



Sculpted by Meri Forrest in 1980, Red Dog's statue still welcomes visitors to Dampier, Western Australia.

Walkabout Red Dog

He had no thumbs, but an Australian dog made a life and legend by hitchhiking. By Brian Patrick Duggan

On a rock in Western Australia stands a bronze dog. The Red Dog. His collar tags are preserved and on the back of one reads a line from a 1959 Australian song later recorded by Johnny Cash:

*I've been everywhere,
man!*

I was at the Australian War Memorial to do research on Horrie, an Egyptian street dog adopted by WWII soldiers and smuggled back home. Two silver-haired docents wearing blue blazers and regimental ties greeted me. I asked about the display for the famous dog. The gents brightened instantly. "Do you mean Red Dog? They've just made a film about him." That was my introduction to the Pilbara Wanderer.

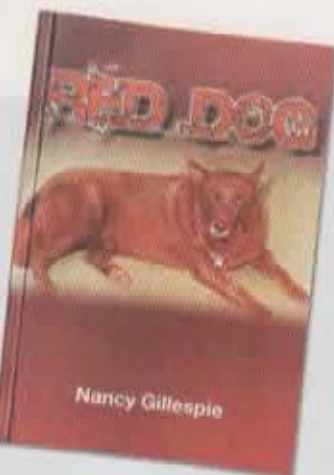
PAUL MARVEL AUSTRALIAN/AMY STOCK PHOTO

The Legend Begins

He was a Red Cloud Kelpie–Cattle Dog cross, the color of deep rust, born in 1971 in the sunburnt, red-dirt region of Pilbara. Australian stockmen produced Kelpies by crossbreeding imported herding dogs (and likely dingoes). Those with russet coats are believed to be descendants of John Quinn's famous Kelpie Red Cloud.

They are hardy and intelligent—and this was Red Dog.

Called "Tally Ho" by his first owner, neither the name nor the relationship would stick. Growing up in Dampier, Tally liked the beach where he got handouts from barbecues and, if not offered, he'd snatch waiting burgers and snaggers (sausages). Partial to wandering, he enjoyed having many owners and was sometimes called Blue



and Bluey (nicknames for a redhead) but mostly Red Dog.

He figured out how to hitchhike and would sit in the middle of the road until a car or truck squealed to a halt and the exasperated driver offered a lift. Remembering cars by color and engine sound, it was said he stopped only vehicles of people he liked and got out only when he was ready. Eventually, Red Dog found his true friend—John Stazzonelli, a bus driver for the Hamersley Iron Works. After initial disagreements about seating, Red Dog claimed his rightful place



behind Stazzonelli and no passenger could shift him. The rough bachelors of the Hamersley mining community took a fancy to Red Dog. Welcome in any hut, he never lacked for tucker (food) or ear scratches.

Stazzonelli and Red Dog were best mates. Stazzonelli accepted his eccentricities and Red Dog always knew where his best home was even though he had other friends in other towns. But one day in 1975, the bus driver didn't come to work. Red Dog waited. The next day, again, no show. So, a couple of Stazzonelli's worried mates went looking. At a tricky bend outside of Dampier, he was found dead beside his crashed motorcycle. Possibly a wallaby or wallaroo had caused him to careen off the road. Back home, Red Dog waited still longer—and then went walkabout looking for Stazzonelli.

Walkabout

For five years, "the Dog of the Northwest" had no

owner and yet everyone owned him. He was the unofficial mascot of Dampier Salt Ltd., admitted to social clubs, a paid-up member of two unions with a canteen meal ticket. Locals opened a bank account in Red Dog's name for veterinary bills. Well known for having an "incredible nose for an occasion," he turned up at sporting matches, outdoor movies, pub sessions, and anywhere else people gathered. Hitching rides on cars, trucks, and iron-ore trains, Red Dog surprised people by unexpectedly appearing miles from where they'd last seen him. More than once he was seen in Perth, 1,800 miles to the south; and one tall tale had him shipping aboard a cargo vessel to Japan (but likely he was only just seen hanging around the docks). In fine oral tradition, his drivers passed along sightings and stories. Here are my favorites.

■ One day, two of Red Dog's Dampier mates found him shot twice in his rear

0 200 400 600 800 km
0 100 200 300 400 500 mi

Sightings of Red Dog in the Pilbara over an area spanning some 660 miles



leg. With each man losing a day's pay, they drove over 200 miles to the nearest vet. The surgery was successful (but costly) and after over-celebrating at a pub, the blokes were fined for drunk driving. Back home, they joked that a vet could have been flown in for less expense than docked wages, the surgeon's bill, and fines.

■ Nancy Gillespie remembered being pregnant, and when she or other expectant ladies had to go to the caravan park's toilet in the wee hours, Red Dog would wake up to escort them to and from. When her boy took sick, Red Dog settled himself on the bed for three days until he was better.

Red Dog and Dr. Fenny

Dr. Rick Fenny had a veterinary practice based in Karratha, but also a mobile clinic serving towns in the area. Fenny recalled being puzzled by several identical Kelpies brought in for treatment by different owners until he realized, "Hang on, this is the same dog—it's Red Dog." Once, the dog needed heartworm treatment, but the four-week-long cure of daily tablets made it essential for him to stay put. So, Fenny asked the local ranger to unofficially lock him in the pound for the duration.

Red Dog's miner friends heard about his impoundment and, fearing euthanasia, busted him out of jail. Resorting to

explanatory posters about the treatment, Fenny got him back. After that, Red Dog rode every day in the ranger's truck in roving medical confinement.

Now, legends rarely end well for the hero (think Davy Crockett, Ned Kelly, and Pancho Villa). At 8 years old and with innumerable miles, Red Dog's muzzle was flecking gray and his joints were getting creaky. Bad luck finally

caught up with the Wanderer. Found violently convulsing, his mates rushed him to the clinic. Fenny diagnosed poison—probably the strychnine ranchers put out for wild dogs and dingoes. The prognosis wasn't hopeful. Amazingly, the vet got him through the seizures and coma, but afterward, it was clear he'd sustained brain damage. On November 22, 1979, Fenny mercifully

put his friend to sleep and buried him out in the bush.

Statue, Books, and Film

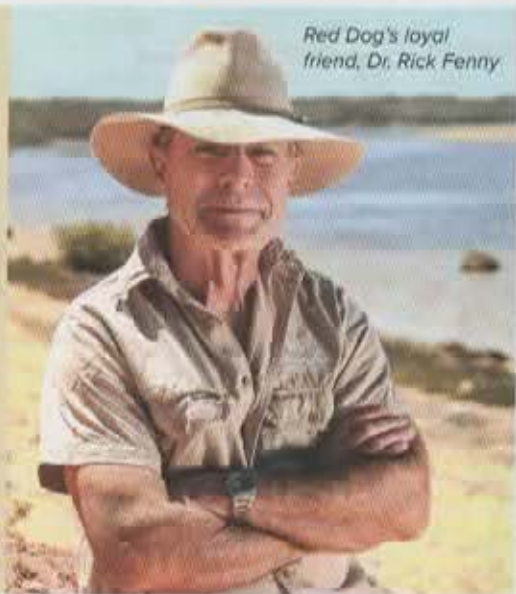
Less than two weeks later, a memorial fund had been established and newspaper articles began popping up all over. Well before the first anniversary of his death, a bronze likeness titled Red Dog The Pilbara Wanderer was mounted on a large, iron-ore boulder at the entrance to Dampier (Fenny



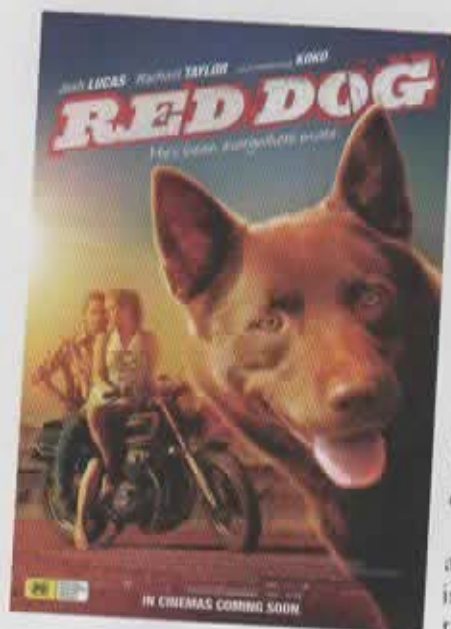
One of the hitchhiking scenes from the well-loved movie about Red Dog

Rick Fenny, Desert Vet

Dr. Rick Fenny is one of the keepers of Red Dog's story. In his 70s, he has a large practice, Pets and Vets (petsandvetswa.com.au), and still drives long distances to serve his patients in the Pilbara. Recently, Fenny was featured in the TV documentary *Desert Vet*. He's published *Red Dog Vet: Pip, My First Red Dog*, the first of four books about his life with Kelpie dogs (the fourth will be about Red Dog). Follow Fenny on Facebook (facebook.com/rickfennyreddogvet) and on Instagram ([@rickfennyreddogvet](https://instagram.com/rickfennyreddogvet)).



Red Dog's loyal friend, Dr. Rick Fenny



Koko on the film poster. His owner, Carol Hobday, says, "He did everything except say 'yes' or 'no' back to you—he just had a way of communicating."

had provided descriptive details to the sculptor). Curiously, you can find three different dates for Red Dog's death—the 20th, 21th, and 22th—which tells you something about legends.

Gillespie and Beverley Duckett wrote factual biographies about Red Dog in 1983 and 1993. A third book by Louis de Bernière was turned into a screenplay that blended fact and embellishment—including a story about Red Dog sauntering into a Karratha dog show and lifting his leg on the trophy and judges' tables. For the 2011 film, a champion Red Cloud Kelpie named Koko, with mastery of over 50 commands, was cast as the lead. Fittingly, *Red Dog's* Australian premiere was in Karratha and was shown at international film festivals. In California,

Koko won the 2012 Golden Collar for Best Dog in a Foreign Film. After this surge of interest, in 2014 on a brick-colored rock near Red Dog's unmarked grave, Fenny set a bronze plaque as a second memorial to this extraordinary dog.

Besides the statue and plaque, Red Dog is remembered in three biographies; two feature films (*Red Dog True Blue*, a prequel); the official Red Dog website (reddogwa.com), with coloring pages for kids; branded merchandise on eBay; and, appropriately, the Red Dog Four Wheel Drive Car Club.

In Karratha, the library has his archive and at Fenny's veterinary clinic there, Red Dog's collar and tags are on display (missing for 33 years, they resurfaced in 2012). Fenny occasionally takes them to special events—like the 40th anniversary celebration of Red Dog in 2019. His statue is a popular place to stop for photos, and at Christmas, it's draped with tinsel and tree baubles.

What Was It About Red Dog?

After I left the War Memorial Library, one of the docents, Dr. David Nott, wrote me to be sure I hadn't forgotten about "the great true dog story *Red Dog* by de Bernière, the very successful film,

Australia's Dogs in Bronze

Other public statues of real dogs Down Under include:

- The Dog on the Tuckerbox
- Snake Gully, near Gundagai
- Biggles, The Rocks, Sydney
- Larry LaTrobe, Melbourne
- Dr. Cook & Dreena the Seeing Eye Dog, Perth
- Terowie Bob the Railway Dog, Peterborough
- Puppy the kilt-wearing parade dog, Rangeville Queensland
- Wee Jock, The Pikeman's Dog, Eureka Stockade Memorial Park, Ballarat

... and these aren't the only ones.



Biggles, a black Miniature Schnauzer famous as a rat catcher, in the *The Rocks*

and Koko's screen test ([youtube.com/watch?v=6Su66nlzKC0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Su66nlzKC0)) on YouTube." With that gentle nudge, I promised myself to write about Red Dog one day.

Like the Aussie dogs I've already chronicled, Horrie the Dinkum Rebel (tinyurl.com/3rdp5jbx) and Citizen Biggles (tinyurl.com/ys88spuv), Red Dog was gutsy, self-reliant, loyal, and a bit of a rebel—qualities that Australians value in themselves and their dogs. And if you ask why Red Dog is a folk hero?

As the bartender in the film said, "It's not what he did. It's who he was." **FD**

Brian Patrick Duggan is a canine historian and the award-winning author of *General Custer, Libbie Custer and their Dogs: A Passion for Hounds from the Civil War to Little Bighorn*. He is also the editor for McFarland Publishers' *Dogs in Our World* series. Duggan's new book, *Horror Dogs: Man's Best Friend as Movie Monsters*, is due out in 2023. Learn more at brianpatrickduggan.net.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Rick Fenny, Nancy Gillespie, Anthony Loveridge, Tawn Anderson, Rosemary Gallagher, and Stephen Walles.