

Tucked away at the southern edge of the world, Tasmania is a place like no other. The lack of a land bridge with mainland Australia has isolated wildlife in the state from many of the introduced predators that eradicated their northern cousins. This means that the island has become a final sanctuary for a number of species now extinct everywhere else, with many of these carrying the “Tasmanian” moniker, such as the Tasmanian devil, the Tasmanian pademelon and the Tasmanian bettong.

Wildlife in this island paradise still faces threats, however, from issues like cars, diseases, cats and dogs, and marine debris. As a result, many thousands of injured and orphaned animals are brought to veterinarians and wildlife sanctuaries every year. For those animals requiring long-term care before being able to survive in the wild again, the network of wildlife carers spread around the state is indispensable. At the time of writing, the number of registered wildlife carers in Tasmania just is more than 300. These dedicated volunteers open their hearts and houses to look after wildlife, preparing them for rerelease and a second chance at life. Carers go to great lengths to keep the animals in their charge “wild” enough to survive once released. However, once in a while a special bond is formed between creature and carer, a bond that transcends these efforts.

A devil named Prada

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Tasmanian devils have a reputation for ferocity. Many media reports carry images of devils screeching or fighting, with mouths agape, teeth and strong jaws on display. Zoos and wildlife sanctuaries display signs warning visitors not to get too close. Keepers working in these enclosures wear steel-capped boots and keep one eye on their charges at all times.

In reality, however, devils are complex characters and can be both fierce and affectionate.

Several years ago, four captive-born Tasmanian devil joeys were entrusted to the care of Petra Harris, a highly experienced wildlife carer who had raised dozens of orphans including possums, wombats and most of Tasmania’s macropod species. As the manager of Bonorong

Prada





Little devils: Prada and her sisters as joeys



Petra, Prada and one of Prada's sisters

Wildlife Sanctuary, an organisation dedicated to protecting the welfare of Tasmanian wildlife, she spent her days tending to injured and orphaned animals, but taking home four endangered devil joeys was another level altogether and she was aware of the responsibility she had been given.

Bottle-feeding each one every four hours, Petra found the first few weeks especially demanding. "They were quite difficult to feed, each one taking 20 to 30 minutes to finish a bottle, so by the time the four had been fed I was able to snatch an hour or two of sleep before starting again," she recalls.

She was still working full-time. She was running on willpower.

The devils adapted quickly, however, and over the next few months they began to thrive. Once big enough, they spent their days outside exploring a custom-made timber devil house the size of a giant rabbit hutch. Complete with ramps

and sloping ladders, the joeys practiced their athletics while soaking up sunshine and fresh air. In the evenings, they would be brought inside to the safety of Petra's bathroom.

As they grew, they were given occasional access to the house and the four girls would run riot, zooming from one end to the other. Petra describes them as "a little scrum, tackling each other as they went". A circuit was mapped out, with the four gleefully dashing upstairs, along the hall and down the stairs at the other end before circling back and starting the lap again.

The joeys were given increasing amounts of independence and, once old enough, were put into a quiet enclosure at Bonorong during the day where Petra could keep an eye on them. Petra recalls that when the time came to leave them there overnight, she was nervous and stayed with them until late before being able to head home herself. Returning in the morning, she brought a bowl of milk formula and watched them busily filling tummies and moustaching top lips white before they were ready to greet their adopted mum.

By the time most orphaned wildlife are weaned, their carers start preparations for their release. However, for Tasmanian devils the situation is complicated by devil facial tumour disease (DFTD), a transmissible cancer that has slashed wild populations. DFTD was first documented during the mid-1990s in the Tasmanian north-east and since then has spread almost statewide. The worst affected areas have seen drops in devil numbers of 90 per cent, and the decline was so rapid that by 2009 the species had been listed as endangered by both the state and federal governments. This threat meant that the four joeys in Petra's care were not destined for release but rather to spend a life in safety at Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary.

Over time Petra named the four joeys Luna, Raali, Nimba and Prada, and began to understand their personalities. Each was unique, reacting in different ways to her care and, while all four were



affectionate, one bonded with her particularly strongly. With her confident attitude, Prada had always been the most dominant, in front at mealtimes and on top when playing. With Petra, this translated into the confidence to demand more cuddles, but with the other keepers at Bonorong Prada developed a reputation for feistiness and a tendency to charge ankles at random.

For those who saw them together, the bond between Prada and Petra was unquestionable. They would regularly be found snuggling in a corner of the enclosure.

The affinity the devils showed for their human friend was both endearing and astounding to visitors. University researchers testing new proximity-measuring collars before deploying them onto wild devils were stunned when Prada and her sisters lay quietly in Petra's arms and allowed the collars to be fitted with little fuss. When veterinarians visiting the Sanctuary performed dental exams, most of the devils required sedation before fingers could be safely inserted into mouths. With Prada, Petra simply held her close and covered her eyes to soothe her. "It's pretty amazing, that trust. As long as she was on me she was relaxed," she says.

Petra was unsure if this intimacy would continue once her friend had babies of her own. During Prada's pregnancy, Petra kept watch for signs that the devil was pulling away and prepared herself to give space. However, the opposite began to happen – Prada became needy, demanding

Petra's attention when she was close by. One evening, after visiting the enclosure, Petra was preparing to leave when the devil called out with a distress bark not used since she was young. Petra believes the strain of carrying three babies was making Prada tired and causing her to seek support from the person she trusted.

As the babies started to get bigger and expand her pouch, Prada began to use Petra as a babysitting service. Waddling over with a big bulbous belly, Prada would clamber onto Petra's lap, relaxing the muscular mouth of her pouch so that all three joeys flopped out onto their human "grandmother". Once free of the weight Prada moved away and stretched out, rubbing her liberated tummy on the mulch as she enjoyed her brief rest.

In captivity, Tasmanian devils have an average lifespan of six to seven years, and as they approached this, Prada and her sisters began to

Petra, Prada and Prada's babies



show signs of age. Their hair thinned, their gait became a little wobblier and they spent longer each day lying in the warm sunshine. Most evenings after work Petra would visit the sisters in their enclosure, using the time to relax after a busy and stressful day. As she watched her girls get older, Petra found it more and more difficult to leave them, staying so late some evenings that her partner would call to check on her.

Prada avoided the lumps, bumps and bald patches often seen on devils in later years but suffered hip trouble, common in a species whose hip structure makes them prone to dysplasia. This discomfort made her increasingly unsteady on her

feet and as the months went by she spent longer periods sleeping. On the afternoon that Prada was seen to collapse and have trouble standing, Petra knew that it was time to make a difficult decision.

Prada was buried under a gum tree, high on a hill above the sanctuary that she called home. Petra's herd of rescued dairy cows stood still and silent in a ring around her as she buried her friend, making a strange but fitting support crew for a woman who has dedicated her life to helping animals in need. Today all four sisters are buried together, each grave marked by a rock and visited frequently by both Petra and her cows. ☐



Grace Heathcote is a Tasmanian freelance writer. After a childhood spent exploring the forests and beaches of Tasmania, she left the island in 2007 to study, work, and travel through Australia and overseas. The charm of Tasmania lured her home in 2014 and has continued to weave its magic for her ever since.