





WORDS Lindy Schneider | PHOTOGRAPHY Kate Baker

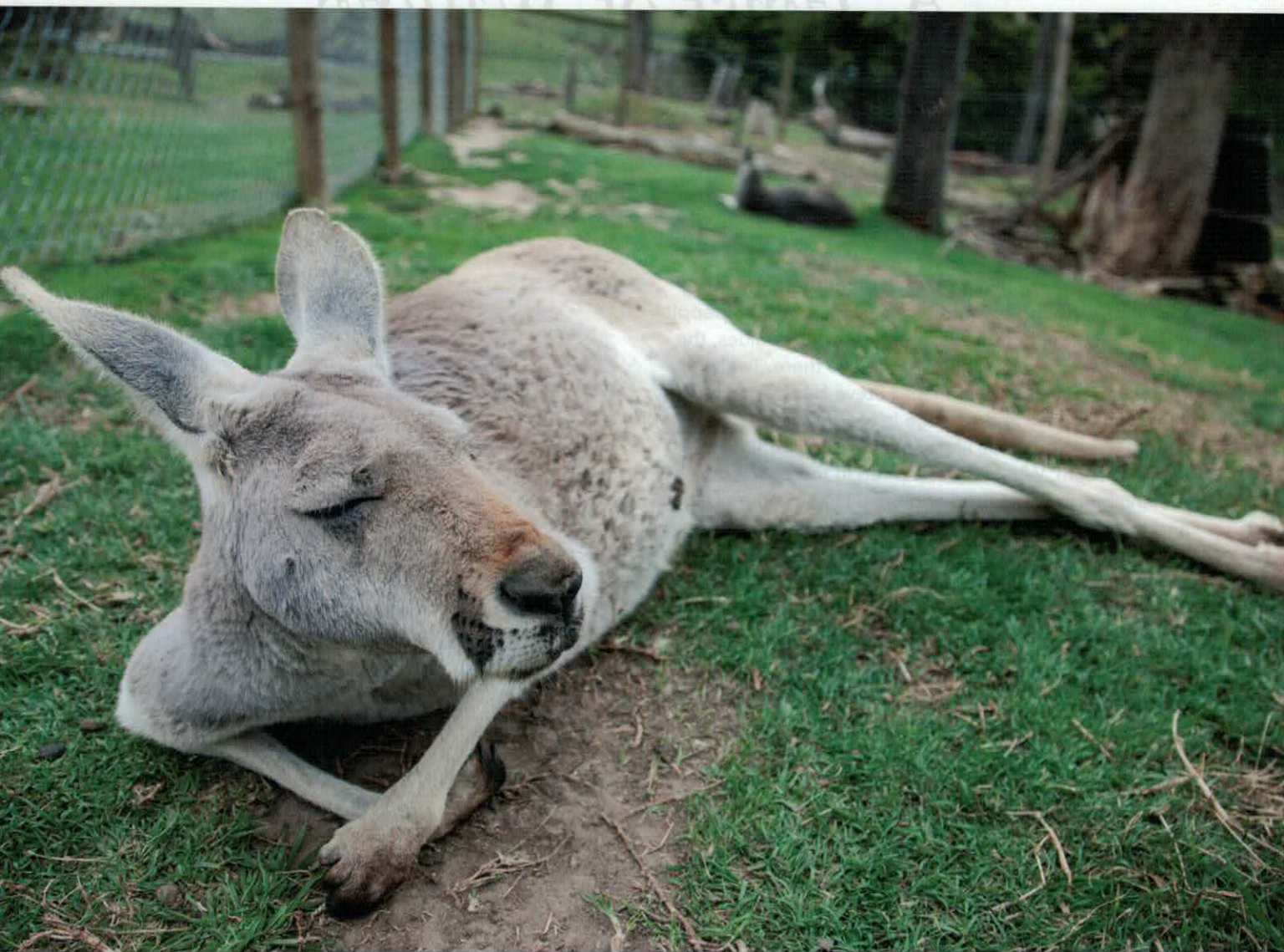
A Twist of Willow

A PRIVATE ZOO WITH REAL MEANING

Some family homes take on lives of their own. They shape around the interests and quirks of the people they shelter and become expressions of the values, the drive and the dreams of those who live there. Twelve years ago, when Loo Scoon and Steve Handy purchased an old farmhouse and acreage in Mount Evelyn, they sought a relaxed rustic lifestyle and space for their family to roam. What has transpired in this space is truly remarkable. A home, bed and breakfast accommodation and the added feature of a private zoo give this property a unique twist that delights visitors and provides a sense of meaning and purpose for 12 locals who work as 'zoo keepers' through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

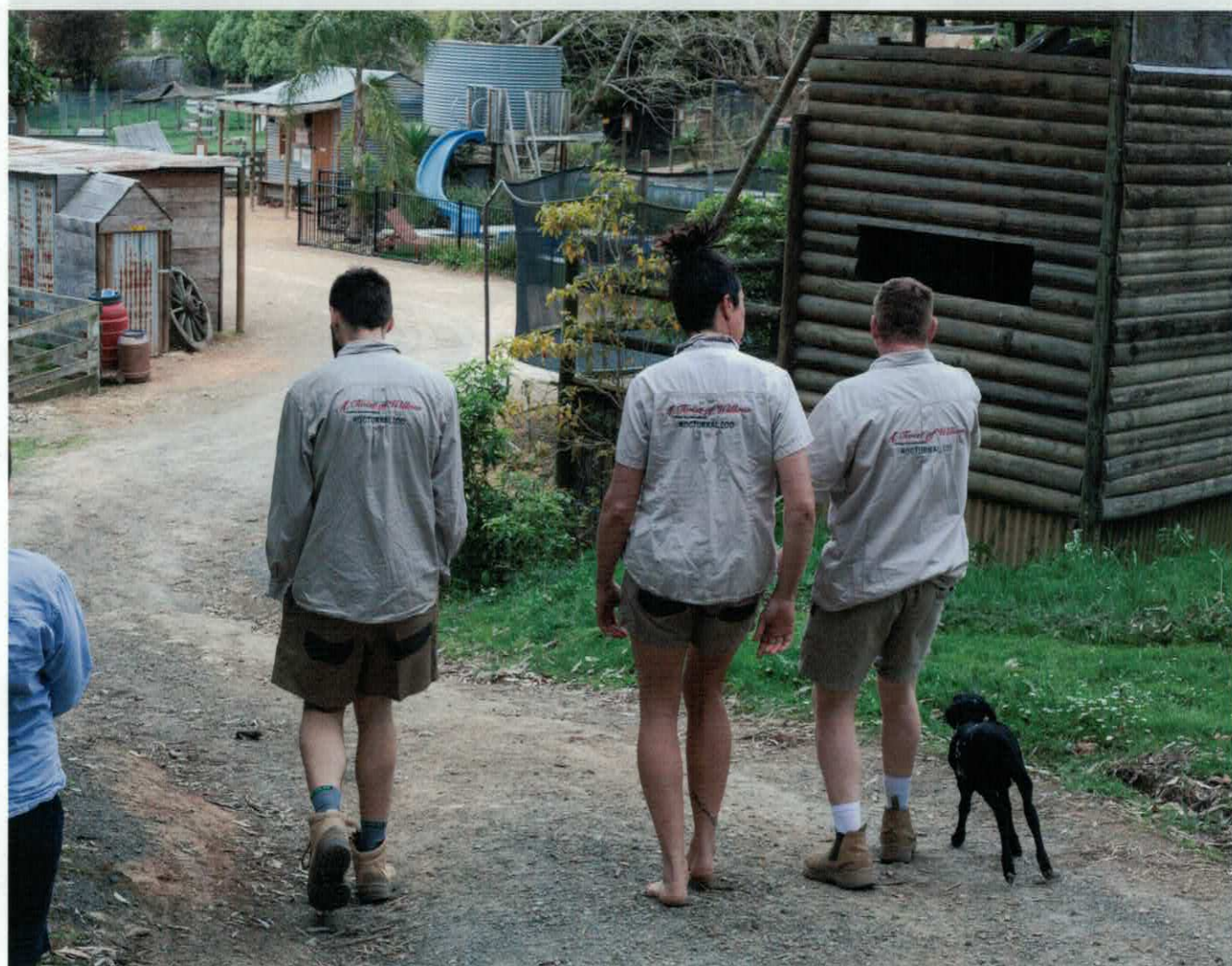
Loo and Steve have both worked for the Department of Human Services for 25 years, and Steve also has a background in building and construction. Together they have created a bespoke destination that attracts thousands of Australian and international guests every year. 'A Twist of Willow Bed and Breakfast' is thriving despite their low-key approach and modest street front profile.





The original 'Little John Estate' 1930s farmhouse is home to their family of four boys aged between nine and 25 years of age, and three grandchildren including one-year-old twins. At night, it's also home to a pair of Macaw parrots, a baby lamb rejected by its mum, and any number of family pets, or wildlife, needing extra care! An original walnut tree planted by the Little John family is still abundant, but the backyard has, quite literally, gone wild.

Loo and Steve started with the desire to offer self-contained farm-stay accommodation and planted an orchard of 100 citrus trees. The accommodation was designed and built with their own hands, on weekends and after hours, and features recycled timbers and iron throughout. The blackened timber floors are reclaimed from an old wool shed in the city, and the exterior facades take on a rustic, almost pioneer, feel with scorched timbers and pitched rooflines. The interiors blend modern features and convenience with the thrill of an antique find from the local recycled building supplier. Leadlight insets in doors, a grandly swathed, four-poster bed, restored antique dressing tables and gilded frames provide focal points in rooms that invite rest in hotel-like, linen-clad beds and deep sofas. The old stables have been converted into an outdoor lounge and BBQ area, and a crystalline pool sits within the grounds like an oasis. The zoo started as an idea and soon took on a life of its own with farm animals and wildlife living in and around this bush-and-pasture landscape.



"The Nocturnal Zoo is an experience we offer our guests. It's not open to the public, but when people stay with us they can enjoy immersive experiences with a wide range of beautiful animals, birds and reptiles that are literally outside their door," says Steve, who has installed CCTV to the rooms so guests can tune in and watch Wilbur the Southern hairy nosed wombat, or the sugar gliders, at any time of the day or night. "We offer a tour at dusk, and people can be part of the animal's world – see them in a real way. I want people to understand how active nocturnal animals are so we all take extra care on the roads."

Down wandering paths, past built habitats that blend with the landscape and make use of reclaimed and upcycled materials – a covered Hills hoist provides excellent shade! – Loo and Steve's zoo keepers delight in introducing you to everything from tawny frogmouths, to alpine dingos, to potaroos. There are wallabies and roos with joeys, spotted quolls, pademelons, kookaburras, wombats, emus, parrots, bettongs, owls and more. The farm animals include peacocks, chickens, horses, rabbits, geese and sheep. In the reptile section blue tongue lizards, snakes and bearded dragons rest sleepily and the crocodile basks in the sun next to the swimming pool, a pane of glass separating him from guests. "Where else can you laze by a pool in view of a crocodile?" laughs Steve.



bird in gravel shilliw bird electric mail glow row, sh to shi





Caring for so many zoo residents is a mammoth task and in addition to several staff members, the NDIS Disability Support Work program is essential to the high quality of life Loo and Steve provide their extended animal family. "Our zoo keepers are front and centre, they come every day and they know the animals and their care regimes intimately. It's empowering for them – they are integrated into society and included in everything we do," says Loo. "And it's wonderful for our visitors to see the zoo keepers doing what they love."

Sustainability is a high priority and the zoo keeping team help with growing vegetables and native grasses to feed the animals. "When the zoo keepers fill in their daily task sheets they write 'fed a quoll, picked grasses and measured the feeds, groomed the horses, showed people the roos.' It's like a dream job!" says Steve.

"There is something about our small scale and the amount of human interaction our animals have that makes them super chilled around people, so there really is an up-close-and-personal experience," says Loo. She has marvelled how the zoo keeping team, who are all differently abled, have bonded together, and with the animals. "They have time, and patience, and they connect in a profound way with the animals. It's a mutually beneficial situation where people who might not interact much in the broader community are part of something they are truly proud of. They are showing people from all over the world what they can do."



This afternoon Loo and zoo keeper Sophie are buying new collars for the dingos before taking them for a walk on the Warburton Rail Trail to continue their familiarisation program. The hours spent building and managing the accommodation, the many training sessions, registrations and approvals they have successfully gained have all led to this, and they are enthusiastic about the prospect of getting out in their community and furthering their education and outreach work with children.

"It's a lifestyle," says Loo, "a crazy, fun, chaotic, rewarding lifestyle that empowers people and values every person and every animal equally. We've done it all ourselves and we love sharing our backyard bliss." •



