

PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

# One for the road

Rick Fenny has been caring for animals around WA for almost 50 years. The vet talks to **Julie Hosking** about his next big move.



*'Risk taking is well and truly in our genes.'*



Man's best friend Rick with staffy Rosie in Shark Bay.

**A**s with most family car trips, there were squabbles aplenty among the Fenny siblings. But Ed – the fifth of seven children – felt he always drew the short straw. Or so he thought at the time. “We used to always fight over who went with Mum because Mum would take the Volvo and she’d stay at a little hotel and she’d let you have cans of Coke and you wouldn’t have to do any work,” Ed recalls. “Whereas when you went with dad it was a lot of work, it was always swagging in the bush, a bit of warm water if you were lucky, and a muesli bar for breakfast.”

Reunited with his brother and sisters some 2000km later, after they’d taken very different routes from Albany to Roebourne, he’d have to listen to their stories of ice-creams at hotels and dips in the ocean. “I was devastated because I’d just spent three hours at a hot dusty cattle station vaccinating cows and we’d get to Newman late and the pub would be closed, so Dad would cook a crusty old steak sandwich on the frying pan.” The 34-year-old laughs at the memory. “Looking back now, I think I was very fortunate to have had that upbringing.”

Ed may have had more car trips around WA than he can count – and has added plenty of mileage of his own since taking over management of Ocean Park Aquarium in Shark Bay at 22 – but the marine scientist is unlikely to catch up to his 69-year-old dad any time soon. Rick Fenny has clocked up more than 580,000km in his Toyota Landcruiser in the past 10 years – “I’m aiming for a million!” – and it’s not the first odometer he’s taken to such heady heights. The veterinarian set up his first practice in Karratha at 28, and he’s been beating his own way around the State ever since.

Now the self-proclaimed risk taker finds himself at the start of another journey, one that he hopes will lead him down many more exciting roads. The vet best known for his work with Red Dog, the much-loved kelpie who roamed the Pilbara in the 1970s and was immortalised on film in 2011, is about to become Desert Vet. The television special, due to air on Seven early next year, follows the passionate West Australian on the road from Perth – placid staffy Rosie by his side, resting her head on the gearshift – to his “spiritual home” in the Pilbara, attending to all creatures great and small along the way. Giving dogs the once-over in Shark Bay, nursing horses at Landor Races, checking on a dingo pup in Exmouth ... all while the cameras keep running at the Karratha practice, documenting the daily trials and triumphs of vet life.

It all began when Rick agreed to let TV cameras into Maitraya, his luxury retreat in Albany, for the series Unreal Estate. “I went nuts about 10 years ago,” he says with typical candour. “I bought Carbla (station, near Shark Bay), Maitraya and Ocean Park all in one year. I thought ‘Man, what have you done here, you’re going to be working for the rest of your life’ and I’m going to be.”

But it was through Maitraya, which famously hosted Lady Gaga not long after he bought it, that he met filmmaker Tim Small, who could see way beyond a mere peek into the well-travelled vet’s

multi-million-dollar property. With Josh Capelin and Matty Roberts from Sydney content house Projuicer on board, the team soon had an idea for a show one (Eastern States) writer described as an introduction to “the most incredible vet you’ve never heard of”. After just a few hours in Rick’s company, I can’t help but wonder why it hadn’t occurred to anyone sooner. Red Dog, who still holds a special place in his heart almost 40 years after he had to euthanise him, may be Rick’s best known chapter but it’s just one of many in a compelling story full of twists and turns – not to mention jaw-dropping scenery. And lots of adorable animals. How could it lose?

Rick may be new to the TV game but he’s not averse to taking a risk. “Risk taking is well and truly in our genes. That’s what I blame my nature on anyway,” he says. “I come up with crazy ideas and sort of do them, and take everyone along for the ride. I guess that’s kind of my role, that’s why I’ve done a few different things over the years.”

He describes himself as a man with four lives, divided between Albany, Perth, Shark Bay and Roebourne, though it’s probably more like five – the road has been a constant home, a canopy of stars often the roof over his head.

To get a better understanding of this inveterate wanderer, we need to go back. A long way back. “Both sides of Mum’s family, the Mundays and the Gardiners, came out as pensioner guards in the 1850s,” Rick says. “The British government of the day did this deal where they said you can get pensioned off for a guinea a year or you can take up this wonderful offer of a free passage to Australia with all your family and goods. All you’ve got to do is guard the convicts on the way – because they were all ex-army – and when you get there you can have as much land as you like. They got land in Fremantle and some in Guildford and some further out and that was their payment, so it sort of set them up for a while.”

His mother, Beatrice “Trixie” Munday, was also a trailblazer, at least in her family. The youngest of six became a school teacher. “She was the first to work in her family. The others were young ladies who sat around and went to balls and waited for someone to marry them,” Rick says. Trixie met his dad, George Edmund “Ted” Fenny at a ball when she was teaching in Cartmesticup, near Katanning. “She displeased her family by going off with an English labourer but they had a wonderful marriage.”

Ted had immigrated from the north of England in 1924, answering an advertisement for strong country lads to work on WA farms. “He got the train down near Mt Toolbrunup and he woke up in the morning and was just surrounded by bush. He said to the farmer who sponsored him ‘Where’s the farm’, and he said ‘This is it, but we’ve got to clear the trees first; here’s an axe, and here’s a box of matches and there’s a tent fly. I’m going to drop you off and just start chopping, chop and burn, chop and burn’,” Rick says. “And that’s all he did for a few years; all done by hand.”

The youngest of four children, two pre-war and two post-war, Rick grew up on a little farm lot in Mahogany Creek, in Perth’s Hills, before his mother decided the family’s future would be better secured in Albany. “I’m the classic post-war baby boomer. We were a lucky generation, really. I had all the things my father didn’t get – education mostly,” he »

feature

« says. “We were all pushed by both parents to continue education.”

To continue his education, though, Rick had to go to Queensland; there was no veterinary degree in WA in 1967. His home State did pay for his degree, tying him to the government for the next five years. “I took the riskiest of all the jobs that was on offer, which was the Kimberley. I went up to be the government vet in Derby and that really set me up for life,” he says, though he struggled initially in a man’s world where “rough, tough” 18-year-olds made the then 23-year-old feel like a child. “I had a bit of waking up to do, I felt like a bit of a fraud actually, I was so naive.”

But he soon settled into a rhythm of mostly station work and the drive to and from Perth to Derby each season led him through what would become one of his biggest loves – the Pilbara. “I thought ‘Gee, this is the place to open a practice one day when I finish my bond’, so that’s what I did. I was going to go to Port Hedland but someone else beat me to it, so I thought I’ll go to Karratha, and the only place I could find to live was Roebourne.”

Rick then started what would soon become a regular circuit. “I’ve always been on the road. I’d go to Tom Price, Paraburdoo, Onslow, Exmouth, even up to Broome. I would just put up a notice. I still do it here,” he says over dinner at the Old Pearler in Denham (which, somewhat confusingly, everyone calls Shark Bay). “Nothing’s changed really, I just sort of say I’m here for a few days, give us a call. It’s a lot easier these days with the mobile phone, of course.”

Like many of the smaller outposts in the Pets and Vets Group – Rick has partners in some of the bigger ones now – the clinic in this pretty seaside town is a one-man operation and that one man is Rick. The room at the back of his house was built as an afterthought when he expanded his garage to accommodate a small yacht – much to the delight of then wife Christine, who wasn’t keen on animal examinations in the front room.



Well travelled (clockwise from top) Rick with his dad in Mahogany Creek circa 1949; with Christine and five of their children in the 80s; with son Ed and Donatello at Ocean Park; treating Wallace in Shark Bay; starting out in the Pilbara; the legendary Red Dog.



His patient this morning is a sparky Jack Russell called Wallace; he’s a rescue dog so English owner Matt has no idea if he’s named for the Scottish warrior or the cheese-loving clay man from Wallace and Gromit. Wallace thought he was going for a walk so he’s a little peeved to be indoors, but he lets Rick examine him to ensure the growth Matt has noticed in his eye isn’t anything serious. “It should be fine,” Rick assures him. “Just, pardon the pun, keep an eye on it. It’s likely to grow and if it does start to irritate him, we might have to zap it.”

I’d been hoping to meet the Shark Bay pigeon who goes everywhere with his owner but he’s, er, travelling. In Desert Vet, it’s pretty obvious how



happy pet owners are that Rick has been calling by every five or six weeks for the past few decades. Without his service, some of them would face a 10-hour round trip to get their beloved animals checked.

More recently, Rick has had other reasons to keep Shark Bay on his circuit. Family is very important to the grandfather (“10.5 grandkids at the moment”), even if it’s a little complicated. Christine – who he describes as both his ex-wife and good friend – already had two little girls, Sally and Kate, when she and Rick met; the couple added another five to their brood. Shannon is an occupational therapist; Louisa followed in her father’s footsteps to become a vet,



though her passion lies in animal conservation; Ed’s devoted to Ocean Park; youngest son Sam runs Carbla station, a few hours east of Shark Bay; and youngest daughter Julia lives on Woodleigh, another family station, where she’s expecting her second child.

If Rick’s smile lines grow deeper whenever he talks about his children, his pride in the way Ed has transformed the former fish farm into an aquarium focused on conservation and education is almost palpable. Ocean Park also runs 4WD tours of the World Heritage area’s many natural wonders, as well as diving expeditions – which have really taken off – and day trips to Dirk Hartog island. The variety is just one of the reasons marine science graduates jump at the chance to work here and why German and English scientists have stayed for years. Staff have to be multi-skilled; they are just as likely to be called on to make a mean coffee in the Ocean Restaurant as they are to feed hungry sharks (which, by the way, hardly eat anything).

The Fennys had hoped to be on the verge of opening luxury eco-tents on the stunning site, with views out across emerald ocean, but keep running into red tape. That aside, Rick says he couldn’t be happier. “It’s so rewarding to be in business with Ed and see all this happen,” he says, gesturing over the balcony where the next phase of the business – an aquaponics operation that will enable them to grow food for the restaurant – is already taking shape. “When Ed was younger I was probably a bit more involved. I’ve learnt to let go, probably not fast enough, but with kids you’ve got to learn to let go.”

Ed acknowledges the push and pull of the father-son relationship. “That was hard for a period,



*‘It’s so rewarding to be in business with Ed and see all this.’*

because on the one hand I was very determined to prove myself and at the same time it was a lot of responsibility for a young guy. The hard part was asking Dad for help and then him coming and doing it as well, so it was difficult to get that balance,” he says. “But to be honest I feel very blessed. Dad always had the greatest respect for all the people who would work with him at the various clinics. I’ve tried to take that on with my staff; give them trust and responsibility and you usually get paid back in spades. I kind of almost learned it via osmosis just watching how Dad interacted with his staff, it was a great education.”

Father and son also get to have a bit of fun on Desert Vet, in which Sam joins them on an octopus hunt. Ed also gives Rick a lesson in bathing sea snakes (they need fresh water), and checks on resident turtle Donatello, who was a tiny 230g when Rick found him and now weighs more than 9kg. He’ll soon be ready to be released back into the wild, adding to the hundreds of turtles Ocean Park has returned to their natural environment in the past decade.

The marine adventure has also added to the coterie of creatures Rick has treated over the years, during which he’s only been bitten once. “I wasn’t careful enough,” he says of the boxer that ripped a piece off his arm, leaving a lasting scar – and another story to share. “That’s what’s great about having this sort of almost new career with Desert Vet, it’s out of the blue. I just love the idea of it because it is doing something for Western Australia. And I’m passionate about Western Australia because we’ve had the rough edge of the pineapple for so many years.”

Rick hopes Desert Vet will lead to an ongoing series because “Desert Vet can go anywhere”. Just like he has been doing for almost 50 years. “I love my music, I couldn’t live without it,” he says, almost as an aside. “You know that song Rock and Roll (I Gave You the Best Years of My Life) – all the crazy, lazy young days/all the magic moony nights? That’s kind of how I feel about being a vet. I’ve given it the best years of my life.” And he ain’t finished yet. 🎸

Desert Vet will screen on Seven early next year. See [desertvet.com.au](http://desertvet.com.au) or search [facebook.com/DesertVetRickFenny](https://www.facebook.com/DesertVetRickFenny). The author was a guest of Tourism WA. [oceanpark.com.au](http://oceanpark.com.au); [sharkbay.org](http://sharkbay.org).

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