

At home with the family who share their sofa with Beaky the 12-stone emu



There's a leggy Essex bird in our front room and she's just eaten the car keys...

and an alligator — who isn't here at the moment.'

Er, sorry? Where do you put the alligator when he 'isn't here at the moment'? 'There's a reptile reserve in Upminster, in Essex — he's with a female up there.'

Ever any escapees? Iain thinks for a moment. 'None that we've never got back'

The animals aren't all pets. In fact, Beaky is the only one in that category. For the Newby's family home is

Feathered friend (main picture): Iain and Lisa Newby with their six children and emu Beaky. Right: Jill and puppet emu meet an unimpressed Beaky

actually a sanctuary for vulnerable and abandoned creatures.

Iain set up the The Dangerous Wild Animal Rescue Facility 18 years ago, and it's still the only rescue centre of its kind.

It now helps up to 30 animals a

week, and Iain and Lisa receive about 20 calls a day from people who have either discovered an animal or can't cope with one they have bought.

The night before I visit, someone had turned up at their door with five baby hedgehogs. I'm not sure they

fulfil the 'dangerous' criteria but, all the same, Lisa is now lovingly hand-rearing them with pipettes of milk.

'When the animals come here, we do our best to feed them and look after them, whereas other places might put them down,' says Iain. It's

purely a labour of love. The sanctuary makes no money — in fact it costs £500 a month just to heat the creature-filled outbuilding — and relies on volunteers. To fund it all, Iain has a full-time job in Hertfordshire distributing medical devices for asthma.

It's perhaps not surprising to learn that he was born on a game reserve in Lusaka in Zambia in 1967, where his father John, a TV wildlife presenter and mother Margaret, a nurse, ran educational school camps. The family moved to the UK in 1971, just as apartheid was rearing its ugly head.

'My early childhood was spent with all kinds of wild animals,' says Iain. 'My father hand-reared a lion called Major and we had an elephant called Jumbolina.'

'One of my earliest memories is my father and a fully-grown chimp rocking me in my cot. It could have easily ripped my head off, but Dad was confident he wouldn't harm me.'

But, having said that, Dad later told me that Mum was standing at the other side of the room with a double-barrelled shotgun in her hand aimed at the chimp's head.

'She'd not only have blown away the chimp but probably me and my dad, too, with a gun like that, but it was just her way of saying to Dad: "You can show him the chimp, but it's your life you're messing with".'

Iain has 462 scars inflicted by various creatures — many of them received during his 11 years as a zookeeper at various parks and wildlife centres in the Nineties.

He's grappled with lions, tigers, leopards and rescued several crocodiles and alligators that have escaped from their owners.

AND in fact, it was a mutual love of reptiles that brought Iain and Lisa together when they met in an Essex nightclub ten years ago.

'She turned me down for a dance, but then overheard me talking to her friend about an iguana I'd rescued. She had two pet iguanas.'

'She came back to my house with friends. I got out my 4ft iguana and placed it in front of her. She spent the whole night cuddling it. We got married five years later. At first we decided it was just going to be the two of us. We weren't going to have any children. But something went a bit wrong there.'

With six children and 200 animals to care for, one might expect Lisa to look thoroughly exhausted. But as she busies herself around the house — feeding babies, feeding hedgehogs, picking up toys — she is slim, tanned and upbeat.

'She's got her hands full,' agrees Iain. 'She gets up at 3.30am to prepare the food for the animals and I sleep in until 4am. Then I come down and join her, make Beaky's breakfast and let her out as it's getting light.'

'I'll check the outbuilding and, by the time I've done that, Lisa will have fed the guinea pigs and the rabbit and sorted out the dogs' food and done a bit out in the garden.'

'We get the children up around 7am after we've sorted the animals. We feed them, then I go to work around ten, come home in the early evening, check on the animals, then relax over a couple of beers and have dinner with the family.'

'By 9pm, when the children are in bed, that's us finished.'

Their dream is to build their own purpose-built rescue centre in rather more suitable surroundings.

'If I won the lottery, I'd be buying 50 or 60 acres,' he says. 'I'd have thatched cottages for people to stay in. We'd invite photographers to take pictures or invite students to come and study endangered species.'

And Beaky? Emus can live up to 60 years, so it's likely she'll outlive Iain. 'Oh yeah, she'd come, too — she'd be the star.'

And with that, the taxi arrives to whisk me home. Thankfully, the driver is too polite to ask what the strange aroma is that's filling his car — he just discreetly winds down his window as I reach into my bag for my perfume.



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