Bubu and Gypsy a run around the house for exercise. They chase each other under beds, behind chesterfields, behind the stove and into the bath. Whenever Bubu gets too obstreperous, Gypsy has the advantage that she can shinny up the curtains and swing from the curtain rods well out of the cub's way. Bubu contents herself by chewing at the covers of the chesterfield.

With Gypsy for company, I race off in the car downtown to pick up the chicken from the poultry processors and the fruit and vegetables from the supermarket. I leave some room in the car for Sam's herring which I collect from the rented locker.

3 PM

Gypsy and the cougars are fed again. Bubu is having her afternoon nap. I settle down to the typewriter to continue writing the current chapter in my book. The phone rings again. A high school student wants help with a school biology project. I suggest she come around and use Dave's library.

5 PM

I leave the typewriter and open the fridge. If Dave is home, I spend about five minutes thinking about the evening meal. If he is away I cut off a slice of ham and several slices of cheese, then settle down to peruse the evening newspaper over a cup of coffee.

I clip the articles of interest to Dave then take Bubu and Gypsy down to the beach for a brief romp. Bubu usually has to be carried down to the sea, well away from the house, because when allowed out her first thought is to go back inside again. But once far enough away from the front door, she follows close behind.

Back at the house, she gets another bottle and is put back in the pen with Gypsy. By now Gypsy's metabolism has slowed considerably. She curls up on the top shelf and tries to sleep.

When she's awake, Gypsy really wants the security of a mother, so her favorite position is hanging around my neck. A gibbon tightly wrapped around your neck is somewhat of a hindrance to typing, especially when she prefers to sit on my lap rather than hang from my back and look over my shoulder.

Scarlet the macaw is brought in from outside the house and cracks open sunflower seeds from her perch on the TV to my right. Bubu alternately sleeps and plays in the pen to my left; the cougar kittens practise walking in their funny little uncoordinated leaps and bounds on the living room carpet at my feet and the book goes on. (It obviously won't be finished this year unless I go off on retreat somewhere.)

8 PM

The phone rings. There is an otter in Oak Bay by the Esplanade. It is sick and washed up on the beach. Will David go and pick it up? I race out to the compound to grab nets, gloves and a pen. It is dark by the time I arrive but I can't find any people or any otters. I return to the typewriter.

Midnight

Gypsy by this time has crept into my bed and is curled up between the sheets. I turn on the light in the bedroom. She squints out of one eye to see if I'll let her stay for the night. But I know Gypsy. She will lie quiet and cuddly till daylight, then will leap into action by swinging on the curtains and pulling the clothes from the hangers in the closet. I harden myself, wrench her off my neck and deposit her in the living room pen, where she cries for a while then forgets and goes to sleep till morning.

12.10 AM

David arrives home on the last ferry from the mainland where he has been working on our next wildlife film.

2.30 AM

The front door bell rings. It can't be a burglar — he wouldn't knock. Probably it is a couple whose car needs to be towed out of the sand dunes at the beach. No. It's a gentleman who has run into a thin and emaciated barn owl on the highway. It seems stunned.

"Can we do anything for it?" he asks. There are no bones broken. We feed it and put it in a dark box till morning.

And then it is the morning of another day.◁

Before Lyn gave up teaching this year to write a book her class met Baldy, a one-winged eagle.

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