

BEN...A DREAM COME TRUE

Hi, my name is Lonarae Harner.

I live in the USA.

My adventure began a year ago while I was planning a 30 day tour of Australia including the Cape York area, where I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the Black Palm Cockatoo flying in its natural environment.

I knew the odds were slim to none, but hey, isn't slim still a chance?

While my friend, Kris Carter and I were doing itinerary research I came across a website featuring comments from bird-watchers in Australia. I emailed a few questions and was fortunate enough to receive information back from Mr. Richard Chilton that there were Black Palms in captivity at the Adelaide Zoo.

I now knew, without a doubt, I would finally get to see a Black Palm regardless of my success in the middle of nowhere on Cape York.

I contacted the zoo and was pleased to learn there was a programme called "Feathered Friend Encounter". I was all booked and ready to leave the States when I was informed that there were changes at the zoo due to the arrival of a pair of Pandas and that some of the birds may not be available for viewing. I contacted my Zoo contact and was told "no worries". Whew!

As the trip to Cape York had not work out as planned it was fortunate that I knew of the only two Black Palms in captivity in Australia.

The big day had finally arrived. I was oozing excitement!

My contact at the zoo said I was to be at the Service Gate by 8:15am. 8:20 came, 8:20 went, as did 8:30, 8:35 and 8:40. By 8:45 I thought they had forgotten about me. But then the gates opened. It was like standing at the Pearly Gates waiting to enter heaven, at least it was for me an avid bird-lover and owner. I was met by my guide for the day. She explained what would happen, the safety rules for both the birds and myself, and then took me to the area where my encounter would begin. I was introduced to many species of birds, was educated and informed of so many things, and was permitted to enter the bird kitchen to prepare a meal for, and feed and release, the Flamingos for the day.

I was overwhelmed and so excited that I cannot even remember the half of it.

Then moment I had been waiting for my whole life arrived, there he was... "Ben", the Black Palm Cockatoo. It was love at first sight!



He stepped right up. I hugged him, cuddled him, gave him scratches and kissed him. I talked to him as he gazed into my eyes, until finally he laid his head on my shoulder and said in the sweetest bird voice "Hello". I felt as if I had found a lifelong friend.

Then my time was up. How could I ever leave Ben? Needless to say I had to. I kissed him and hugged him and wished his family well. (He had a girlfriend who was sitting on an egg.) I put Ben down and said my goodbyes and started to walk away.

He followed me and got on my shoe. It was an experience I will never forget. The staff managed to keep him back as I carefully and painfully walked away. There was no looking back.

I walked along to meet my friend at the main gate so we could enjoy the rest of the zoo. As we made our way around I stopped one last time at the penned area and called to Ben: "Ben where are you?" And he came walking from his home and climbed right up the wire fence and put his head down for a scratch. Am I a glutton for punishment? How could I ever leave the zoo?



But I did, and I'm back home in the States now, and my time with Ben plays in my mind everyday.



I encourage anyone who is a bird or animal lover to take advantage of the tours available at the zoo, they are an experience most people will never experience. However, if you do take the tour it will stay with you for ever.

Please be sure to follow up to see if Ben becomes a father, and please, please let me know.

