

Capturing the covers: your free taster for more stories to follow

What do hermit crabs, ferrets and elephants all have in common? They were all animals that I managed to stalk over my 14 years of taking cover photos for the *Australian Veterinary Journal*.

Before now, my writing and editing work has been either in a formal scientific context or had to align to somebody's party line, and any humour I added frequently got me into trouble! (One of my unfortunate headings about blue tits springs to mind!)

Many people have asked me the background stories of these cover photos, so here goes.

I'm excited to be sharing my thoughts on my career experiences and publishing my photographic stories. I would love you to let me know what you think, follow along and come on this journey with me.

My first close call



This 'composite' bull was a challenge to photograph and also needed some anatomical 'Photoshopping' before its final appearance.

My excuse for this photographic trip was a reproductive veterinarians' workshop in Coffs Harbour in NSW. While the others were checking out the specs of the mobile frozen semen facilities and learning how to count bull sperm, I wandered around the property looking for animals to photograph.

The so-called composite bulls were of the Brangus breed, which is 3/8 Brahman and 5/8 Angus. This red or black breed was

developed in the 1950s and 60s to keep the best of both breeds.

It's always tricky getting decent photos of black animals because they often end up as silhouettes or featureless black blobs because of the high contrast between them and the background. I was single-mindedly watching their ponderous walk and concentrating on trying to produce a good photo in spite of the bright light. I tried to crouch down to make them look even more impressive.

Suddenly, in one of those "Oh shit" moments, I looked up and saw five bulls standing in a semi-circle peering down at me. It didn't take me long to realise that I was lying on my back in the grass, hiding behind my camera – and the only thing between me and the (admittedly friendly-looking) bulls was a single-strand electric fence.

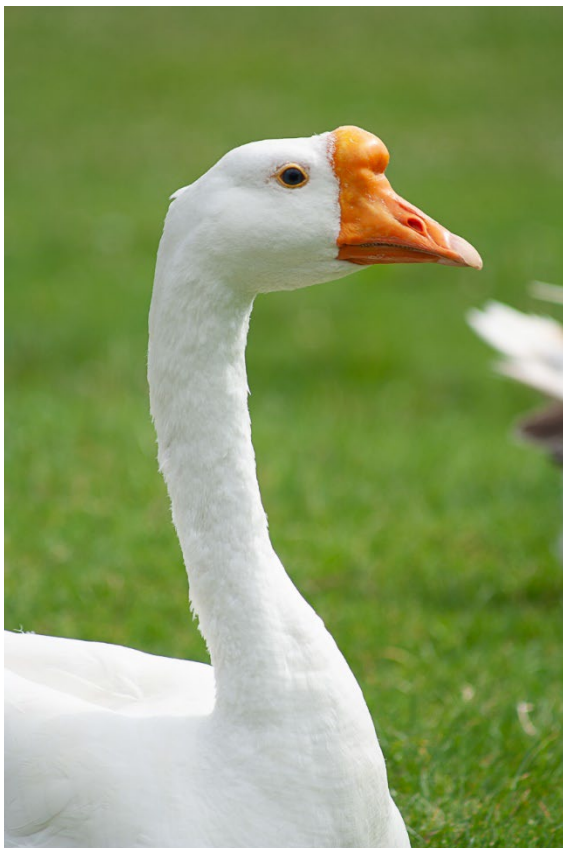
I remember taking a deep breath and thinking to myself, "Don't change your physiology." Which, looking back on it, would have been a particularly silly final sentence! And also, "Keep breathing, get up very slowly and back away!"

The bulls immediately lost interest, but even so, I decided I would go somewhere else for a stroll. I didn't even take a photo from that angle before I scarpered!

The one I chose for the October 2007 cover did need some Photoshopping to brighten up his coat, but also to remove his red protruding penis! In spite of the fact that I found him at a repro conference, it was deemed by the non-veterinary members of the team to be not quite suitable for a front cover photograph!

Techo stuff: Canon EOS 300D: 1/200 sec at f/5.0, ISO 100, EF 70-200 lens @ 200mm.

What a goose!



I've been an animal portrait photographer for around 16 years now, but I fell into it by mistake like most of my career changes.

The first time I knew I was in charge of the covers as well as the content of the *Australian Veterinary Journal* was when the layout people asked me what photo I wanted on my first issue.

"Oh! Where did the last guy get them from?" "He was a professional photographer, so he used his own."

I discovered that we hadn't got any photos in the works ready to use, and I didn't have a budget to buy one.

I soon learned that publishing deadlines came like a speeding train, so I didn't have any time to think about it. Luckily (or serendipitously), I had been taking photographs of animals for years, so I looked for one of my own.

The designers gave me a crash course in what they needed – the photo had to be in portrait format to fit the size of the journal, with space at the top to fit the journal title and high enough resolution to print correctly. I knew it had to be in focus and show a healthy and recognisable animal (mainly because two of the first letters-to-the-editor I

received complained about both of those in one of the previous cover shots). So, no pressure then!

What could I use? Finally, after much scrabbling about, I found this picture of a white bird with an orange beak on a grassy background that I'd seen on a farm near Brecon in Wales, and at least it looked in focus and would probably work.

The next problem: what sort of bird was it? My knowledge of birds is virtually non-existent, and while I knew it was either a duck or a goose, I wasn't game (excuse the pun!) to ask any of my veterinary colleagues what the bird was. It was partly because it seemed so unprofessional and partly because I felt so silly that I did not know! So I called it 'What a goose' '. To this day, I have no idea whether it is a duck or a goose!

The designer took one look at the bird and said, "Let's get rid of that other tail." And so, with a quick flurry on his magical keyboard, he took out the offending tail on the right-hand side, and we ended up with this clear, in focus bird for my first front cover. As soon as I saw the printed image on the front cover, I was hooked. And so began my adventures in animal portrait photography.

This is 'What a goose', as it appeared on my first Australian Veterinary Journal cover, October 2005.

Techo stuff: Canon 350D. 1/250 sec at f/7.1, ISO 100, 80-200.. @ 200mm.



A sheep gets a face-lift



Journal issue December 2005, and I was still on a significant learning curve for my budding animal portrait photography career!

I stalked this sheep on a trip to CSIRO in Armidale, and I was feeling quite pleased with myself. Ben, our designer, wasn't impressed with this potential cover shot and decided that he didn't like the goopy bits around the sheep's eye. So he gave me a lesson in airbrushing!

The photo on the left is with goop, the one at the bottom without.

When this issue appeared, the ex-Scientific Editor phoned me to complain about it. I instantly panicked, trying to work out what major error I had kept in the text. Fortunately, he was joking. He said that I had put back animal welfare by 25 years – it was the first photograph he had ever

seen of a sheep looking intelligent. I thought that was a great coup!

As an aside, I never ever re-read an issue after it came out – unless there was a specific reason to do so – it was far too stressful because I could ALWAYS find an error. "Done is better than perfect, because nothing is ever perfect," as Veterinary Career & Business Coach Dr Emma Davis tells me!

Another entertaining part of the process was that Ben would pick out a colour for the banner (the title at the top of the front page) that would give the best accent for the image. We would spend ages working out which particular shade of pink (or whatever) would bring out the contrasts in the photo. It may sound a bit overly pedantic now, but sitting with Sam Safi and the Southern Design team was a great learning experience for when I had to deal with later colour management issues

For the technically inclined, I was using a Canon EOS 350D, with an 80-200 mm lens at 128 mm, 1/640 sec at f11. At that stage, I was still shooting jpgs.