



following the furnace

Though we often hear of how many hectares of land have been burnt during bushfires, we may not equate this with losses to wildlife. And the losses can be devastating – sometimes the annihilation of entire populations of wildlife. Following the furnace of a bushfire, time is critical. As Briar Jensen discovers, despite the often dire situation for wildlife, the wholehearted dedication and compassion of volunteers to save them indicates that the future of our wildlife is in good hands.



'Everything is burnt, blackened. Nothing's moving, no birds, no flies, nothing except the wind eerily whistling through burnt forest, which is scattered with charred, burnt bodies.'

This is what faces Denise Garratt, director of Help for Wildlife, Victoria, when searching for animal casualties after a bushfire. 'It's gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, soul-destroying.'

In Victoria alone, more than 1.1 million hectares have been burnt this season and Sandy Fernee of Wildlife Victoria estimates wildlife losses could be in the millions. 'People tend to think about the kangaroos and koalas; we tend to overlook the devastation to our smaller animals, the possums, micro bats, gliders, lizards, snakes and baby birds.'

In Framlingham Forest, about 25 kilometres north-east of Warrnambool, it's believed most of the population of 5,000 koalas has been wiped out. The 1,075-hectare forest, also home to long-nosed potoroos and bandicoots, eastern grey kangaroos and swamp wallabies, is burnt out.

Framlingham is an isolated remnant forest surrounded by farmland, with no bush corridors for animals such as koalas to escape into. While animals like wallabies, potoroos and kangaroos retreated into farmland, the koalas were trapped, engulfed by the fire's intensity.

Farmers emotionally recounted hearing extreme, loud and intense screaming by koalas when the fire reached them, according to Rolf Schlagloth of the Australian Koala Foundation (AKF).

Driving into the forest after the fire, Rolf says, 'There were dead koalas on either side of the road every 20 metres. Everything smelt of death. There were burnt koalas hanging up in the trees and koalas fried in the motion of escape. The scene was quite shocking.'

'Your first reaction is you just want to get in there,' says rescuer and photographer Mick De Montignie from Help for Wildlife, but rescue operations must be planned and coordinated, and authority given by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) or the Country Fire Authority (CFA). 'You have to follow the instructions of the authority in charge. We have to have bushfire training and I have animal burns training



as well.' Depending on the weather and remaining fire hotspots, it can be a week before access is granted.

It's a wonderful achievement for wildlife groups to be consulted in the planning of rescue operations, and at Framlingham, Mick was encouraged by the spirit of cooperation between DSE and the different wildlife groups involved, which included daily meetings.

By the time rescuers reach an area, the situation is extremely distressing and many animals require euthanasia. The remainder are taken to triage centres set up at staging posts. Once here, animals are placed on a drip for re-hydration, given painkillers and antibiotics and their wounds treated, before being transported to qualified wildlife carers.

The days are long, the conditions hot, dry and smoky. Storms or flaring hotspots can hamper operations, meaning periods of frustrated waiting.

Rescuing the koalas requires enormous empathy, says Denise. 'They are hanging on to life by a thread. Apart from being in extreme pain, they are terrified. Everything left in their world is what they're hanging on to and to be torn away from that is very difficult. They will fight.'

With koalas trapped in trees 40 to 50 metres tall and too injured to climb down, rescuers have to go up to retrieve them. Cherry pickers can only access the forest edge, so tree climbers, who often have to clamber past dead koalas, do most of the work.

Time is critical. 'It's been 18 days since the fire was put out and there are still koalas in there who don't have anything to eat,' says Mick. 'They're starting to drop out of the trees.'

But not all animals are above the ground. Rescuer Sue Kirwan says one girl crawled down a wombat hole to retrieve a badly burnt possum who required euthanasia. An echidna, which had dug into the ground, was found with the tops of its quills melted.

One of the closest carers to Framlingham is artist Lorraine O'Brien. She has cared for more than 170 koalas, 79 of whom have gone on to other carers, wildlife hospitals or passed away. Eighty-one are still in her home – in her studio, her garage and all around the

Opposite page: A rescued koala. Photography Rupert Baker, courtesy of Healesville Sanctuary

This page Photography Mick de Montignie, Help for Wildlife

Left: Delicate care from volunteers for all creatures.

Right: In consultation – Help for Wildlife volunteers and DSE



Left: Healesville Sanctuary vet nurse Gerry Hammersley, resident vet Franciscus Scheelings, and Katie Eckert, US University of California vet student. Photography Rupert Baker, courtesy of Healesville Sanctuary

Right: Tree climbers scale heights to save koalas stuck in trees. Photography Mick de Montignie, Help for Wildlife

house. 'We have 23 koalas in our lounge room. So it's basically wall-to-wall koalas,' she says with a chuckle late one night as she bottle-feeds an eight-month-old koala, while a baby wallaby jumps on and off her lap.

But it's no laughing matter. With 23 babies requiring hand rearing, hundreds of bandages to change and bloody, pus-y wounds to dress, Lorraine is struggling to cope. 'It's very emotionally draining. My family is reaching critical point.'

Koalas with internal injuries add to the stress. 'Nearly three weeks after the fire, animals are suddenly going into kidney failure as a result of being literally cooked. They just start screaming.'

Carer Julie Pryor says it's heartbreaking to watch them in distress, especially when you don't know what's wrong. 'We've lost one baby, the mother threw it [from the pouch] twice. She's really depressed, her legs aren't working, but there are no broken bones.'

Sixteen koalas made it to the Australian Wildlife Health Centre at Healesville in Victoria. 'Most are suffering from full thickness burns [third degree burns] to feet, ears and faces,' says veterinarian Dr Rupert Baker. 'These injuries are very painful and require significant analgesic and treatment. Some have been euthanased due to the severity of their burns.'

Other injuries include broken bones, severe bruising and flyblown wounds. Autopsies reveal shrivelled lungs and kidney failure. Survivors face anywhere from a couple of weeks to a year in captivity as it can take 12 months to regrow nails required for climbing.

Animals lucky to escape unharmed now face thirst, starvation and predation. Water supplies are contaminated with dead wildlife and ash, which can suffocate fish stocks. With no protective vegetation, animals are easy targets for foxes, wild cats and dogs. Wildlife searching for food on roadsides and in

suburbia risk being struck by vehicles and attacked by domestic pets. For threatened species like the truffe-eating long-footed potoroos, who have now lost one of only three known habitats, this could prove disastrous.

In addition to wildlife losses, it's estimated more than 1,700 livestock, mostly cattle and sheep, have died from Victorian fires and 17,000 hectares of farmland has been lost. Now the crisis for those that remain is the shortage of feed and water.

The fire at Framlingham is suspected of being deliberately lit. 'It's bad enough when it's a lightning strike or started by a discarded cigarette,' says Denise. 'But it's hard to deal with when it's a deliberately lit fire.' It's especially frustrating for the AKF, who spent eight years working at Framlingham with local Aborigines to revegetate and create corridors. It could be two to four years before koalas can be returned to the forest.

'All this work, all this energy, has gone up in flames,' says Rolf, who is critical of the DSE, which he believes was lacking strategies for such a severe fire with huge animal casualties. 'We must have plans in place to deal with this sort of situation in the future because we have very few koalas and koala habitat left.'

Volunteers are vital for animal rescue operations and the community spirit at Framlingham is inspiring. Medication has been donated from hospitals, companies have provided cherry pickers and tree climbers and vets have been travelling from across the state. Local residents are feeding volunteers, the Aboriginal community are feeding displaced wildlife, while school children are collecting gum leaves.

Wildlife volunteers are dedicated, passionate people, and need to be to cope with so much suffering. 'You focus on the positives,' says Denise. Sue agrees, 'Some koala mums had just hung on until they were rescued and then they died. It's extremely satisfying to think these guys [orphaned koalas] are going to have a second chance.'

Post Script

The carers interviewed for this story would like to acknowledge the generous support of their local vets, too numerous to name individually. So our heartfelt thanks to you all.



Photography Mick de Montganie, Help for Wildlife

Above: A hands-on team approach to wildlife care

Far right: Clinging to safety

Right: Down a hole – volunteers check everywhere for wildlife



How you can help ...

If near bushfire areas, keep dogs and cats locked up for at least 10 days after the fire. Leave water at ground level and above, but place a stick in the container so small animals don't drown. Contact your local wildlife group before leaving food out, as some foods attract rats and foxes. Do not place hay in parks or forests as seeds can disperse.

Watch out for dehydrated, frightened or stressed wildlife. Animals can be found weeks after the fires. If you see injured animals, call your local wildlife group.

Carers need supplies of bandages, old pillowcases, sheets, towels, cloth nappies, washing baskets and cushions. Donations of burn creams, analgesics and antibiotics are appreciated as well as specific formulas.

Help volunteers by offering to collect gum leaves, clean cages, prepare meals, change bedding and do the washing. Donate nesting boxes, cages or building materials for animal enclosures and offer to help make them. Assist transportation of animals between

vets and carers. If your property is suitable, consider offering it as a release site for rehabilitated animals.

Wildlife organisations are volunteer, non-profit groups that rely on public donations. Most carers pay their own expenses, but with the cost of intensive care for one adult koala estimated at \$50 per day they desperately need assistance. See websites for donations details.

Australian Fauna Care www.fauna.org.au for wildlife groups in your area

Australian Koala Foundation www.savethekoala.com

Australian Wildlife Health Centre (Victoria) www.healesvillesanctuary.com.au

Australian Wildlife Hospital (Queensland) www.wildlifewarriors.org.au

Wildlife Victoria www.wildlifevictoria.org.au

Help for Wildlife (Victoria) www.helpforwildlife.com