



Gungahlin homestead.

Down amongst the wildlife

By ROGER FRYER

FOR SEVERAL years in the 1990s I was privileged to work as a communications officer for the CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology in the old Gungahlin homestead on the outskirts of Canberra.

The new division chief, Dr Brian Walker, was a world-renowned rangelands ecologist from South Africa with a progressive outlook. He agreed to take on the exalted position as long as he could live and work back in SA for several months of the year.

I had been writing features on wildlife for the *Canberra Times* and was known to the front desk of the division from

my enquiries, and when a contract position became available Dr Walker offered me the job reasoning that an “investigative journalist” would help disseminate the division’s research and enhance its reputation.

At the time CSIRO was a fairly stuffy organisation. There was some jealousy among other divisions over this move but after years in newspaper offices I was used to watching my back.

The job largely entailed converting scientists’ dense and obscure texts into readable articles for the public media. This was easy for me as I could write for a general audience and also understood science. There was some resistance however, by the scientists themselves,

who had a tendency to bury the point of their project somewhere near the last paragraph, and were sensitive to being seen as blowing their own horn by their peers.

One of my jobs was to write speeches, including for government ministers who turned up from time to time.

It wasn’t rocket science—the speech had to be typed up, 14pt Times Roman, triple-spaced with keywords underlined and a joke inserted somewhere.

Barry Jones, well-loved quiz show genius and Labor member, was Minister for Science appointed by new PM Bob Hawke. He was coming to Gungahlin to open the new National Wildlife Collection building in



the grounds of the homestead, which was to house a huge collection of specimens in sterile and humidity-controlled cabinets.

Collecting specimens was a time-honoured tradition of biologists. One of my favourite books was Roger MacDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter*, about a deeply religious servant of Charles Darwin who unwittingly helped prove that God did not create individual species.

Shooting specimens was considered quite valid even at the time of the speech I was to write. The usual specimen gun was a .410 light shotgun which would not mark the specimen skin too much.

As a young naturalist years before in Victoria, I had been granted a license to collect specimens myself, and owned a .410 inherited from my maternal grandfather. I had also been taught how to prepare study skins.

So all this was grist for the mill. At the time the scientist in charge of the collection was Dick Schodde, a likeable and enthusiastic personality. His technical officer was responsible for the shooting, and boasted that he planned to "eat every species of wildlife in Australia". One never knew what you would have placed before you if invited to dinner. One night we ate black swan, which was a favourite of Van Dieman's Land convicts. He drew the line at musk duck, however, with its strongly-tainted flesh.

It was fascinating to wander through the new facilities if allowed and look at the specimens. One set of vertical drawers held a couple of dozen thylacine skins. There was a table in the middle of the main room with a huge map of Australia on it. Dick Schodde had arranged specimens of rosella indicating where they were taken and showed that a large number of what up till then

were considered separate species were actually colour variations grading gradually around the coast of the continent. Nowadays, DNA technology puts this kind of revelation beyond doubt.

Found in the new building often was Dr John Callaby, a highly-regarded wildlife researcher and one of my idols. He was well past retirement age but like many dedicated scientists was happy to keep working as a research "fellow". I'm not sure he was achieving very much—he was very old and slow, but well-loved and tolerated by all, and enjoying himself. I made as the joke in the speech I wrote that one day Dr Callaby would be one of the specimens. This was pushing the envelope a bit of what was respectful, but never one to err on the side of caution, I let it go.

To my relief it got a few laughs and I lived to fight another day.