

THIRTY YEARS OF KIMBERLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

On 1 June 2011, Jiri and Marie Lochman held their large audience enthralled with a PowerPoint presentation that showed only a fraction of the thousands of beautiful images they have taken of Kimberley fauna, flora, and landscapes. Marie deftly handled the PowerPoint while Jiri concentrated on the accompanying narrative.

Jiri, a renowned Australian wildlife photographer, was described in the book *25 Years of Australian Geographic Photography* as follows: “At the forefront of Australian wildlife photography and an Australian Geographic contributor for over 20 years, Czech-born Jiri, together with his wife Marie, is a recipient of the AG Award for Excellence in Photography and an author and co-author of several books, the most recent being *Wildlife of Australia*.”

Wildlife of Australia, published by Allen & Unwin in 2009, was co-authored with zoologist Louise Egerton from Sydney. In Jiri's other publishing ventures, his works include *Australia's Unique Wildlife* (1998), and he and Marie co-authored *Wildflowers of Western Australia* (1998) and *Portrait of Perth* (1998, 2002).

In Western Australia, the Department of Conservation has long used Lochman images in its reports, in *Landscape*, and in books that include *North-west bound: from Shark Bay to Wyndham* (1990, 1997) and [its successor](#) *North-west bound: from the Batavia Coast to the Kimberley* (2007). More recently, Kimberley Society member [Victoria Laurie's book](#), *The Kimberley: Australia's Last Great Wilderness*, benefited from the inclusion of Jiri's images.

[Victoria](#), who spoke to us about her book in November 2010, suggested Jiri as a speaker but she didn't mention that *Australian Geographic* had described him as an “intensely private person”. After discovering that, we felt doubly privileged to have him accept our invitation to talk about one of his great loves, the Kimberley region.

Jiri and Marie's association with the Kimberley is both intimate and longstanding. They came to Australia in 1978. Two years later, they spent two months searching for the elusive [Scaly-tailed Possum](#), which is found only in the northern parts of the Kimberley.



Scaly-tailed Possum (*Wyulda squamicaudata*)

This unusual possum weighs up to two kilograms, lives only in high rainfall areas, and is predominantly nocturnal. Its food includes the blossoms and foliage of Eucalypt and other trees as well as native fruits. Its tendency to secrete itself during the day makes it very hard to find. In the PowerPoint presentation, the possum's scaly tail was immediately noticeable with most of its surface looking bare and hard. Despite that, the tail is prehensile and very useful for climbing trees.

It was 1985 before Jiri and Marie returned to the Kimberley, this time looking for another endemic – the [Monjon](#) – Australia's smallest rock wallaby. Identified by Dr Andrew Burbidge in 1972, and weighing in at only about half the bulk of the Scaly-tailed Possum, it eluded photographers until Jiri finally succeeded in capturing it on film. Confined to rugged sandstone escarpments near open woodland vine thickets, it lives on the Mitchell Plateau, in the Prince Regent Nature Reserve, and on a few Kimberley islands. It is very timid, and its distribution is now so limited that it is listed as 'Near Threatened' in the [IUCN List of Threatened Species](#). In describing how the Monjon came to be caught on film, Victoria Laurie wrote:

Photographer Jiri Lochman spent three exhausting weeks hiking alone on foot to find it. One night, tucked in his sleeping bag, he looked up to see a miniature wallaby dancing on a rock. "Fully absorbed in its performance," wrote Lochman later, "the wallaby stamped its feet vigorously, while repeatedly turning on the rock in either direction." Jiri set up a camera hide behind a low forking tree the next night, where under an almost full moon, he captured the Monjon's image for posterity and science.



Monjon (*Petrogale burbidgei*)

© [Jiri Lochman / Lochman Transparencies](#)

The Monjon images shown in the PowerPoint presentation were one of the highlights of the evening. At the time of securing them, Jiri was working at the Perth Zoo looking after native mammals. The length of his annual leave limited their stay on the Mitchell Plateau. With only six weeks available, and three of those weeks spent finding the little rock wallaby, the joy of being able to photograph it can only be imagined. There must also have been a measure of relief because Jiri sometimes sits in the same spot every night for a week until the animals in that locality accept him as part of their environment.

Jiri wrote a major article about their quest to photograph the Monjon for *GEO Magazine*. Published in March 1987, it appealed to the *GEO* readers so much they subsequently voted it the best long feature article of the year. By that time the Lochmans had left their respective jobs in order to carve a niche in wildlife photography. They definitely succeeded. Their company, Lochman Transparencies, based in the Perth suburb of Innaloo, will be celebrating 25 years in business this September (2011). Their [website](#) offers a convenient window into their world.

Since 1985, Jiri and Marie have returned to the Kimberley many times, usually every second year. Their search for rare animals has resulted in photographs that include the spotted [Northern Quoll](#), the [Golden-backed Tree Rat](#), and the [Golden Bandicoot](#). Australia has four species of quoll but their populations are depleted due to loss of habitat and the introduction of predators. Their spots help to preserve their relatively short lives, serving as camouflage as they move among rocks at night, but, being carnivorous, they have suffered from the spread of the cane toad in recent years.

The Golden-backed Tree Rat weighs only about 300 grams, is mainly nocturnal, and was thought to be extinct. Despite once being widespread – as far east as Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and as far south as the Pilbara – it is now confined to a few coastal areas in the Kimberley, and to five adjacent islands.



Northern Quoll – Native Cat (*Dasyurus hallucatus*)
© [Jiri Lochman / Lochman Transparencies](#)



Golden-backed Tree Rat (*Mesembriomys macrurus*)
© [Jiri Lochman / Lochman Transparencies](#)

It is not just wildlife that takes Jiri and Marie to the Kimberley so regularly. They love the place and, on top of that, they really enjoy hiking. Although their pack-loads are exceptionally heavy, thanks to the camera gear and provisions they carry with them, they make these Kimberley wilderness hikes a regular feature of their lives. “We just drive as far as we can,” said Jiri, “and then we walk away for extended period of time; our longest hike was 21 days away from the car.” On one such occasion they left their car under a tree on what is now the Mitchell Falls camping ground. This was a few years before helicopter pilots built their permanent camp under that very same tree. A tour operator

arrived with a tour and spotted the car there. A fortnight later, when he arrived again with another tour, he promptly reported the car to Derby police because he thought that its owners must be lost. They were not, and when the police contacted Lochman Transparencies office, they were assured that the intrepid pair knew what they are doing! But knowing what you are doing doesn't always mean being safe. As Jiri and Marie told Victoria Laurie, with regard to another trek:

They were two days walk from anywhere in the Kimberley when Jiri was bitten by a rare Papuan Whipsnake (no-one even knew they were there!). He'd been photographing it, and getting awfully close ... It bit him hard on the arm and he and Marie then had to sit down and work out what to do... They walked the two days back to the car, by which time it was clear Jiri wasn't going to die! But his lymph glands were swollen for a month afterwards and he could barely lower his arms to his sides!



Papuan Whipsnake (*Demansia papuensis*)
© Jiri Lochman / Lochman Transparencies

Yet, undeterred, they return again and again. Apart from being the first to photograph the Monjon, Jiri also found a Thylacine jawbone in a deep cave in Napier Range. On another memorable trip he and Marie discovered a new species of freshwater turtle in the Kimberley. His tales added to our delight in seeing what he and Marie had photographed in the Kimberley.

Cathie Clement

Further reading

Department of the Environment and Heritage. [Quolls of Australia](#).

Egerton, Louise & Lochman, Jiri (2009). *Wildlife of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW).

Goonack, Cathy (2010). *Scaly-tailed possum and echidna*. Magabala Books, Broome.

James Cook University, Reptiles and amphibians by scientific name, [Demansia papuensis](#).

Kitchener, D.J. and Sanson G.D. (1978). [Petrogale burbidgei \(Marsupialia: Macropodidae\), a new rock wallaby from the Kimberley](#), Western Australia. *Records of the Western Australian Museum* 6, 269-285.

Lochman, Jiri (1998). *Australia's Unique Wildlife*. New Holland, Frenchs Forrest (NSW).

Lochman, Jiri and Marie (1998). *Wildflowers of Western Australia*. New Holland, Frenchs Forrest.

Lochman, Jiri and Marie (1998, 2002). *Portrait of Perth*. New Holland, Frenchs Forrest.

Rootourism - The Kangaroo Trail (2007), [Fact sheet 39 for the Monjon](#).

Runcie, M. (1999). 'Movements, dens and feeding behaviour of the tropical scaly-tailed possum (*Wyulda squamicaudata*)'. *Wildlife Research*, vol. 26, no. 3, 367-73.

Save the Kimberley [website](#).