

A portrait of Ben Fogle, a man with light brown hair, smiling warmly at the camera. He is wearing a dark brown, textured jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. A raccoon is perched on his right shoulder, its head turned towards Fogle's face. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field.

BEN FOGLE

THE
ACCIDENTAL
NATURALIST

My Wild Years

About the Book

For as long as he can remember, Ben Fogle has been surrounded by creatures great and small. As a young boy his best friends were Liberty and Lexington, the family dogs. Then there was Milly the puma-sized cat, Jaws the goldfish and three very 'charismatic' parrots, not to mention a whole host of weird and wonderful animals that came through the doors of his father's veterinary practice.

Then came Inca, Ben's adorable black Labrador, who changed his life. Since first melting the nation's heart on *Castaway*, the duo have been inseparable. With Inca's help, Ben was soon charming worms and tickling trout on *Countryfile*, minding the big cats on *Animal Park* and fronting the BBC's coverage of *Crufts*.

Ben's passion for wildlife has taken him all over the world, from the plains of Africa to the sea ice of Antarctica. He has played with penguins, been chased by bull elephant seals and tapirs, and helped operate on a cheetah. He has given mud packs to rhinos, bathed with elephants and risked life and limb diving with Nile crocodiles, all the while campaigning tirelessly for conservation, the environment and animal welfare.

Hair-raising, heart-breaking and wildly entertaining, *The Accidental Naturalist* tells the extraordinary true stories of

Ben's amazing encounters with animals and how they changed his life.

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**THE ACCIDENTAL
NATURALIST**
My Wild Years

BEN FOGLE

To Inca, and all the animals
I have known (and eaten)

Introduction

Crocodile Tears

‘HAW, HAW, HAW . . . hawwwwwww.’

It sounded like an old man laughing.

‘Haw, haw, hawww.’

The deep, loud bass reverberated across the inky river. A slight chill had descended with the darkness and the moon was just beginning its spectacular rise. A rich orange glow appeared on the horizon, dancing like distant flames, the optical illusion making the moon look twice its normal size. The calm waters reflected its light and cast long shadows to the shore, leaves and grasses turning silver as we gently paddled along.

I jumped each time a fish leapt out of the darkness and crashed back into the river. Mosquitoes buzzed around my ear. I swatted them away and stared closely at the water as a powerful beam of light swept back and forth. A chorus of cicadas and frogs sent a wave of music dancing from shore to shore. Nature’s orchestra can be breathtakingly beautiful.

Sitting at the front of the boat, I pulled my fleece close to my neck as I stared, mesmerized, at the beam of light ahead.

‘Haw, haw, haw.’

They were close. Very close.

A couple of bats swept low over the water, their silhouettes caught in the eye of the moon. We all remained deadly silent, eyes fixed on the beam of light. Watching. Waiting. Wanting.

Back and forth, the light swept from bank to bank like the beam of a lighthouse, as hundreds of flies, insects and moths converged within it.

Then the light settled on a bright white reflection close to the shore. My heart leapt. This was what we were after.

‘It’s a spider,’ said Clive, continuing the sweep.

We were in the Caprivi Strip, a long, thin tentacle of land in northern Namibia that borders Angola and Botswana. This was the real Africa – a green, watery world of forest and river rich in wildlife.

I was on the river with a team of scientists and a BBC film crew in search of Nile crocodiles. It was my big break into natural history presenting and this was my moment to catch a crocodile with my bare hands at night. We were all pumped with adrenaline. There is something so uniquely exciting about the African night, and here we were, in search of one of the continent’s most feared predators.

But as we drifted down the river it wasn’t the crocodiles that were our main concern. It was another African animal that is feared in equal measure and, debatably, is responsible for even more deaths.

‘Haw, haw, hawwwww’ – the unmistakable grunt and snort of the hippos that float on the surface of the water like angry icebergs.

Hippos get out of the wrong side of bed every day. I’m not sure why they are so grumpy, but they need anger-management classes more than any other African animal. Pessimistic, cantankerous and cranky sums them up. Their perpetual bad mood makes them incredibly dangerous. Hippos take no prisoners.

Now the hippos added to the drama of the night as we continued our search. We had been out for several hours

under the magical African night, quietly sharing our wildlife encounters from across the globe: tales of hungry hyena and soaring condors. I had just finished recounting my favourite campfire tale about the night of the turtles (you'll have to wait for that story) when we spotted our first croc.

The red reflection from the creature's eyes confirmed that this was indeed what we were after. It was crucial that Clive estimated the size of the animal. Too big and I'd become its dinner.

We held our breath as the boat crept towards the unsuspecting crocodile. The torchlight remained on its eyes, blinding it to our approach.

'It's about a two-footer,' he whispered.

On the shore, a two-foot crocodile had sounded a little disappointing. 'Can't we go for something a little larger?' I had implored.

'Wait till we're on the river,' smiled Clive. 'It might seem a little bigger then.'

And right now, a two-foot crocodile sounded like a gargantuan dinosaur.

'If you're happy, you can try for it,' said Clive.

I could feel my heart pounding.

'Hang low over the front of the boat. When you can see its neck, grab it hard behind the eyes,' he advised, 'and hang on.'

It seemed slightly ludicrous that I was about to hang over the side of a boat on an African river teeming with hippos – to catch a crocodile with my bare hands . . .

But this was no dream. This was the real deal and I had a TV crew in tow to record every breathless moment for millions to see.

'Focus, Ben,' I said to myself under my breath. 'Breathe deeply.'

Carefully, I moved to the front of the boat and gently eased my body over the edge. I stared at the red eyes

reflecting just a few metres away.

Limbering up, I practised a fast snatch with my hands. Suddenly I wished I'd paid more attention in all those lessons at Lord's cricket ground in London, where my mother had sent me as a boy in the hope that I would become the next Ian Botham. I was always terrible with my hands, but now my very fingers depended on them. If I miscalculated my snatch, I risked plunging my hands into the croc's mouth. I didn't need reminding that a two-foot croc could do serious damage to a pair of pinkies.

The universe around me narrowed as I focused on those two eyes. I didn't dare blink. I held my breath. It was as if the world had stopped. No noise. No smell. Just me and the croc.

I wriggled my fingers gently for fear they would cramp with terror. I had to do this. My pride and my career were at stake.

The croc was just a metre away. I could make out its body under the surface; it looked huge. It was facing head on to the boat. The torchlight held on firmly to its eyes, giving me a clear chance to strike.

'Go,' whispered Clive. 'Go!'

I can still remember as a child being frozen with fear at the edge of a small cliff.

'Jump!' hollered my sister Emily. 'Jump, you wuss.'

It was only about 20 feet, but I stood there, rooted like a plant. I was physically frozen with fear.

'*Jump!*' came the cry from the water.

Why couldn't I jump? It was like a physical barrier. I knew it was safe, but the longer I waited the worse the paralysis became. Several times I edged towards the cliff, but each time I hit an invisible wall. I could see my skin physically moving above my heart.

'*Jump!*'

The more my sister implored, and the longer I procrastinated, the worse it became.

Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. By now there were other people behind me waiting to jump.

I gave up, and with my tail between my legs I gently clambered down. Pride dented, it was an early lesson in the dangers of procrastination and the art of immediate action. Here on an African river, I knew I had to act at once or risk failure.

I stared at the neck of the croc, lifted my hands slightly to gain more leverage – and swiped.

My hands dipped into the tepid waters and I felt the tough, scaly skin as I made contact with the crocodile. I felt it struggle against my grip and locked my hands tight. In the commotion I wasn't sure where I had grabbed it, but I had the croc in my grasp. As I lifted my arms from the water I could see its head just beyond my hands.

Adrenaline coursed through my body as I hauled the creature on to the boat. I couldn't believe I had done it. I had actually caught a crocodile with my bare hands. I was puffed with pride and excitement.

'Whoaaaaa!' I squealed to the camera.

'Look at this turtle!' I said with excitement. 'I have caught this turtle with my bare hands!'

Where had that come from? Why had I called it a turtle? It was a crocodile. I knew that. Everyone knew that.

'Idiot – idiot!' I berated myself silently. *Why had I called it a turtle?*

I had been talking about turtles, but this wasn't a turtle. I have sometimes wondered whether I have a form of verbal dyslexia. I have often confused and mixed words over the years, but there were no excuses. This was my chance as a wildlife presenter and I'd just ruined it. My dreams and aspirations of becoming a naturalist began to fizzle and fade.

A little like that descent of shame down the cliff face as a child, I returned to our Namibian lodge humiliated and dejected.

One of the hardest parts of this book was not the writing, nor the recollection of the events themselves, but the title. I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I have had worrying about it. 'Who am I to call myself a naturalist?' I would berate myself.

A naturalist is defined in the dictionary as someone with an interest in nature and the environment, which in my case is true. The inescapable reality is that, whatever I am, I happened by accident. I never intended to work with nature and wildlife; as with so much in my life, it just sort of happened.

In a way it isn't surprising. Animals have always been a big part of my life. As a young boy I would spend all my summers out on Lake Chemong in Canada, where my grandparents had built a wooden cottage. I loved to paddle out on to the lake and fish, but my late grandfather, Morris, would only allow me to take part on the understanding that I ate anything big enough to keep. I hated fish, but decided it was worth a few unpleasant mouthfuls in return for the hours of pleasure it gave me. I would sit in my little wooden rowing boat and watch as muskrats porpoised in the water while Canadian loons glided by. I loved being so close to nature and wanted to understand more about it.

Like Gerald Durrell, I really can refer to 'my family and other animals'. Animals are part of my DNA. My father, Dr Bruce Fogle, a veterinary surgeon, is a world authority on animal behaviour and has written dozens of books on the subject. I always longed to follow in his footsteps. I grew up watching *All Creatures Great and Small*, *Lassie*, *Flipper* and *Gentle Ben* and they only added fuel to my pursuit of animal medicine.

I can remember watching in awe as Sir David Attenborough was tumbled around on the jungle floor by a silverback gorilla, and who can forget the elephant pooing on the *Blue Peter* studio floor? I admired both Michaela

Strachan and Terry Nutkins on *The Really Wild Show* and dreamed of one day doing the same.

Sadly, my brain never quite matched my aspirations and a couple of failed A-levels soon put paid to any lingering hopes of becoming a vet. But my love of animals and fascination with the natural world have never waned; indeed, throughout my life my curiosity to discover more has only been fuelled.

Dogs in particular helped inspire my interest in the animal world. From the day I was born, they have been a constant for me. Our four-legged friends have helped bend and shape my life, and I'd argue that one black dog in particular has been responsible for finding me a career, a wife and a family. The dogs in my early life offered me a tiny window into the animal kingdom and fuelled my curiosity about the natural world. How can a small chihuahua be related to a wolf? I still wonder. What evolutionary quirk created the elephant and how can whales navigate across vast oceans?

My life in animals has been as colourful as it has been varied and over the years I have had more than my fair share of adventures and misadventures with creatures great and small. I have travelled to some of the furthest regions of the globe in search of wildlife. I have been chased by bull elephant seals in the Falkland Islands and enchanted by penguins in the Galapagos. I have watched great white sharks hunting off San Francisco and washed an elephant in a river. I've translocated rhino and helped operate on a cheetah. I've been bitten by parrots in Wiltshire and been diving with wild saltwater crocodiles in northern Australia. From turtles in Honduras to condors in California, over the years I have built up a wealth of experiences from my encounters that have instilled wonder and fear in me in equal measure. I have learnt to love the environment through my understanding of the planet's fragile ecosystem.

As a society we tend to group animals into different categories, essentially creating a rating system in the same way we classify celebrities from A list to D list. I am always appalled to see celebrities romping around the Australian bush for ITV's *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*, eating live insects and torturing spiders and eels. 'Why,' I ask myself each year, 'does society permit such wanton cruelty to any creature?' Just because it has eight legs and no spine doesn't mean it is any different from an animal that has two and vertebrae. What has always upset me is that the programme is symbolic of our relationship with animals. The programme makers take precautions not to hurt the animals and deny that any excessive harm is caused, but what kind of message does it give to young people when they see such cruel acts inflicted on rats and snakes?

Every creature, great and small, has a role in the carefully balanced ecosystem of the planet, and I have always thought it wrong to categorize animals according to their importance. We are all living, breathing creatures – doesn't that make us essentially the same? The answer is, I don't know.

The reason I don't know, and the reason that I must also regard myself as a bit of a hypocrite, is that I too will eat beef, lamb and pork but will turn up my nose at rabbit or horse. It is not because I don't like the taste, but because I don't like the thought of it. For me, horses and rabbits are pets, not dinner. But why is it that we have chosen to live with dogs, eat pigs and wear cows? How is it that one nation's dinner is another nation's pet? How can two different cultures revere and deride the same animal? These are questions that have intrigued me since I was a child.

I have also always been intrigued by man's power to 'harness' wildlife. But are we 'harnessing' it at all, or are we working with it? Perhaps it is merely working with us. I

have always been fascinated by the theory that dogs are the most intelligent 'parasites' on earth, merely using their affections and cute puppy looks to get closer and closer to man before taking over the world. From being wild, they have slowly worked their way into our lives until they are not only in our homes but also in our beds.

Keeping animals in captivity has always been a highly emotive subject. However, I would argue that it has become key to the conservation of wildlife. The irony is, of course, that even though we might object to it, we have brought it on ourselves through the destruction of habitat. It is a deeply sad vicious circle of our own making.

Animals stir some of mankind's greatest questions but also answer some of our key concerns. Our relationship with them is symbolic of our attitudes towards nature and our effect on the natural world in general. Wildlife has become our litmus paper, an advanced warning of our impact on the planet and how it will eventually affect us too. Climate change has become a highly contentious issue in itself. While I agree the planet is going through a natural cycle of evolutionary climatic change, it seems impossible to deny our own effect on the environment.

Over the years I have seen first hand the changing conditions in the Arctic Circle and the effect that has on the polar bear. I have seen the effects of deforestation in the Amazon Basin and the 'plasticization' of the oceans. I, like most of us, have become a helpless spectator, but I have also become desperate to do something. Determined to make a change.

Although I didn't follow my earliest ambition to become a vet, a series of misadventures, dogged determination, fighting against all odds, and some remarkable events and encounters have colluded to help me in my lifelong dream to become a sort of naturalist anyway. This is the story of my life in animals and a tale of hope - hope for nature, the

planet, mankind, and my own hope in the pursuit of becoming a naturalist.

Part One

The Bark

Jaws, Sea Monkeys and Other Pets

SHE GAZED UP at me with her hazel eyes as I ran my fingers through her thick black hair. It was instant love as she stared longingly back at me. I nuzzled my nose behind her ear and inhaled her scent. I had always been told that I'd find her, and now I really had found 'the one'. Life can work in strange ways with its twists and turns, and they always say momentous things happen when you least expect them. I certainly never thought it would be here, in a semi-rural farm next to Heathrow airport, that our lives would collide.

'She's taken,' shrugged the woman in charge.

'What do you mean she's taken?' I was heartbroken.

She pointed to a small blue pen mark in her ear. 'She was bought this morning.'

I was devastated. I was in love and had already envisaged our life together. Now I was being told I couldn't have her.

'What about this one?' she suggested.

She picked up a rather scrawny-looking thing. She was small and had a large swollen eye.

'Wasp sting,' the woman explained.

I held her close to me and examined her carefully.

'No, thanks,' I said rather heartlessly, handing her back.

'Are you sure?' asked the woman. 'She's the last one.'

In retrospect, I don't know how or even why I could have rejected her, but I did.

As I pulled away from the yard, I caught a glimpse of her sad, dark eyes. Little did I realize I was walking away from one of the most important things in my life.

I stared into the rearview mirror at the tiny black Labrador with her swollen eye. Why was I turning my back on this lone little puppy? Suddenly I wasn't sure – but just as with love, I wanted to be certain. How would I know she was the one?

For more than a week my father and I had toured the country looking at litter after litter. Too thin, too fat, too noisy, too boisterous. None was quite right. The final litter was up in Scotland. We set off early in the morning for the long drive north.

There was something rather special about this search. Father and son on a journey together. I had always dreamed of having my own dog and now the time was right. The stars were aligned and this was the moment I had been waiting for.

Dogs have always been an important part of the Fogle family. My father had grown up with two Yorkshire terriers which had helped shape and direct his life. My mother had grown up with a beagle before getting a dog of her own – Honey, a golden retriever. It was she who was destined to bring my parents' worlds together.

My dad had graduated in veterinary medicine from the University of Guelph in Canada and shortly afterwards was given a placement at London Zoo. He packed his bags and crossed the Atlantic, little realizing he would never return. He spent a year at the zoo, then went to work with a London vet called Mr Singleton. At the same time my mother, Julia, was in her acting prime. She had received plaudits for her roles in *Alfie* and *Half a Sixpence*, and was currently treading the boards as Lulu. Then one day her dog Honey swallowed a balloon and my mother rushed her

to the vet . . . and met my father. They married less than three years later.

In turn, my life too was shaped by the dogs and other animals that passed through our home. As a child, Honey was my best friend. I loved that dog. She was old by the time I was a little boy and I can remember her greying muzzle and all her lumps and smelly breath. I loved everything about her – the soothing snore, the tear marks around her eyes.

We all have moments from our childhood that remain etched for ever in our consciousness and I shall never forget the day my father had to put Honey down. She lay in her wicker basket in my parents' room with her old toys around her, an elderly dog suffering from old age. It is one of the hardest decisions for any dog-owner – when to let go. For many it is hard to distinguish between saving a dog for itself or for yourself.

'Come and say goodbye,' said my mother. I crawled into Honey's bed and held her close to me, listening to her shallow breaths. I ran my hand through her fur and across her lumpy belly. I kissed her head and her nose and felt her silky ears.

'Bye.'

Away from our eyes, my father gave her an injection from which she never woke.

I remember taking one final look at her lifeless body in that basket at the foot of my parents' bed. For sixteen years she had been my mother's best friend. They had shared their life together and she had even helped my parents fall in love; and now she was gone. She left a large void in all our lives.

I lay in my bed and wept. I had never known pain like it. I had lost my best friend.

But life is full of surprises for a seven-year-old and, just when I didn't think my heart would ever recover, along came Liberty. Liberty Olympia Sweetpea Chewingdog

Fogle, to be exact. Liberty bounded into my life and it wasn't long before she had stolen all of our hearts . . . and all of our socks . . . and pants . . . and teddy bears. Dogs have an ability to gnaw their way into your affections. Sometimes you don't even see it happening, but before you know it they have become part of the furniture.

I loved Liberty, and even after she was joined by a lively young upstart called Lexington I remained loyal to Lib, as she became known. I never sat on a sofa or a chair. I was always on the floor with Lib. I used to watch telly using her haunch as a pillow. In the car she would lay her head on my lap and at night my parents would allow her to sleep on my bed. Nightmares became a thing of the past with my canine protection. She would lie stretched out along my side, her back to me, with her paws dipping over the side of the bed. She would grumble if she heard a sound and I would fall asleep to the melancholic rumble of her snore. To this day I love the sound of snoring. It is my comforter, my white noise; it soothes, calms, reminds. The sound of a dog snoring makes me regress to my childhood and the wonderful animals that shared our home.

We used to live in a tall Georgian house on Seymour Street in the middle of London. From my bedroom window I could see Marble Arch. Our nearest shop was Selfridges and there was a busy police station opposite. It was as urban as you could get. But it was still full of animals.

My father ran his veterinary surgery, Portman Veterinary Clinic, from the first few floors of our house. To get to our home, you had to walk past reception, up a steep flight of stairs and past my father's consulting room, then up another flight of stairs into our living room. It meant that his clinic, the nurses and of course the patients were all very much part of the family.

It was a very busy house. As well as my sisters, dogs and parrots, we had a live-in nanny and one of the nurses also

had her own little apartment at the back of the house. There was never a dull moment at Seymour Street – always people or animals coming and going, seven days a week. I sometimes describe my childhood as like something from Dr Dolittle. That is probably a little bit of poetic licence and retrospective fantasy, but it was certainly filled with a lot of animals. Often my father would bring a sick dog up to our house rather than leave it in the creepy kennels overnight.

The kennels and the operating theatre were in the basement of the building. I was terrified of the basement. It was down a steep set of stairs into the bowels of the house, below the pavement. Some dirty glass bricks allowed a small pool of natural light to get in, but as a child I found it a very creepy place. During the day it was all right; it was busy with nurses and I would often sit in the operating theatre while my father performed surgery. But in the evening it was different.

I used to supplement my pocket money by cleaning the cages. They were simple kennels lined with newspaper and my job was to remove the used paper, disinfect the kennel, then replace the paper and refill the water bowls. My heart would start to race as I descended the steep stairs and I can still remember the creak of the door at the bottom and the blind struggle to find the light switch. A single bare bulb cast a small pool of light near the foot of the stairs, while the rest of the basement remained in shadow. I never knew how many dogs or cats were in the kennels, and to an eleven-year-old their noises sounded like monsters in the gloom. Like most London basements, it smelt slightly damp and musty. Now I don't want you to get the wrong idea about the conditions in the kennels or the clinic – it was an amazing state-of-the-art place and the dogs that were kept in overnight lived in relative luxury, but to a young boy it was a very, very eerie place.

I would walk past the darkened operating theatre with its dozens of scalpels, machines and tools hanging on the

wall. Even once I was in the company of the overnight patients, I still found it incredibly scary down there. It was a race to clean the kennels before I frightened myself to death. Every noise seemed amplified, and to a child's rather active imagination all sorts of ghouls and ghosts lived in the cellar. I spent several years doing this job each night and it never got any easier.

When I grew out of cleaning the kennels I became my father's 'sometime' nurse. Each Christmas he would give the nurses the whole period between Christmas and the New Year off, but accidents happen whatever the date and my dad would open the clinic for that week, with me as nurse. I loved those weeks. True, my job was largely restricted to answering the phone and holding dogs while he injected them, but it was as close as I was ever going to get to being a real-life James Herriot, or his nurse at any rate.

Dad used to have a tiny little camper van which he called his 'mobile animal clinic'. It had a green flashing light and was about as near as you can get to an animal ambulance. It had an operating table and oxygen and he would use it to make house calls. Sometimes I would go with him, and of all the trips on which I accompanied him there is one that stands out a mile. The day we went to the Sanctuary in Covent Garden.

The Sanctuary is a women-only health club. It still exists, but I've never been back - because I am a man - but on this particular day my father had been called out on emergency because they had a problem with their Japanese koi carp. As I remember - and it may have changed - the whole centre of the club was made up of a vast pool filled with the exotic fish, hundreds of them, and they were ill.

In those days women wandered around the club naked, but they were warned that a male vet would be coming into the club and so they should cover up. My father and I remember the story differently - he doesn't recall any

naked women. Well, I can assure you I lost my visual virginity that day. I was a red-blooded thirteen-year-old and my eyes stood out on stalks. Perhaps my father didn't notice because he was so engrossed in the task in hand. He had to collect, anaesthetize and treat every single koi. It took us the best part of the day.

No one believed me when I went to school the next day, but it only strengthened my resolve to spend my life working with animals.

Around this time, my father was dipping his toe into the world of TV. He had already written a number of books and he was being courted by several of the national broadcasters. His first show was a live series for the BBC called *Pet Watch*, which was made from BBC Bristol. It was a Sunday night studio show all about animals and if I was lucky I was allowed to go and watch it being recorded. One time I met Terry Nutkins' sea lion splashing around in a child's paddling pool, but the highlight was when Lib and Lex made an appearance. Not long after, Mum and Dad made a series for Thames Television called *Paws Across London*. It was based on a book my father had written and involved my parents walking the dogs through every green space in London. I was so proud of Lib. Next Dad became the resident vet on an ITV morning show for two new TV hosts, Richard and Judy.

Almost every aspect of my childhood seemed to encompass animals and wildlife. Even our dentist worked with them. One day my father saw a cat who needed some root canal work done on its teeth. He wasn't sure how to do it, so he hopped in a cab to Bond Street in London and asked our dentist, Peter Kertesz, if he had any ideas.

Peter looked through his tools and, placing the cat on the chair, performed what is arguably one of the earliest root canal operations on a cat. A trickle of animal patients began and soon increased, and Peter found himself

summoned to zoos and safari parks. One of the little joys of going to the dentist as a child was the 'Our Fridays' book, which was a journal of photos of all the animals Peter and his nurses worked on each Friday.

It wasn't long before he was called overseas to work on elephants, lions and gorillas, but my favourite story was when he was asked to do root canal work on a killer whale. Peter needed a tool big enough for the job, so he got Rolls-Royce Precision Instruments to make him a set of implements that he could use on elephants and whales. But while an elephant could be sedated, a whale would need to be fully conscious, and what's more it would need to open its mouth for him. For two months before Peter's house call, the whale's trainers taught it to come to the side of the pool and open its mouth while they held a mock Black & Decker drill into its mouth, after which it would receive a fish and swim off.

The day came, and Peter and his team flew across the world with tons of equipment for this pioneering procedure. He set up all his tools at the side of the pool and the whale was summoned to the edge. On cue it arrived and opened its mouth. Peter was astonished. He found the rotten tooth and turned on his enormous whale drill - at which point the whale bolted. Someone had forgotten to warn 'Orca' about the noise and it took them a further two months to accustom him to it before Peter and his team could return.

My father sometimes joined Peter on his overseas missions. They once travelled to Greece together to work on some former dancing bears that had been rescued but needed urgent treatment on their rotten teeth.

I have always been mesmerized by my father's photographs and stories. Although he has spent the last forty years working with small animals, I think there is a part of him that hankers to work with large ones again.

Apart from the dogs, there were the parrots. Now neither my father nor I particularly approve of keeping exotic birds or parrots as pets, but the life of a vet takes many strange turns and we ended up with three: Bill, Clive and Humphrey.

Parrots have been kept as companions for as long as written records have existed. Pictures of parrots occur in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and Alexander the Great is said to have introduced them to Europe in 397 BC. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, offered a somewhat cruel account of how an owner of a parrot might teach it to speak: 'While being taught to speak it must be beaten on the head with an iron rod; its head is so hard that it will not feel lesser blows.'

Since those days parrots have continued to be kept as pets in Europe, but often only by the rich and famous. Christopher Columbus is said to have brought a pair of Cuban parrots for Queen Isabella of Spain when he returned from discovering the Americas in 1493; and Henry VIII is said to have kept an African Grey parrot at Hampton Court Palace. Throughout their domestication parrots have been taught to speak. In 1876 Friedrich Engels wrote, 'Teach a parrot swear words in such a way that it gets an idea of their meaning (one of the great amusements of sailors returning from the tropics); tease it and you will soon discover that it knows how to use its swear words just as correctly as a Berlin costermonger.' By this time America had already learnt this lesson: in 1837 former President Andrew Jackson's pet parrot had to be removed from his funeral for swearing.

Today parrots remain a popular pet, with the small budgerigar, which has been bred domestically for 150 years, being the most popular of all. I can still remember my grandmother Aileen out in Canada at the cottage on the lake walking around with her budgerigar on her head. It was always perched there. Once it escaped and we had to

wait for Grandma to return from the shops so that the little bird could be coaxed from the trees with the temptation of grandma's hair.

One of the most prized companion parrots is the African Grey, which is well known for its ability to learn large vocabularies and is considered to be one of the most intelligent breeds. It is believed that each year over 20 per cent of the wild African Greys are captured to be sold as pets. Another popular species is the macaw, which has been kept domestically since the twelfth century. And again, because of their popularity as pets, as well as deforestation in the twentieth century, almost all species of macaw are now endangered. The Spix's macaw is believed to be extinct in the wild, but continues to be bred in captivity.

Bill was our first feathery friend. A magnificent macaw, he came as a patient and stayed after he was never collected. I've never understood how someone could abandon their pet, but Bill soon became part of the furniture. He lived in the reception on the ground floor of the house. He had his own cage, but my father and the nurses always felt too guilty keeping him shut up, so his door was left ajar and he was allowed to wander around on the roof of his cage. He loved sitting on shoulders and gently nibbling ears. I would rush home from school in time for him to perch on my shoulder.

Bill spent a year with us before we felt too guilty about his incarcerated life and gave him to Sir John Gielgud, who had converted his orangery into an aviary. It was sad saying farewell, but even with my childhood sensitivities I knew he was off to a much happier life.

We were only bird-free for a few months before another parrot was dumped on us, this time an Amazon Green called Clive. He stayed for a short while before joining Bill.

The house wasn't quiet for long. Humphrey changed all our lives. An African Grey, he fluttered into our home, stole our hearts and never left. African Grey parrots can look

rather splendid with their crimson tails and their red crowns, but Humphrey was all a little wrong. He didn't have much red on his tail or head; in fact, he looked like a rather bedraggled exotic pigeon. And maybe that was why we loved him so much. He was quite a personality. He too lived in the clinic, but it didn't take long for us to realize that he wasn't fond of women – in fact, he would allow only my father and me anywhere near him. He would let us scratch his head and he even regurgitated food for my father as a sign of affection.

In his home in the reception area his favourite game was tormenting the canine and feline patients. He would climb down the side of his cage and pull the fur out of unwitting dogs' tails or even sometimes their heads. As if the vet's wasn't bad enough for most dogs, the presence of Humphrey made it unbearable and he was soon consigned to our house, where his trail of destruction began.

For some unfathomable reason, his previous owner had clipped his wings so that he couldn't fly. I remember thinking how mean it was to prevent a bird from doing the one thing it is made to do – fly. It was a little like cutting off a human's legs or a fish's fins. The only advantage for us was that he could live in and on his cage with his door open without fear of his destroying our house. That was until the day his wing feathers had grown back sufficiently for him to try flying again. We found him on a bookshelf where he had destroyed several valuable antique books by pecking and clawing, and had pooped over the rest.

For some reason, his new ability to fly didn't change our habit of leaving his door open. He never got very good at it, but he continued to fly clumsily around the house with great squawks of delight, flapping his wings uneasily and crashing into the bookcase, a window or, more often than not, crash-landing on to the floor. He would then make a beeline for the sofa, which he would duck down under and promptly get himself stuck, necessitating a highly complex

rescue that invariably involved Dad or me, as we were the only people he would let near him.

Carefully we would have to lift the sofa, making sure we didn't squash him, then I would slowly creep up on him. He *hated* being handled. I don't blame him, to tell you the truth. The only way was to creep up with a nut or a grape. I would hold it out, offering it to his sharp beak. As he took it, I would throw my hands around his body to envelop his wings. He would drop the fruit and go to bite me, though I never minded; he often drew blood, but I always forgave him. I'm not sure why. He was the grumpiest parrot I ever met, but we all loved him, even my mother and sisters. Our nanny did too, until the day he bit her on the boob. After that she wasn't so sure.

When I changed the newspaper on the floor of his cage, he would take the new paper that I had carefully cut to fit the round bottom of the cage and tear it to shreds.

He was a cantankerous old bird and very, very fussy. He would only eat grapes that had been peeled for him so I used to spend hours with one of Dad's surgical scalpels, carefully removing the skins from a whole bunch. Humphrey would proceed to take a single bite from each grape before flinging it to the bottom of his cage. We would buy him mixed bird food containing sunflower seeds, nuts, peppers and seeds, which I would pour into his bowl - at which point he would clamber down the cage and push everything out of the bowl with his beak until there was just one sunflower seed left . . . which he would then eat.

He hated the peppers in his food. Correction: he hated the fiery seeds in the middle of the dried red chilli peppers. Loyal companion that I was, I would carefully prise the peppers apart and remove the seeds before returning them to his food bowl. I had to be incredibly careful where I put my fingers after the removal procedure. One time I picked my nose and my whole face swelled. It was a lesson I didn't forget. Humphrey never thanked me for it.