

Fire & biodiversity

– Responding to fire-affected wildlife

Wildlife can be injured during bushfires. The Department of Sustainability and Environment works with suitably qualified and experienced wildlife care organisations and rehabilitators to assist with the recovery, treatment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife affected by fire.

What happens to wildlife during fires?

Fire is a natural part of the Australian landscape. The evidence from thousands of years of fire history is that most species have been able to recover after fire, time and again.

Many of our plants and animals have evolved to survive fire events and most Australian ecosystems have developed very specialised relationships to



Photograph by Drew Ryan

Rescuing koalas after the fire at Framlingham, January 2007.

respond to it. Some plants and animals benefit from fire and need it in order to survive.

Mobile animals, such as birds, kangaroos and wallabies, may be able to move out of burning areas to safer grounds. Other wildlife can take refuge underground, in tree hollows and logs, unburnt patches of vegetation, wet gullies, rocky areas and on leeward slopes.

However, most populations experience some loss during or immediately after a fire. Animals may be destroyed directly and, while others may survive, they can perish shortly afterwards due to predation or starvation, caused by shortages of food.

The extent of wildlife loss depends on the intensity and pattern of the fire. Severe fires can remove all vegetation, while patchy fires will result in patches of unburnt vegetation. The area and locations of unburnt patches influences how animals and plants recover. Usually, a sufficient number of individuals survive in unburnt areas to allow recolonisation of affected areas.

The first few seasons after a bushfire are a major regeneration phase for many plants and regrowth is usually very vigorous. Many plant species resprout from protected buds, at or below ground level, and many others regenerate from soil-stored seed (even if the adults were killed by the fires).

Treatment of wildlife injured during fire events

As part of the Incident Management approach to wildlife and fires, the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) engages suitably qualified and experienced wildlife care organisations and rehabilitators to assist with the recovery, treatment, rehabilitation and release of wildlife affected by fire.

To assist during fire operations, volunteers must be accredited with Basic Wildfire Awareness Training, and must act under the instructions of the designated Incident Controller. Anyone who takes in injured wildlife must have a Wildlife Shelter permit or Foster Carer authorisation.

Wildlife injured during the fires should be assessed by a qualified veterinarian as soon as possible and/or transported to an authorised shelter for treatment and rehabilitation.

The primary goal of wildlife rehabilitation is to assist animal welfare both during the rehabilitation process,

and upon release. Animals must be euthanased if they are considered unlikely to recover sufficiently to return to the wild, or if there is uncertainty regarding the ability of a release site to sustain them.

Government assistance for wildlife rehabilitators

The Victorian Government has announced a Bushfire Wildlife Volunteer Grants Program to assist volunteer wildlife rehabilitators, foster carers, and veterinarians in their efforts to rescue, treat and rehabilitate wildlife injured by fires. Up to \$350,000 will be available as grants to provide additional assistance to those volunteers whose resources have been stretched responding to the fire effort.

For more information on these grants or to see if you are eligible for funding, please contact the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

The Victorian Government also provides funding opportunities through grant schemes such as the Victorian Volunteer Small Grants Program and other one-off initiatives. For example, in 2008 the Government provided \$500,000 in grants to enable rehabilitators to purchase new facilities and equipment. The Government also contributed \$6 million for the development of the Australian Wildlife Health Centre at Healesville Sanctuary.

What can you do to help injured wildlife?

Wildlife in fire-affected areas may be dehydrated and stressed. It is important not to frighten these animals by approaching or trying to catch them. All wild animals should be treated with caution, especially when they are distressed and injured. Also, domestic animals, particularly dogs and cats, should not be allowed to roam, including at night, as they may chase or prey on susceptible wildlife.

You can help wildlife by leaving water out for them, ensuring to place a stick or rock inside the container so small animals don't drown. However **DSE does not recommend the feeding of wildlife that has been affected by fire for a variety of reasons.**

In areas of native vegetation, particularly National and State Parks, spreading domestic animal fodder compromises environmental recovery through invasion by weed species. Feed such as hay, often contains weed seeds that germinate and invade natural areas.

Secondly, long-term feeding also creates dependency upon humans for food. Hand fed animals may also become tame exposing them to risks from people and dogs.

Feeding stations also attract predators, especially cats and dogs, that may prey on wildlife.

Finally, poorly targeted feeding may support populations of introduced pest species such as rats, mice, and introduced birds into an area.

If you feel you must provide food for fire-affected wildlife:

- **You should not enter areas where there are fire-affected trees.** Falling trees and limbs can injure or kill.
- Only provide feed in areas where you have the permission from the landowner or manager to do so. This includes public and private land.
- Seek advice from wildlife care organisations on the best types of foods for the particular wildlife in question. Foods provided should be as close to the natural diet of the species as possible.
- Restrict feeding to areas away from natural bushland, such as on farmland.
- Place food well away from roadways to prevent animals from being attracted to places where they may be hit by vehicles.
- Use foods that are free of weed seeds.
- Seek advice from wildlife carers if you have animals regularly returning to artificially provided food. Such animals may need to be treated by a vet or humanely destroyed if they are sick or injured and dependant upon food provided by people.
- Slowly cease feeding when vegetation shows signs of regeneration.

Contacts

If you come across sick or injured wildlife, please contact DSE on 136 186 or a wildlife rescue group:

Help for Wildlife

24 hr emergency service
0417 380 687
www.helpforwildlife.com

RSPCA

General enquiries (03) 9224 2222, or contact your local shelter
www.rspcavic.org

Wildlife Victoria

24hr Hotline 13 000 94535 or 13000Wildlife
www.wildlifelifevictoria.org.au

WRIN Wildlife Rescue and Information Network

0419 356 433
www.wrin.asn.au

www.dse.vic.gov.au/fires

WRES Wildlife Rescue Emergency Service

0427 301 401
www.wres.org.au

BADGAR Emergency Wildlife and Rescue

1300 223427 or 1300BADGAR
www.wildlifeshelter.org.au

AWARE

24 Hr Rescue Hotline 0411 986 719 for injured wildlife in the Frankston to Melbourne region.
www.awarewildlife.org.au

Healesville Sanctuary

is accepting native wildlife for treatment.
59 57 2829.

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