

Rescue operation on for smallest survivors of Australia fires

October 24 2013, by Amy Coopes



A resident sits outside his house following a nearby bush fire as ducks make to a safer place near Faulconbridge in the Blue Mountains on October 23, 2013

As the Blue Mountains bushfire threat eases and hundreds of residents return to their homes a relief and rescue operation is just beginning for its smallest victims—Australia's unique wildlife.

Veterinarians across the region west of Sydney are on standby as volunteer crews from animal rescue group WIRES hike out into

scorched bush areas in search of native creatures that have survived the flames.

Residents whose own homes have been destroyed are putting aside their trauma to do everything they can for their animal neighbours, with WIRES describing the public response as 'mindblowing'.

Zoologist and WIRES volunteer Anna Felton is coordinating operations from the rapid-response WIRES ambulance, a 50-animal capacity van stocked with painkillers, burns cream, pouches for orphaned baby [animals](#) and cotton sheets—the only safe way to pick up a burned animal without damaging its skin.

Native birds such as cockatoos fled the mountains early, sensing imminent danger, but Felton said other animals, particularly ground and tree-dwelling marsupials such as wombats, wallabies and koalas, are "not as clued into that sort of thing and are more haphazard in their fleeing".

"So they're the ones that are kind of hanging around here with really, really nasty injuries," Felton told AFP.

There are typically few survivors from events like these—just 10 percent of native animals were estimated to have survived the 2009 Black Saturday wildfires which killed 173 Australians in neighbouring Victoria state, with more than one million wildlife deaths.

"If history is anything to go on the number that survive is very, very low," Felton said.



An injured swamp wallaby receives treatment after being saved by animal rescue group WIRES, in an undated handout photo received October 24, 2013

Rescues have been steadily increasing since an inferno swept through the lower mountains last Thursday, razing more than 200 homes and vast tracts of bushland, with "possums and birds, a few sugar gliders and quite a few wallabies," among the most recent reported casualties.

"Most of them have pretty substantial burns at this point in time, and whilst we've been able to get a fair amount of them to vets and then out to our carers the overall outlook on what's come in so far is not great to be honest," she said.

"The ones we've seen have pretty substantial injuries."

As well as responding to injury reports from its Sydney call centre—currently running at around 300 per day, including non-fire related incidents—Felton and other volunteers will trek into blackened wilderness areas searching for survivors.

Apart from burns, typically to the paws and face, many animals are also dehydrated and suffering internal smoke inhalation injuries.

Once rescued, injured animals are taken to a local vet for triage and emergency care before being released into the custody of a trained WIRES volunteer carer, of which there are 2,000 across New South Wales state, for a period of six to 12 months.

Each volunteer is trained in the care of a specific type of animal and rescued creatures of the same species will be housed together where possible to maintain their wild traits and self-sufficiency.

Orphans are "buddied" with another animal of the same species to teach them appropriate wild behaviours and with whom, when the time comes, they will be released back into the bush.



A man rides past a car burnt out by bush fires in Springwood in the Blue Mountains on October 23, 2013

It requires patience and dedication, with many rescued charges keeping nocturnal hours meaning carers coming home from their day jobs will wake every few hours to feed the animals and dress their wounds.

Felton said the community response to the wildfires had been overwhelming, with huge donations of medical supplies and cash.

Blue Mountains locals whose own homes came under threat from the fires were as concerned about putting bowls of water and seed out for their native neighbours as protecting their property, and Felton said they were "broken" to return and find familiar creatures missing.

One woman whose parents lost their home drove 80 kilometres (49 miles) and spent an "exorbitant" sum stocking up on essentials for the

WIRES van to "assist in her way with her grieving and emotions".

Even those who lost everything would dash from the ruins of their homes when they saw the WIRES van go by.

"Their houses were gone and yet they'd come running to the van to say 'Oh I saw a wallaby, it went that way'... and you sit there thinking oh my goodness. It's mindblowing," said Felton.

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