

## Two Tiny Surprises on the Farm

There are some adventures you plan and some that just appear at your feet on a rainy morning. This story is the second kind. It happened during a short stay on a friend's game farm near Bela Bela and it quickly became one of the cutest small wildlife moments I have ever been part of.

On our second day, we were all gathered around the breakfast table, listening to the steady rain on the roof when Luca and the others suddenly spotted something moving outside. From the window it looked like a frog so, of course, they all sprinted out in excitement, imagining a big discovery. But when they got outside, the confusion on their faces said everything. This was no frog. What lay there in the wet grass was something tiny, curled up, soaked and shivering.

They called us over and at first glance we thought it might be a newborn squirrel. There are squirrels nesting in the roof, so it seemed like the most reasonable guess. But then someone suggested it could be a baby bushbaby. The truth was none of us had any idea because the little creature was so unbelievably small, its eyes still completely closed, and its fur matted flat from the rain.

We gently scooped it up, wrapped it in something warm, and brought it inside. The first goal was simply to get it dry, safe and warm enough to stop shaking. Then the big question started. What on earth were we holding?

I took a few photos and uploaded them to iNaturalist in the hope that someone online could give us a positive ID. A few minutes later the notifications came in. Woodland Dormouse. Suddenly everything made sense. These little animals are not often seen up close, and certainly not at this size, so it felt like the most unexpected wildlife encounter we could have had.

Now that we knew what he was, our next mission was to keep him alive. He became incredibly active for such a tiny thing and he had enough determination to escape from any warm space we put him in. That meant he could not be left alone for even a moment. So when we headed out on a short game drive around the farm, he came too. The funny thing is he slept the entire time because as long as he was held close in someone's warm hands, he was instantly content.

When we arrived back at the house and climbed out of the vehicle, we spotted something near the front door. Another one. Another baby woodland dormouse. We all just stared at each other in disbelief before quickly scooping him up as well. What must have happened was simple. With the rain and the stormy weather, the squirrels and dormice in the roof probably had their nests disturbed, and these two helpless little ones fell out.

So now we had twins to care for. Both were tiny, fragile and hungry, so we fed them, dried them, warmed them and watched as their strength slowly returned. By that evening their eyes had opened and with that came a sudden burst of energy. They wanted to explore

everything. Luca and I stayed behind while the others went frog hunting at the dam. Our job was to put these two wild babies to sleep.

We spread a blanket across the floor of the girls' room, scrunched it up to create little hideouts and cosy corners, and placed the babies in the middle. After lots of wriggling and rolling and climbing they eventually settled down, curled together, blissfully warm and spooning under the blanket.

Just when I thought the adventure was over, dawn arrived. At 10 minutes to five I woke up to the faintest squeak under my pillow. Half asleep, I slid my arm underneath and something moved. I jumped up and lifted the pillow to find one of the baby dormice staring up at me. He had somehow climbed out of the blanket fort, crossed the room, and decided my pillow was a better place to sleep.

As much as we wanted to keep them forever, the right thing was always to return them to the wild once they were strong enough. When it was time for us to leave, the girl whose family owns the farm kept both babies so they could continue building strength. Once they were ready, she would take them back to the same farmhouse and release them into the familiar area they came from.

It was a tiny adventure. But it reminded all of us how connected we are to the wild, even in the simplest unexpected moments. And sometimes the biggest stories arrive in the smallest, fluffiest package.