

# Rottnest Island, Western Australia

The last bastion of the beloved quokka

By Elizabeth Warkentin



Left: iemee - stock.adobe.com Right: Saphirios - stock.adobe.com Rottnest Foundation/3

## “HELP!” I CALLED.

I was seated on the edge of a raised patio, eating a sandwich, when suddenly a furry creature the size of a large house cat climbed onto my lap. The animal sat on his hind legs, his delicate finger-like digits on my chest. He was trying to reach my sandwich, which I was holding up in the air.

Of course, I was in no danger. After all, I was on idyllic Rottnest Island, known by the indigenous Nyoongar people as Wadjemup, in the state of Western Australia. And the unfamiliar creature? A quokka (pronounced “kwaakuh”), a diminutive, wallaby-like creature. The sensation of having a wild animal on my lap was unnerving, but I was pretty certain quokkas were harmless. Still, I’d heard they could bite. What had me more worried was the possibility that the quokka would snatch my food and eat it. This would be bad. Not for me, but for the quokka.

## A LITTLE TOO TAME

On the 30-minute ferry over from Fremantle, a suburb of Perth, staff had alerted passengers not to stress the quokkas. They might come to us, but we should aim to keep a distance of at least 6 feet. No touching or feeding the gentle creatures. Human food could make them ill, they warned. Signs around the historic settlement at Wadjemup/Rottnest emphasized this same message.

Ultimately, another tourist did come over to “rescue” me by hiding my sandwich in my backpack. Eventually, the quokka grew bored and moved on.

But I felt heartsick for the endearing, inquisitive animals. While quokkas are nocturnal by nature, they have adapted their behavior around humans in hopes of snagging easy meals. The furballs were all over the main square of the settlement: hopping on and off raised patios, sitting at people’s feet hoping for handouts, “posing”

with delighted visitors for the ubiquitous #quokkaselfie, and getting into scuffles with their four-legged compatriots over human attention — read: food.

On Wadjemup/Rottnest, where the quokka population ranges between 8,000 and 10,000, the species is not endangered. Still, it remains vital to follow the rules. Off the island, the beloved species is listed as vulnerable. Where once the species was widespread on the mainland of the state of Western Australia, today, due to development, wildfires and habitat fragmentation, there exist only a few known pockets living in the southwestern part of the state.

Luckily for the quokkas, they



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have a guardian angel: the Rottnest Island Authority. Arvid Hogstrom, Director of Environment, Heritage and Park Services for the RIA, says, “We certainly don’t encourage [quokkas climbing on people]. We encourage people to slowly try and nudge the animal away. Because they can bite. And it’s not natural behavior. They’re herbivores; giving them a custard tart or a meat pie is not their natural food. And can do them damage.”

Rangers on Wadjemup/Rottnest Island spend a lot of time doing public education and talking to visitors. “I think over the past







couple of months, they've had probably 400 or 500 interactions with people who are doing the wrong thing," says Hogstrom.

Owing to their vulnerable status, "The quokka population on Rottnest is really important," Hogstrom says. "It's the last stronghold for the species."

Among numerous other responsibilities, Hogstrom's team is committed to restoring woodlands and native plants (which benefits quokkas) as well as monitoring quokkas by microchipping them and ensuring that their welfare across the island is maintained.

According to the director, the quokka population on the island is doing well. Despite the almost complete lack of fresh water on Wadjemup/Rottnest, quokkas are very well adapted to the dry, blistering climate. Numbers vary with the seasons, but overall the population is healthy. "Where we're lucky is that we don't have any predators," says Hogstrom.

Sick or injured quokkas are picked up by the team. At the moment the island houses a small quokka rehab facility and a bare bones "hospital." This could soon change, though. The RIA hopes the fundraising efforts of the Rottnest Foundation, the island's not-for-profit arm, can raise enough to build a new state-of-the-art conservation and interpretation center. The facility will also house a quokka wellness center.

## IN THE BUSH

Having rented a bicycle from the ferry service, I distanced myself from the human-habituated quokka scenes at the settlement. Wadjemup/Rottnest is a haven of quiet and a protected nature reserve famous not only for quokkas but also for its bird and marine life. With its pretty limestone coves and exquisite white sand beaches, its rolling landscape of salty-sweet-scented shrub heath dotted with Rottnest Island tea, pine and wattle trees, the 6.8-mile-long by 2.6-mile-wide island is a pleasure to explore.

I hoped to see quokkas in the wild. Though it was only November — spring Down Under — the temperature was 99 Fahrenheit by late morning. I knew the quokkas were probably sleeping and it was unlikely I would see any, but I hoped nonetheless.

Toward the end of the afternoon, having given up, I turned back toward the settlement. Then, at one of the few water stations, I spotted them in the wood: two non-habituated quokkas, grazing on grasses. With my relatively long lens, I went to sit 10 or 12 feet from them and watched, enchanted, as they munched around me, unafraid.

Back in the settlement, most of the day tourists had decamped. With an hour to kill before my 6:30 pm ferry back to Fremantle, I walked over to a deserted, grassy area away from the main strip. Then the jackpot: A quokka couple, mama with her baby joey in her pouch, filling up on grass.

As Hogstrom says, there's no better way to see quokkas, "not in the settlement, but out in the bush doing what they should be doing." To a wildlife lover, it was an absolute privilege. ●