



PHOTO: STEVE OTTON

Brumby at home in Yuraygir National Park's landscape.

The wild one

WORDS: LESLEY APPS

Banjo Paterson immortalised Australia's wild brumbies in his classic poem *The Man from Snowy River*, but here in the Clarence we have our own legendary tale, one of freedom and defiance, in the form of a piebald stallion called Brumby.

For this story we'll call him Brumby, anyhow. It's what some of the locals know him as. He's also been called Curious George, Brumbles, Brums and simply 'horse' – some names hardly original but endearing and do the job when he's the only one.

It also demonstrates how people feel about Brumby, the familiar friend and muse to artists, whose recurring presence is as recognisable in this landscape as that of the kangaroos and birdlife.

But perhaps the stallion's most telling name is that of Wildfire, a romanticised moniker bestowed upon the spirited beast that has called the sands and shrubbery of Yuraygir National Park home for the past 17 years. It hints that there's more to the story of this motley figure, whose ancestors had been both loved and controversial fixtures on the Brooms Head landscape for

decades.

Much like Cyclone Tracy did to Darwin in 1974, in 2000 it was a raging bushfire at The Broom that turned thoughts of Christmas presents and festive gatherings to chaos and confusion.

While the village was compromised, it escaped the devastation the park that encased it endured, the unforgiving orange blanket incinerating everything in its path.

Wildlife cruelly trapped between the ridge and the sea either perished or were mortally wounded, among them the remaining herd of brumbies, wiped out completely.

Or so it seemed.

In the aftermath of this ecological war zone, a youngster stood defiant on this blackest of days. His family, his tribe, had vanished and a lonely fate stared down this unsuspecting face.

It was the stuff of storybooks and big-screen adaptations that revel in such gallant survival.

Here he was, the little miracle, a mere child now left to his own devices.

When Steve Otton arrived in Brooms Head a decade ago, Brumby was a sprightly, young stallion of about seven (his age is an ongoing debate), one of the first 'locals' he met

"Of course you never really meet him, you just observe from a distance," the freelance photographer said.

"But he's the reason I took to wildlife photography. He was the first animal I started shooting. I wasn't much into that kind of photography before I came here."

Given the nature of their relationship, Otton is understandably protective of his good mate, a distant keeper of sorts, along with a handful of others who slot comfortably into Brumby's world.

Otton knows the intricacies of his routine – as much as you can know about a wild animal's, his thousands of images testament to Brumby's habits, a colourful catalogue of activities and encounters across the coastal plains his ancestors once traversed.

He's also been known to make village appearances, but these are more likely to occur under the cover of darkness.

"He'll come into town at night for his greens," Otton said. "He likes fresh lawn. You can see where he's been by the piles of droppings around. I remember coming out the back door one night and he was just standing there."

He said Brumby liked to hang around the lake and the sports ground sometimes. "He has developed his own system. I'm kind of glad he doesn't hang around too obviously though."

Despite the long friendship, Otton is yet to steal a tactile moment with Brumby. The closest he's come, a couple of metres away.

"He will just back off and then stop. That's if he likes you. He seems to be fascinated by people. He kind of looks at you as if to say, 'What do you want now?'"

Otton said children seemed drawn to Brumby. "They're pretty good mostly. They have a ball watching him go about his business. He's always on the lookout for baddies though."

Otton said Brumby generally wasn't approached much, but if he was and didn't trust you, he just "bolts off".

"He's curious but he's also been traumatised, so it's understandable he's a bit wary of people."

Otton said despite the passage of time, there were plenty of reminders from Brumby's past that still showed in his behaviour.



LEFT: Brumbies run through streets of Brooms Head during the 1960s.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

BELOW: Brumby gets vocal. PHOTO: STEVE OTTON



"If there's ever any smoke, he heads back down to Red Cliff. He must have sought refuge in the lily pond and used sand dunes for shelter during the fires, so you'll find him back there whenever there's smoke about."

Despite the lonely figure Brumby cuts on this vast landscape, Otton feels he makes the most of what life has dealt him.

"You often see him with about 20 kangaroos hanging around. They're all mates, they eat together and rest around one another. He's also struck up a friendship with one of the long-time holiday dogs that visit."

He said it wasn't unusual to see lots of birds around Brumby. The constant supply of willie wagtails part of his grooming process, the sight of a white-bellied sea eagle perched on a post next to him while he grazed, a memorable one for Otton.

"The pelicans at the lake also seemed to have adopted him."

He said Brumby had become "a bit of celebrity around town", but for others not so much.

"The brumbies have always been a bit divisive but he does have a lot of supporters.

"The bowling club have adopted him as a mascot. They have a huge mural there now, and there's the Brumby beer coasters. Even their bowls team is called The Brumbies.

"He's definitely becoming more prolific, but he still has a



The Last Brumby of Brooms Head by Robert Moore.