

# BORN TO BE WILD

Joanna Lumley reflects on life in the spotlight and reveals how she's using responsible fashion to bring the world's focus back to nature

**Words:** Michelle Johnson

Joanna Lumley is a national treasure. Yes, it's a phrase bandied about with alarming frequency, yet with a career spanning 50 years as a BAFTA-winning actress, author, presenter, model and activist, Lumley is undoubtedly the real deal. A true polymath, her career has not been without controversy – need we mention the ill-fated Thames Garden Bridge? – but Lumley's diverse projects and sheer joie de vivre have cemented her enduring popularity among her multi-generational fanbase. In person, she is charming and conspiratorial, inviting us to share in the projects she is so fiercely passionate about.

Lumley devotes much of her time to human rights and animal welfare charities, lending her distinctive voice and campaigning skills to organisation such as Survival International and Tree Aid. Much of her work has had great impact worldwide – her work as the public face of the Gurkha Justice Campaign saw landmark success for Gurkha soldiers wishing to settle in Britain.

The British star, who is vocal about her passion for wildlife conservation, is also a founding patron of wildlife charity the Born Free Foundation (founded by fellow actors Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers) which this year celebrates its 35th anniversary.

"I am thrilled to bits that this wonderful charity has not only survived but is flourishing," Lumley says. "I have worked closely with Bill, Virginia and Will [the founders' son and current president] since the charity was known as Zoo Check. They are like a family to me. I have always loved animals in the wild, and when the opportunity came for me to step up to help, I was there in a heartbeat.

"One of my most treasured moments was working with Will in Kenya to translocate a small group of Rothschild's giraffes for breeding purposes. To be so close to these almost mythical animals – and to be kissed by their hairy lips – made me feel I was half-way to paradise."

One of the foundation's current campaigns, Living With Tigers, promotes wild tiger conservation in central India by tackling poaching, protecting habitats and educating communities. "Born Free's tireless fight to help the big beasts has not only saved individual animals, it has highlighted to the public the dangers facing the natural world, all perpetrated by man," Lumley says.

The actress modelled a unique Shere Khan necklace for the charity, created in 2011 by award-winning jeweller Catherine Best, worth more than £500,000. First auctioned eight years ago, it's now available directly through Born Free to raise £300,000 for Living With Tigers.

Celebrating her 73rd birthday on 1 May, Lumley has no plans to cool down her campaigning work. As she tells Tempus: "I shall stop only when the lights go out."»



Statement jewellery: Modelling the Shere Khan necklace for Born Free Foundation's Living With Tigers campaign



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**Left:**  
Lumley with her beloved Rothschild's giraffes; wild tigers protected by Born Free

**Right:**  
Lumley at Born Free's Beyond the Bars event



Nothing delights the actress more than travelling the world: her documentary work has taken her on adventures to Norway, Greece, India, Japan, the Nile, the Silk Road and beyond.

"I loved Central Asia, Georgia and Uzbekistan. I fell at once for Iran: anywhere with mountains is magic to me," she says of her favourite adventures, noting that she has inherited her enthusiasm for the great outdoors from her mother, Beatrice Rose Weir. "The wild outdoors was her favourite place: mountains were her meat and drink. My mother adored spiders, and my sister and I were taught to love all creatures, and treat them with care and respect – even the lowliest worm, the slimiest slug and hissiest snake," she laughs.

Born in Kashmir, India, in 1946, Lumley takes much of her personal travel style from the region's influences. "In India the shalwar kameez is so cool and elegant," she says. "I am pleased to see its influence being felt in the west. Wherever I travel I always take glorious scarves and shawls, black and white basics, long sleeves and covered legs... and my trusty canvas shoulder-bag, which almost has its own passport."

Lumley is also no stranger to red carpets and says that the contemporary fashion industry should be a natural ally for wildlife charities. "Maybe the loveliness and glamour of the fashion world is readier than most to see beauty in the natural world. But beware – some brands still use skins and hides that were reared or trapped in the most inhumane ways," she says. "No fashion house should be using fur or pelts, and all of us

know now there are also dangers in plastic – but the greatest threat of all is indifference."

Fashion has always been a key part of Lumley's career. She was photographer Brian Duffy's model and muse during the swinging 60s before her move into acting saw her take on standout roles in *The Avengers* (1976-77) and, of course, long-running sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* in which she played eternal party girl Patsy Stone, alongside series creator and actress Jennifer Saunders.

"We all adored working on *Ab Fab*. We laughed ourselves sick and formed the tightest friendships," she says. Lumley will next be on our screens opposite actor Roger Allam in *Conversations from a Long Marriage*, a sitcom based on the BBC Radio 4 play. "It's a wonderful two-hander with the delicious Roger Allam," she says. "Funny, touching and charming – the scripts are a joy to work on. What could be better?"

For now, Lumley's sights are firmly set on her campaigning work, and she is hopeful that Born Free's efforts will see a new lease of life for the endangered wild tigers of India.

"My family was always keen on courtesy and kindness, curiosity, bravery, modesty, good nature and energy. I am so proud if any of these attributes have rubbed off on me. I support so many things," she says. "The way I look at it is this: If someone needs help and you hear their cries, help them. That's really all there is to it." ①

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