

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

# COMMENT

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The service isn't quite up to McDonald's but these mid-morning snacks are sure worth the wait. Our thanks to photographer Michael Hoskins for this delightful shot of the latest arrivals to SFU's cave swallow family.



# Lyn Hancock and Friends

By Rick Hyde

If you've had trouble finding a landlord who allows you to keep pets, you can imagine the difficulties encountered by Lyn Hancock when she looks for a place to rent.

Since deciding to settle in British Columbia in 1963, Hancock's pets have included a seal, a small ape, a macaw, two black bears, a raccoon, innumerable sea birds, a few bald eagles and four cougar kittens.

Granted, only about half of those 14 years have been spent in rented accommodation. Nevertheless, it's obvious that Hancock has been blessed with both understanding landlords and tolerant neighbors during that time.

A one-time columnist with a Victoria newspaper, Lyn Hancock's experiences with such menageries have supplied her with the grist for one best-selling book, *There's a Seal in My Sleeping Bag*, and for another which seems destined to find its way onto the best-sellers' list, the recently-published *There's a Raccoon in My Parka*.

It was while married to a wildlife biologist that Hancock first began serving as a nursemaid for many of the species which make up the fauna of British Columbia.

Before that, she was a typical Australian on a five-year trip around the world and whose interest in the great outdoors extended as far as "seeing a pretty flower and taking a picture of it." But all that has changed.

Today's Lyn Hancock says: "I'm dedicating my life to communicating to people on the importance of the outdoors and wildlife conservation. It has almost become a religion for me.

"Before, I wanted simply to visit all the countries in the world and cross them off a list, saying, 'I've been there'. My ambition now is to see as much of B.C. as possible, to learn about every plant in this province and to photograph every indigenous animal.

"It's a much deeper interest than it was before. I want to learn a lot about a little, whereas before I wanted to learn a little about a lot."

Hancock was working in Vancouver to raise the fare home when she met her husband-to-be — a graduate student in biology at the University of British Columbia — and, within a month, found herself married and caring for an ailing fur seal named Sam in a basement suite in Point Grey.

During the next eight years, the Hancocks raised a steady stream of animals and birds, many of which had never been raised in captivity before, while living in rented houses in Vancouver and while operating the Wildlife Conservation Centre in Saanichton.

Somewhat surprisingly, Hancock says it has been her experience that it's easier to keep wild animals such as cougars and bears in a big city than it is to keep them in country areas:



Photo: Deni England, Vancouver Sun

"In a city, there are no regulations directed at such creatures. For example, Vancouver has no bylaws prohibiting keeping grizzly bears in your backyard.

"And, if there are no regulations against it, what can they do to you if you keep a bear in your backyard? It's only when people start keeping grizzlies that anyone thinks of raising the question at council meetings. We certainly had no problems in that regard in Vancouver.



# ...raccoons, seals, cougars help SFU writer to tell story of conservation

"However, it was a different story when we moved to Saanichton. We lived on six acres and our nearest neighbors were a half-mile away — yet it was there we ran afoul of various regulations and had a great deal of trouble establishing our wildlife centre."

When not caring for her assorted animals and birds, Hancock occupied herself by teaching elementary school in Victoria, writing articles about wildlife and the outdoors and chronicling her many adventures in Vancouver and at the conservation centre for her first book.

Despite the importance of her husband's influence (they are now divorced) in stirring her interest in the outdoors, Hancock believes that Simon Fraser University has probably played a larger part in shaping her determination to spread the good word about wildlife conservation.

She enrolled at Simon Fraser two years ago to upgrade her Australian teaching qualifications and, "since my Australian degree was in speech and drama, I tried to pick up those threads again at SFU by majoring in English.

"However, I soon found I didn't know that younger person anymore. So involved had I become with wildlife and with the outdoors that I was no longer interested in English, except as a tool to use in communicating the message of conservation."

Rather than continue to major in English, she decided on an interdisciplinary approach, combining biological sciences and communication studies with education. It paid off and, at this year's Convocation ceremonies, she was awarded her Bachelor of Education degree. In fact, she cut short a promotional cross-country tour for her latest book to receive her degree at Convocation.

"Going to Simon Fraser has been a real milestone in my life," she says. "It crystallized my goals and my aims. It was a way of pulling together the threads of my previous life's experiences and it gave me an impetus into the future. It made me see ways of using those experiences to continue on into the future."

Working on her graduating thesis, she spent a semester researching the formation of public attitudes towards cougars. She became so involved in the study that she has decided to return to Simon Fraser to pursue the topic at a graduate level. She says:

"I've been wanting to do a book on my experiences with cougars since I first began writing in the late sixties but, as a result of being at Simon Fraser, this has now deepened and widened to the stage where I now have up to four books planned, instead of the original one."

Hancock explains the start of her interest in the predator:

"While living in Vancouver in the mid-sixties, I had four cougar kittens thrown on my bed at midnight. My husband had come into possession of the four orphaned kittens and

had decided to raise them, to get experience caring for cougars."

She was teaching in an elementary school at the time and decided to take the cougar kittens to her class. After all, the kittens had to be fed and her pupils would probably enjoy seeing the animals.

"The kids were delighted and fascinated, but the other teachers were just horrified. They suggested I kill the kittens immediately because, if I'd lived in British Columbia for any length of time, I'd know of the many children and cattle killed by cougars.

"That sparked my interest. I wanted to find out how much of this attitude was based on fact and how much on fiction. But when I started looking for information, I found that almost nothing had been written on cougars — the major predator in Canada.

"I decided then that one of these days I'd write a book on cougars which would fill the gap. And when I needed a topic for my thesis at Simon Fraser, that's what came immediately to mind."

However, she found her interest encompassed a lot more than how many cattle had been killed by cougars over the last 10 years.

"I wanted to find out what dictated people's attitudes about cougars. Where did they get these attitudes from and did they change with age and education? And what was the most important factor in shaping these attitudes? Was it parental influence, teacher influence, media influence or personal experience?"

"I spent six months at Simon Fraser gathering information for my thesis, which could be used in what I thought would be one book, but it became so all-consuming that I wound up with material for at least two books and possibly as many as four.

"In any case, I would like at least two books to come out of this: the first, the popular one with my personal experiences about raising cougars; the other, a more scientific study directed at a smaller audience on the wider implications of cougars."

Both her Seal and Raccoon books follow an anecdotal format, reflecting Lyn Hancock's belief that the chief problem facing conservationists is educating the public on the value of its outdoor heritage and stressing the importance of the meaning of nature. She says:

"Scientists can't reach the public with their technical explanations of ecology, so in my books I try to get the message over in terms that the average person can understand while being entertained. I try to combine education with entertainment.

"I try not to preach about the importance of the outdoors, but I believe that if we turn our backs on nature, we'll become unnatural ourselves. I'm an optimist and believe we'll eventually realize the importance of our connection with nature." ■