

## PETS FOR AFRICA

School holidays were a special time when we were free to indulge our interests. For my cousin Peter, that often meant making model balsa aeroplanes, but for me, it was the little creatures of the bush.

One privilege of growing up in Zimbabwe Rhodesia was the proximity of the bush. I lived with my cousins in Willsgrove, between the Hotel Rio and Waterford, only a fifteen-minute drive from Bulawayo's CBD. In those days, it was the bush.

Kids in town had dogs, cats, hamsters, white mice, and budgerigars. We also kept those at various times, but in the bush, a wider choice existed. So many little creatures walked, hopped, swam, and flew around, making life one long study of nature. The farther out of town a kid lived, the greater their choice of exotic pets.

For me, it started with grasshoppers in their endless variety of sizes and colours. Shoebox prison with multiple airholes punched through the lid wouldn't have been much fun for the inmates. Those in glass bottles had better views, but less room to exercise. I soon tired of grasshoppers, so they served a short stint in detention. Time to expand my horizons.

The amphibious characteristics of frogs fascinated me. A forty-four-gallon drum, complete with floating wooden island, outside the bedroom window looked like the perfect place for my growing collection. At night, the downside of confining frogs to a metal-drum amplifier under the bedroom window became clear. After three or four raucous nights, I set them free.

No problem! We lived on my uncle's chicken farm, and the grain barrels proved a most effective trap for mice. Grey feral mice differ from the domesticated white ones. They plotted their escape, while the white mice seemed happy to spend their day on the treadmill. At first, apart from the musty smell, everything ran well. But on the second night, one inmate escaped after I switched off the bedside-table searchlight. It found its way into my mother's hanky drawer, and that's where the mouse project ended.

A sizeable wire mesh cage stood in the back garden. It looked like a cage for several canaries or budgerigars, but now it sat empty. I set up a bird trap over the omnipresent spilled grain that lay between the house and the chicken runs, and I caught several small seed-eating birds every day. Each day, I released a couple, so none stayed too long, and the constant turnover kept things interesting.

But doubts crept in when my mother reminded me they may have nests with babies waiting for dinner. Just then, a tragic accident occurred when the edge of the sieve I used for my trap fell on a bird, killing it. So there ended my bird project.

On one occasion, my cousin Peter had a school friend visit. While exploring the bush behind the house, we found a bird's nest with three eggs. It turned out he collected birds' eggs, so he took one and placed it under his tongue, claiming it to be the safest place to carry it. It might have been the safest, if not for the wayward wooden stock of one of our pellet guns striking him under the chin. Soft-boiled eggs, I like, but raw eggs, not so much.

The little creatures from the bush were proving problematic, so I relented and visited a pet shop in town. Golden hamsters looked cute, but I wanted pets with a little more grunt. A display at the agricultural show held rabbits and guinea pigs. I'd heard the former sometimes ate their young, so I settled on two guinea pigs. Their new home was to be the now empty bird cage. Who knew they possessed such healthy appetites? They still seemed hungry after

ripping through the cabbage and lettuce leaves Francis, the cook, gave me. I couldn't get more greens from the kitchen because the house's occupants also needed to eat.

Luck was on my side. On our seven-acre property, I found a large-leafed weed growing in abundance. I gathered a hessian sack full and put it in the cage, covering the entire floor in twelve inches of green, and burying the guinea pigs. I imagined that was the day's feeding done, but when I returned after lunch, the greens were all gone. On Monday, so were the guinea pigs, back to the pet shop.

In the meantime, Zulu, my cousins' black schipperke, gave birth to three puppies. A cute white one soon found another home. A second white one, and a gangling long-legged black puppy were not so lucky. Their pedigree was in question. In the family's effort to find a home for the second cute white puppy, my cousin Jean took it to school on a Friday. Success! A classmate took it home.

Taking the long-legged, gangly black puppy to school was out of the question, as it lacked the requisite cute puppy looks. But it had a gentle face and nature, so my mother adopted it and called it Scrappy.

The joy of finding a new home for the second white puppy was short-lived. On the Monday, only three days after Jean's classmate took it home, she returned it, saying it ate too much. As a result, her parents decided against adopting it. True enough, the puppy was twice as fat as before the weekend, when it used to jump onto the sofa with ease. But now, no matter how hard it tried, it couldn't manage it. A diet and exercise regime over several weeks helped the white puppy lose weight, and later, find a home.

On the opposite side of the house to the chicken runs, several white ant hills dotted the property, providing hours of entertainment on the school holidays. We'd break into the walls of their nests and note how they posted their fierce soldier ants to guard the damaged entrances. The overnight repairs were testimony to their diligence, and by morning, the dozens of red bite marks on my arms and hands were fading.

My cousin Peter owned a donkey that he was training to be a horse—a jumper. An enormous, elliptical, raised garden bed stood in front of the house. After coaxing and cajoling overcame his initial reluctance, Sammy, the donkey, jumped up and down the half-metre high wall with my cousin on his back. I dreamed of getting a mount of my own and joining them on their explorations of the property.

Next door was a similar sized block of undeveloped bushland, where a group of donkeys often grazed. I thought, instead of buying a donkey, I could ride one of them. They weren't at all timid and I selected one. Needing reins, I took off my leather belt and tied it around the donkey's neck. As I prepared to mount it, the donkey bolted, with the others in pursuit. Thereafter, the donkeys wouldn't let us approach them. Gone were my riding days and my leather belt.

I thought I'd try something a little more sophisticated. During the school holidays, I rode my bicycle to the Bulawayo Museum and spoke to the elderly, balding entomologist. What about a colony of ants? He gave me a small formicarium (a plaster of Paris maze with a glass cover) and recommended the *Bothroponera kruegeri*, a particular favourite of his.

He told me how to identify them; hairy, six legs, bigger than the common ant but smaller than the Matabele ant—and where to find them on the Victoria Falls Road. He'd found only

two nests near Bulawayo, so asked me to collect only half a dozen ants, and to not dig too deep and destroy the nest.

The helpful entomologist gave me precise information, and I found the first nest without difficulty. There was no possibility of me digging too deep in the hard, sandy soil on the edge of the Vic Falls Road. Close to the surface, I found the ants running around with white larvae, so I collected six ants together with the larva each carried and put them in the formicarium.

With true Rhodesian spirit, the ants didn't let their circumstances deter them from taking care of the larvae, which soon turned into pupae. When the ants emerged, they included males. Great!

In summer, a plentiful supply of moths and other insects fed the ants, but in winter, feeding was a problem. So back to the Vic Falls Road I went. There was no sign of the colony, but I let them loose, anyway. They marched off in single file, heading for who knows where.

Many other creatures attracted my interest, including the chameleons and lizards that inhabited the property. But the problem of finding sufficient food in winter saved them from joining my menagerie. The ubiquitous chongololos (millipedes) didn't qualify as collectible, so they remained at liberty, as did snakes and the fleeting clouds of flying ants that followed the early rains.

The one thing I learned from keeping all these creatures is that you become a slave to them. Much better for them to roam free. Thereafter, all the bush inhabitants lived in peace.