

Old Man Kangaroo

By GRETCHEN GRAF

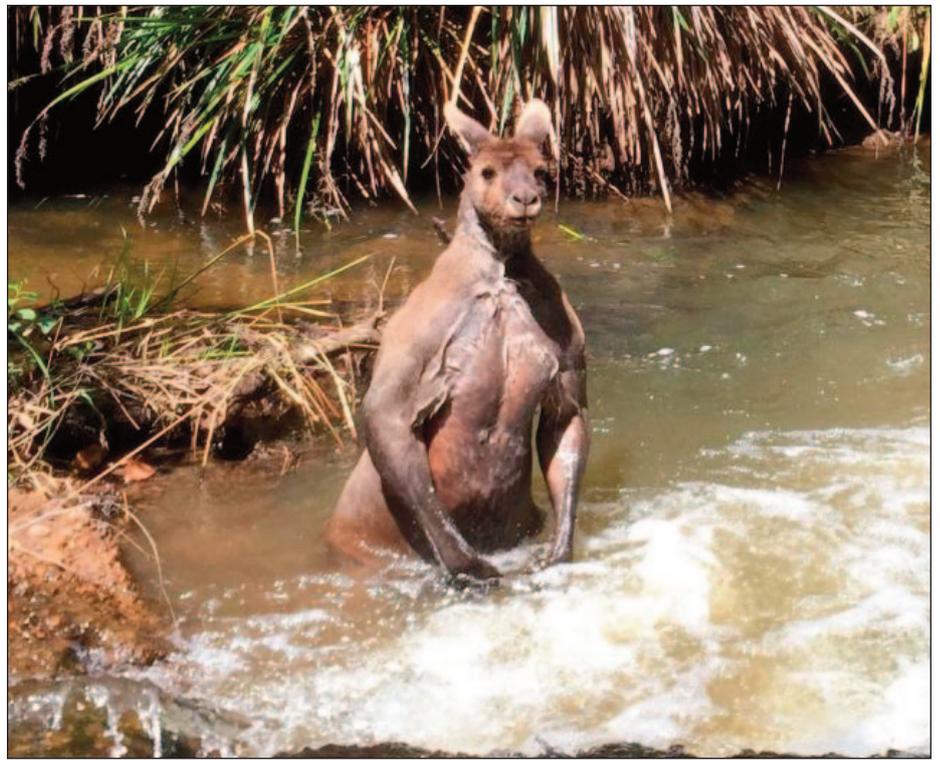
Wilf Reid was a legend around where I used to live, on the south coast of New South Wales, and even a hero to some, but not to me.

He ran the best wrecking yard on the whole south coast, well-located on the corner of the Princes Highway (now the M1) and Old Broulee Road. If you needed a car part, no matter how obscure, you wouldn't go anywhere else.

Wilf also had a bush property up the Burra Creek where he had a pack of feral beagles, to keep his property free of wallabies and kangaroos, even though he did not farm the property at all. Like many other conservation-minded locals, I despised him for this.

As the crow flies, Wilf's property on the Burra was probably only five or six kilometres from our place on the river. But it was quite a journey by road, as this entailed crossing the river twice, and driving half an hour on a dirt road into Moruya, and then another half hour over creek crossings on a dirt road out to the Burra. There were heavily timbered hills in between the two places, penetrable only by hiking or on horseback.

If you've ever heard the noise a pack of beagles make on the hunt, you know it's a godawful, unforgettable sound. Every now and then we would hear the horrific baying, howling and yelping of this pack of ravenous dogs in the hills as they ran a wallaby or kangaroo to exhaustion, and then killed it by lit-



erally tearing it apart, as they have been bred to do, with foxes.

Once or twice they chased a terrified beast right through our property. If there was time, Roger would grab the rifle and shoot it into the air, to break up the pack. The weakened animal would make a weary escape while the dogs ran in all directions, confused.

It would have been tempting to shoot one or more dogs, but not worth incurring the wrath of red-neck Wilf. Word would undoubtedly get out. Cowardly? Perhaps. I call it keeping the peace.

One day I heard the occasional, high-pitched yelps of a solitary beagle coming over the hill at the back of our place. Before the emaciated animal came into view, I saw a fully-grown buck kangaroo loping along in front of it.

He was panting, not yet exhausted, but had obviously outrun the rest of the pack. The beagle was flagging, barely able to keep on the tail of its quarry. But this magnificent buck had been chased before, and knew exactly what he was doing.

He loped along the flat, down the bank, across the beach of river stones and into the river. When he was in waist-deep water, he turned around to wait for his pursuer.

From the top of the river bank, I watched the starving beagle slowly traversing the stones. It kept its nose to the scent, only looking up when it came to the water's edge. It didn't hesitate, plunging in, snapping and barking at the waiting prey.

Did it really think it could take down a kangaroo without its pack? Starvation drives a very strong instinct. But this day, there would be no food, only a rather slow, pathetic death.

The buck grabbed the dog around the neck with both his strong arms, even as the dog snapped furiously at him. He lowered its head under the water as it kicked and writhed and thrashed. As its movements slowed, he put his two huge hind feet on its body, and stood upright, panting, his strong little arms hanging down. Old man kangaroo would live to face another day.