

Karen Coombes rolls over sleepily in the bed of her Malanda home in North Queensland and opens her eyes. Sun streams into the room and she sees a tree kangaroo joey perched on the bed next to her, munching hungrily on a branch of leaves while staring intently at her.

A second joey snuggles under the covers, while yet another sleeps soundly on top of her, encouraging Karen to lie in bed a little longer. A fourth joey, an early riser, has hopped off the bed and is exploring the bedroom.

"People will think I'm nuts but yes I wake up to four tree kangaroos each day, often trying to clean my arms and face and talk to me," Karen chuckles. "They love human warmth and interaction when they're little and they thrive better by sleeping in bed with me because normally they'd be in a pouch 24 hours per day and have the constant heartbeat and warmth of their mothers," she explains.

While many people have never even heard of tree kangaroos, a unique Australian marsupial found only in small pockets of rainforest in North Queensland, Karen has dedicated her life to rescuing and rehabilitating sick, orphaned and injured tree 'roos'.

After she playfully wrestles the joeys out of her bed, Karen takes the younger babies out to the lounge

room for their first bottles of special macropod formula for the day, while she sips on a steaming cup of tea.

"When they're very young, I do three- or four-hourly feeds throughout the night," Karen explains. "If I do occasionally have a couple of nights off and someone else is caring for them, I'm worried about them and can't sleep. I need to have a tree kangaroo to cuddle up to ... no offence to my husband," she laughs.

Karen, a veterinary nurse, and husband Neil, a carpenter, moved to Malanda 20 years ago and built their home on a sprawling 65-hectare property, much of it lush rainforest teeming with cassowaries, possums, pademelons and, of course, tree kangaroos.

Shortly after settling in the Malanda area, located 90 minutes southwest of Cairns, a local wildlife carer introduced them to the native species of tree kangaroos, known as the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo. A second species, the Bennett's tree kangaroo, lives further north still in the idyllic Daintree Rainforest.

For Karen, it was love at first sight



Lillie, a blind tree kangaroo in Karen Coombes' care, gets her daily cuddle

and she immediately began taking in rescued tree roos that had been hit by cars or mauled by dogs, but she was surprised at the lack of information available about the animal.

"Many Australians don't even know tree kangaroos exist," says Karen, who completed a PhD in 2005 at James Cook University, documenting the ecology of the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo species. "When I started my PhD, I even had one family member say, 'I think you've been sitting in the rainforest smoking too much dope!' Well, I don't smoke dope," Karen laughs. "And then I got the usual 'Oh, aren't they drop bears?' kind of comments."

As the couple became known in the area and demand grew, Neil built

Tree Kangaroo Mum

several outdoor enclosures as well as a small hospital, while Karen monitored the ongoing care of the animals and set up the Tree Roo Rescue and Conservation Centre – a not-for-profit organisation that would allow her to raise much-needed funds.

WHEN I ARRIVE to meet Karen, she's busy unloading a ute load of leafy branches, which she tells me is only one day's supply of food for the 16 tree roos currently in her care. She beckons me into the hospital, which looks more like a holiday cottage, to meet one of her charges.

"This is Lillie, one of our big babies," Karen says, bending to pick up a plump, eight-kilogram tree roo resting on an old couch. Looking rather like an oversized possum but with an extra-long tail, Lillie snuggles into Karen's neck, clearly enjoying the cuddle.

"She came in as a youngster, blind and with eye damage," Karen explains. "She'd been attacked by a dog and had a fractured ankle that turned into a bone infection. She comes in the house every day and is a star on our Facebook page. Neil brings her up about five in the morning, and she climbs on the ropes and shelves, that's her playtime."

With the hospital at capacity, Karen then leads me through her house

READER'S DIGEST

and into the laundry where a tree roo, recently hit by a car, sits lapping at a bowl of water. Turning its dark face towards the door as we enter, it looks at us expectantly, but it's clear from its misty eyes that this one is also blind.

"Because of the hotter and drier weather we're having, the rainforest is stressed and so are the tree kangaroos," Karen explains. "More and more we're getting tree kangaroos coming in with central blindness and optic nerve damage, which may be caused by increased toxins in the rainforest leaves due to a lack of water."

It's just a theory at this stage, but Karen is working closely with pathologists at Charles Sturt University to document and study the eye damage from eye tissue samples taken from deceased tree kangaroos, and is hopeful of finding answers.

She also works closely with Dreamworld Wildlife Foundation's wildlife supervisor, Alana Legge, to help rehome tree roos once they have been rehabilitated, but are unable to return to the wild, often because of permanent blindness.

Dreamworld, on the Gold Coast, is one of the few zoo environments in Australia where visitors can observe Lumholtz's tree kangaroos, and the only one in the world that offers an interactive experience with one of



A tree kangaroo recovering in the outdoor enclosure on Karen's property

their four resident tree roos.

"They're very intelligent and quite cheeky animals so it's nice to share that with our guests and educate people about the species," says Alana, who is involved in their daily care and training. "Guests get to give them a scratch or feed them the plants and flowers that they love, along with some treats such as chickpeas."

Yet despite the attempts at public education, Alana says that not a day goes by without visitors scratching their heads in puzzlement at the sight of the tree kangaroos – listed as near-threatened by the Nature Conservation Act. "We've had them for five years at Dreamworld and we still hear the same question every

Tree Kangaroo Mum

day: what are they and where do they come from?"

UNFORTUNATELY, for those that prefer to see animals in their natural habitat, the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo is notoriously difficult to spot in the wild.

However, sightings are almost guaranteed at the Nerada Tea Estate at Malanda, not far from Karen's property, where you can sip on a steaming brew of farm-fresh tea in the onsite café while watching a family of resident tree kangaroos deftly climbing the trees that fringe the tea plantation outside. "We've had tree kangaroos on the Nerada Tea Estate for a long time and some of the females have successfully produced quite a few young," says plantation manager, Tony Poyner.

"Depending on where they are in the trees, you can sometimes see little joeys pop out of the mum's pouch, jump around on the

branches and have a great time. They're typical little kids and teenagers. They run up and down the trees and chase each other and it's really quite special to see."

Recently, Nerada Tea sponsored the construction of two new enclosures at Karen's Tree Roo Rescue and Conservation Centre to help accommodate the growing number of rescues resulting from blindness and loss of habitat. But despite the challenges facing the species, Karen remains an optimist.

"I think that every single person can do something to help our wildlife, regardless of what species it is," she says, swinging a hefty male tree roo onto her shoulder. She turns to address him: "Hey, gorgeous! Can I pat you? You've grown so big!" She looks back at me and smiles. "As for the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo, I'd like to think we can save them, but I always say you can't save a species if no one knows anything about them. So that's what I'm all about, all the time." **R**

Technology Goes Old School

Although Casio pioneered its electronic calculator in the 1950s, the abacus is still valued in Japan and often used by elderly cashiers. In fact, many Japanese believe the abacus can hone maths skills and manual dexterity, and there are several schools in the country teaching the skill. The government puts the number of learners taking advanced lessons in the abacus at 43,000. Practitioners who attain qualifications can even vie for abacus supremacy in national tournaments.

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

TREE KANGAROO MUM



*It hops like a **kangaroo**, eats leaves like a **koala** and climbs like a **possum**... the little-known Australian tree kangaroo is as old as time itself, but in more recent years, the **species** has found a dedicated protector in **Karen Coombes***

BY Cath Johnsen

