

Crunchie explores the pond. Image WCCC.



ANIMAL EXPERIENCES WE LOVE

Greater Sydney is a wonderful place to discover amazing animal experiences, from wild cat conservation to a primate sanctuary, to wonderful zoos and koala parks. Find out what Greater Sydney has to offer for the animal lover in us all.

STORY: BRIAR JENSEN

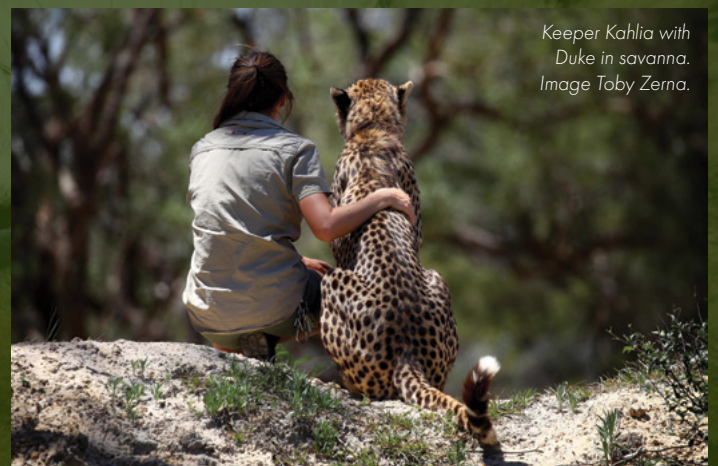
WILDCATS IN WILBERFORCE

A unique wildlife experience at Greater Sydney's Wild Cat Conservation Centre helps save vulnerable cheetahs in Africa.

Crunchie, a serval from sub-Saharan Africa leads the way, stalking soundlessly through the paddock on elegantly long legs, oversized ears pricked forward, eyes focused ahead, engaged and engrossed with his surroundings. Aware of our presence beside him, he's not perturbed by it. Then he disappears.

He's somewhere at the end of a loose lead, but this striped and spotted wild cat has vanished in the vegetation. Secreted amidst clumps of waving grass, it's camouflage in action – and mesmerising.

A flash sees Crunchie leap vertically. There's a whoosh and whirr of wings as four quail escape the grass. Stimulated, he scouts



Keeper Kahlia with Duke in savanna. Image Toby Zerna.

the paddock, investigating puddles with delicate paws, sniffing branches brought down by the previous night's storm.

Equal parts animal enrichment and environmental education, this private walk at the Wild Cat Conservation Centre (WCCC) in Wilberforce helps raise funds for the not-for-profit foundation's work with wildlife research in Africa.

"These animals are ambassadors or advocates for their wild cousins," says founder and Nat Geo Wild presenter Ben Britton. "People come here and get a better appreciation for the species and learn about their plight in the wild. The facility works as a shopfront for our work in Botswana."



Ben and Cooper on the Savanna.
Image Toby Zerna.



Ben and Duke.
Image WCCC.



A serval camouflaged in the grass. Image WCCC.



Kaia the Caracal. Image WCCC.



Crunchie the serval on an enrichment walk with Ben.
Image WCCC.



Guests on a guided tour. Image WCCC



Duke the cheetah. Image Toby Zerna

As the name says, the WCCC is not a zoo but a conservation facility, home to the only conservation breeding program for cheetahs in Sydney, along with servals and caracals. With less than 7000 cheetahs left in the wild, captive breeding of insurance populations are essential to maintaining this vulnerable species as their wild numbers plummet due to habitat loss and conflict with humans.

"First and foremost we need to secure the remaining wild populations and their habitat," explains Britton. "Then we've got to have a healthy insurance population in captivity."

Britton, who grew up in Rouse Hill, has more than 20 years' experience in animal husbandry and opened the WCCC, designed specifically for wild cat species, in 2016.

"Cheetahs like to be able to see distance and hate to be looked down upon," says Britton, so their enclosures enable them to scan their surroundings and benefit from olfactory stimulus. As the largest cheetah habitat in Australia, it includes a two-hectare 'savanna' that promotes natural behaviours like sprinting – cheetahs are the world's fastest land animals reaching up to 112kph in short bursts.

Because of these regular enrichment activities outside their enclosures, the Zoo and Aquarium Association, which accredits facilities in Australasia, has commended the WCCC for the positive welfare opportunities given to their cheetahs and servals.

As these cats will not be released into the wild, it's important to Britton he and his staff nurture a trusting relationship with them, enabling the cats to live the best possible captive life filled with as much choice and opportunity as possible. This bond between the cats and staff is heart-warming, and you can witness it first-hand on a private tour.

On the ultimate tour you accompany a keeper as they take a cat on an enrichment walk or meet and greet a cheetah (which are always at the cat's discretion, they are never coerced). Their 'animals-first' policy means no phones or selfies (though they take photos if the opportunity arises) ensuring your focus is always on the cats; watching, learning and interacting if the animals so choose. "That's what it's all about," says Britton. "Trying to get people to share our passion for saving wild cats."

And passionate you will become as you stroke the fur on a cheetah's back or have it choose to lean against you, purring its way into your heart.

www.wildcatcentre.org.au