

Pet Project

Newport couple Ryan and Jen Tate are passionate about using their animal training skills to help wildlife conservation. And it's not just dogs, either...

Life Stories



Story by Rosamund Burton

“Ari holds the world record for the most tricks in under a minute,” says Ryan Tate, as the four-year-old Australian shepherd obediently rolls, jumps and circles around his owner at Newport’s Attunga Reserve. Then at the command of Jennifer, Ryan’s wife, Ari darts across the cut grass before dropping to the ground, while the young couple’s two-year-old son, Lennox, toddles towards his canine friend.

Ryan and Jennifer Tate run dog training courses at Deep Creek Reserve in Narrabeen, and Ryan has recently appeared on the two-part ABC Catalyst program, ‘Making Dogs Happy’, which went to air on the 6th and 13th of September. Ryan, 33, was one of two animal behaviour consultants on the program. In addition to teaching people how to read their dog’s body language over a two-week period, Ryan taught three owners how to train their dogs basic scent detection.

“We had three dogs, which were trained for three different detection processes,” Ryan explained. “So a Chihuahua learnt to find a mobile phone, the Labrador found his owner’s keys and the Spoodle found a wallet.

“On Day One we were down at Bilgola Beach, and I said to each owner, “Ask your dog to come and sit,” and none of the three dogs obeyed. Then two weeks later not only were they coming and sitting, but they were detector dogs. It was really cool!”

Ryan and Jen, 30, are also both passionate about wildlife conservation, so an integral part of their dog training involves teaching owners how to control their dogs so they don’t prey on native animals – like blue tongue lizards, bush turkeys or possums.

This Newport couple met when they were both working at Taronga Zoo. A Marine Biologist, Ryan was supervisor of the Marine Mammal department. Jen worked as a Keeper on the Australian Fauna Precinct, and then with carnivores and ungulates (“which are hooved animals”, she explains), before gravitating back to her great love – Australian native animals.

“We got talking and discovered we were living around the corner from each other. Jen was at Cromer and I was in Dee Why. We became friends and used to go surfing and to concerts together,” says Ryan.

“We planned a spontaneous trip to Mexico and South California together as friends,” interjects Jen, “and we came home as a couple”.

While holding their full-time positions at Taronga Zoo, the couple was also training dogs on the side. Two years ago their lives changed with the birth of Lennox, and their decision to set up their own business, not only training domestic dogs, but also conservation detector dogs.

Ryan is now training dogs with and for Steve Austin, who is known worldwide for his groundbreaking work. Steve Austin is training most of the conservation detector dogs in Australia, and his dogs were part of the team that successfully eradicated all the feral species on Macquarie Island in 2014, a process that took over seven years. Ryan knew Steve from when he was training penguin detector dogs at Taronga Zoo, and Ryan and Steve’s wife, Vicki, have done dog training work together for the past seven years. Ryan completed Steve Austin’s Statement of Attainment in Dog Training in 2015.

Ryan releases a six-month-old white-and-brown Springer spaniel called Taylor from the truck. As she strains on her

lead, keen to sniff out the expanse of the reserve, he explains that he is training her to be a conservation detector dog, and she will probably detect feral cats and foxes.

“Her brother is finding the Bellingen river turtle. One of her sisters is working on termite detection, and another on finding spotted quolls.” Ryan says. “Spaniels are the most trustworthy dogs around native wildlife. Once they have been taught to detect a specific animal or plant, they love the job so much they work tirelessly all day.”

Jen has completed a puppy instructor course, and like Ryan, in due course will undertake the Statement of Training in Dog Training. She has also written and self-published an educational picture book highlighting the ‘not so famous’ Australian animals.

“After giving birth to Lennox, I felt compelled to write a children’s book, showcasing the diversity of our unique Aussie animals,” she explains, so she wrote *‘Pouches, Paws, Tails and Claws’*

and with her mother and sister, painted the illustrations. Her mother was sick with cancer at the time, and passed away six months ago. Jen describes sitting at the end of her bed, day after day painting and writing together.

“Mum’s creativity and determination was the fire that drove this project to completion and she was adamant that David Attenborough would love this book,” she says, “so once I had the hard copy, I sent it off to him as a gift for his 90th birthday. Within a few weeks I received a letter back from him thanking me; he wrote: ‘It’s a beautiful book.’ It’s a letter I will treasure forever.”

With *‘Pouches, Paws, Tails and Claws’* in hand, Jen has presented talks to primary school students across the Northern Beaches on creative writing, being a zoo keeper and how to best care for our local wildlife. “Nature is something that every child should engage with every day at some point. It’s so important for our environment and for kids to stay connected with it,” she says.

Jen recounts how, aged 11, she travelled around Australia with her family for a year and a half in a caravan.

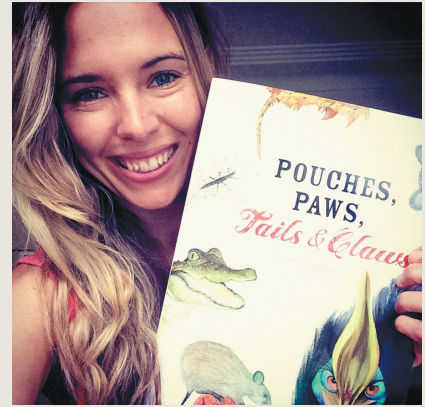
“We had a bird book and a mammal book and at dawn and dusk, after reaching our new destination, we’d go looking for creatures, and that was our schooling,” she says. “My love for native wildlife stems from that time. We saw so much of untouched Australia... that’s why I feel so strongly about making sure that native bush areas like Attunga Reserve are maintained, because they are valuable wildlife corridors. This area is full of bandicoots and possums, and the bush land here is an important habitat for the endangered squirrel glider. The last remaining squirrel glider population in the whole of the Northern Sydney region is here in the Newport/Avalon area... I suspect this may not be the case for much longer.”

Last month on September 7 – Threatened Species Day – Ryan went with Taylor to the Royal Botanic Gardens for the launch of the newly founded Canine Detection Certification Council.



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Jen and Ryan with dogs Ari and Taylor; Ryan cues a Leopard Seal to open its mouth at Taronga Zoo; The couple on their wedding day; just like his dad, son Lennox gets Ari to stand; Jen at Taronga working with ‘Blush’, a Red Kangaroo; Jen delivers a talk to pupils at Maria Regina Catholic School in Avalon during Book Week, on the importance of caring for native wildlife.





CARING COUPLE: Jen with Goodfellows the Tree Kangaroo; Ryan with Mav the New Zealand Fur Seal; and proud author Jen with her kids' book.

Because there is an increasing demand for conservation detection dogs, Ryan explains, this organisation has established standards for operating procedures and benchmarks for canine detection work and a formal assessment and certification. Taylor is one of 10 dogs being trained up as part of a new NSW Government program to sniff out endangered flora and fauna, as well as introduced pest species.

The third member of the Tate animal family I'm introduced to is a pigeon called Alfred. This small bird was handed in to the veterinary clinic where Ryan and Jen run puppy classes.

"He was quacking like a duck," Ryan remembers. "I thought he was hilarious and fell in love with him." Ryan had read

about pigeons being used in search and rescue missions during WWII. "They were trained to sit in choppers and indicate when they spotted life rafts. Pigeons can concentrate for much longer than we can, and their eyesight is far superior to ours."

Ryan set a personal challenge for himself: to teach Alfred to locate, and discriminate against, people lying down in a parkland or bush as a form of aerial search and rescue. One afternoon, a hawk landed in the Tates' backyard and Alfred flew off. Ryan and Jen searched for several hours but couldn't find him, until on his way to work Ryan spotted him land beside a canoodling couple lying on the grass near Newport Beach, and start playing with the couple's

dachshund. Ryan called Alfred, and he immediately flew over and landed on his hand, leaving a very puzzled pair of lovers.

"He's ridiculously confident," says Ryan with a smile.

Having lived for many years on the Northern Beaches and drawn to Pittwater four years ago because of their mutual love of the ocean, this family and their animals are here to stay. Already they have made a significant mark on the community with their dog training and zeal for native wildlife conservation, not to mention their passion for a pigeon called Alfred.

* For more information on Ryan and Jennifer Tate's work visit www.tateanimals.com www.barrenjoeybooks.com

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