

## **Caring for animals in remote locations**

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*Joanne Waterstrom Muller, is a wildlife carer with Pilbara Wildlife Carer's Association based out of the northwest of Western Australia, Karratha, 2000km from Perth. She has been a wildlife carer and rehabilitator for 10 years looking after predominantly kangaroos. She is also a registered carer with Department of Conservation and Environment in WA. Joanne is the main contact for all kangaroos that come into care, receiving over a hundred a year. The group sees over 700 birds a year, as well as turtles, bats, echidnas, emus, snakes and other endangered species from the surrounding islands. She also provides training to new members and co-ordinate the release and rehoming of animals. Joanne helps to co-ordinate the movements of animals in the northwest which may come from as far away as 700km, before they reach care.*

Carers come from all walks of life and from many different places within Australia. Everyone has their challenges when caring for wildlife and these are some of the issues that we face. Hopefully others may benefit from our experiences.

I am not a trained professional and I have no tertiary qualification in any field associated with wildlife care. My paper is more about personal experience gained from 10 years as a wildlife rehabilitator living in Karratha, a town in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia.

I belong to a dedicated group of volunteer carers called Pilbara Wildlife Carers Association (PWCA).

The PWCA was formed about 10 years ago when a number of individual carers recognised the need to support from one another. It started out as a small group of about 10 people, who formed a committee and wrote the constitution to become incorporated.

From these humble beginnings the PWCA has grown to include 36 current members located not only in Karratha but also in the surrounding areas of the Pilbara as well. Maintaining this level of membership requires ongoing effort due to the transient nature of many of the mining Pilbara communities. Each year this number fluctuates with people coming and going in the towns and this can be frustrating when training people up to only have them leave town within 12 months.

Our members care for a wide variety of different animals including Red Kangaroos, Euros, Spectacled Hare Wallabies, Burrowing Bettongs, Red Kalutas, Northern Quolls, Echidnas, monitors, snakes, turtles, bats, dingoes, a large number of birds including Sea Eagles, Wedge Tailed Eagles, Nankeen Kestrels, Bush Curlew, Peaceful Doves, Boobook Owls, Terns, Brown Falcon, Tawny Frogmouth and many others. Last year we received

in to care 165 kangaroos, 779 birds, 8 bats, 10 turtles, 6 quolls, 2 echidnas, 1 possum, 3 native mice and 7 reptiles.

Members were individually obtaining caring supplies from a variety of sources, sometimes at exorbitant prices. As a result the PWCA initiated bulk purchasing of caring supplies to assist our members and others. This has reduced some of the extra expense met by individual carers associated with obtaining supplies from Perth some 1600km away or even as far away as the east coast of Australia.

Distance also increases the difficulty in operating a wildlife care group in other ways. Our members are located up to 600km from Karratha, located in towns and communities such as Jiggalong, Newman and Carnarvon to name a few. This makes face to face communication difficult and a rare event. We now make extensive use of new technologies including voice/video over internet and video/picture messaging on mobile telephones for consultation and meetings.

The nearest wildlife care groups outside Karratha are located in Broome (800km) and Exmouth (600km). Networking with these and other groups is usually done over the phone or by email. Individuals may only be a voice or email address for many years until an opportunity to meet or visit arises. We have a good affiliation with other wildlife groups around Australia and are members of the Conservation Council of WA and WA Wildlife Rehabilitation council.

Most animals are injured or orphaned on our roads, but some are injured by working machinery, fences, power poles, entrapment in oil pits, water catchments or drill holes and by cyclones which we can get between the months of November to April each year (about which you will hear more later). Animals can come from the mainland Pilbara, offshore islands, offshore oil installations and shipping.

A big percentage of the animals we receive into care are found large distances away. We have found that it is important that during our initial contact with a person who finds an animal, normally by a phone call, that we ensure they understand how to care for it until they can transport it to us or one of our carers. Sometimes it can be hours or even days, before the animal is in proper care. While normally all animals come to nominated coordinators for initial assessment and care, the priority is the animal's welfare and as such it may go directly to the nearest carer.

We have found that sometimes gaining a correct description of an animal and its condition over the phone from untrained personnel can be difficult. We have had many occasions where the description turns out to be totally incorrect when the animal arrives in care. An example would be "the red kangaroo only 3 months old" that turned out to be a Euro that was red in colour, fully furred and 7 months of age. Mobile phones with cameras is a very useful tool these days which makes identification and diagnosis a little easier, where you have mobile phone service.

Once we have gained the initial information about the animal, sometimes we need to arrange to get it into our care. This can be a logistical nightmare. We will use any means available and in the past have utilised freight companies, tourists driving by, regional airlines, local fixed wing and helicopter charter companies, Police air wing, road trains, iron ore trains, mining personnel, boats and will use anything else that moves..

Access to veterinary services can be difficult also - some members are required to travel 200km for basic care or use the local freight companies to send the animal into the vets or faeces samples via freight to get a diagnosis. Any advanced care requires animals to be transported 1600km to Perth. Quite often we are diagnose animals over the phone as some carers don't have any other facilities available to them, with medications being sent out via the post.

One instance a carer at Jiggalong (a remote Aboriginal community) sent a photo of an injured kangaroo to us via an email and we sent some medication to her via the Police air wing plane that was heading out that way the next morning, travelling some 800 kms to get it to her.

It is important to have a good working relationship with your local authorities ( in WA it is Department of Environment and Conservation), and your local veterinary service, Shire Rangers and other animal welfare groups. It is a long way to get help from another town if you are not getting along with the services that are provided locally.

Working with our local vets is at times challenging. We have found that they generally don't have the extra training to deal with wildlife and we are often more knowledgeable than them and regularly have them ringing us for advice. The vets like many others in the Pilbara are transient too. Some locums we have dealt with are visiting from other countries and have never even seen a kangaroo before let alone try and treat an animal for a disease they have never heard of. Veterinary services are regularly unavailable over the weekend and we have to use our own knowledge to treat the animals, with the Police taking care of euthanasia cases if needed. For any case where we feel we may learn from an autopsy, then we have to send the animal to Perth. The logistics of transporting a deceased animal to Perth and having it arrive in a condition that allows for a full autopsy to be conducted, can be a nightmare.

Living and operating in a cyclone prone area has presented some challenges. A cyclone crossing the Pilbara coast usually results in a large increase of birds coming to care - many have been blown out of trees. Another impact of cyclones is that road transport can be disrupted due to flooding. The PWCA maintains extra stocks during cyclone season to cater for this eventuality.

Cost can also be a factor of living remotely. Supplies and transport costs are usually higher and we have worked toward reducing this as mentioned earlier. Additionally you have to pay a premium for services, such as vets ( if there is only one in town), not to mention the cost of fuel and general living expenses.

One benefit of our location is that we have a number of mining and other resources developments around us. Most of them and their contractors, place a great deal of importance on maintaining a good environmental image and we have used this to our advantage and have negotiated sponsorship and regular funding arrangements. We also regularly receive donations from these groups and the broader community.

One source of non-monetary donations' that has proven invaluable is our local hospital. We continually receive expired medical supplies and equipment that are no longer suitable for human use but perfect for our needs. Any excess is sent to our remote carers or anyone else in need. In the aftermath of the Victorian bushfires we sent emergency animal care packages.

Despite operating in remote area the PWCA has had some achievements that has contributed to it's effectiveness (have on average a 68% release rate on all animals into care). In early stages of the organisation and continuing now we produced a brochure, business cards, stubby holders, stickers, fridge magnets, an informative website [www.pwca.org.au](http://www.pwca.org.au) to advertise our services to the community and further a field (we have received calls from all over Australia and other countries asking us questions or wanting to care from our website). This was so successful that demand quickly overcame the services we could supply.

We now provide a 24hr on call phone service, provide regular training sessions for new members and the general public, provide talks to local schools and businesses and produce a quarterly newsletter. We provide bird aviaries and pet crates for use by our members and also provide our own tetanus and worming for their animals. The PWCA now also sells milk and other foods, animal bags and other general caring supplies.

The PWCA has recently received funding to produce a national brochure campaign - "Toot your horn for Wedge Tailed Eagles".

Even though we are surrounded by huge expanses of land we don't have large acreage lots to raise our animals on. Animals are generally housed in carer's back yards. We therefore have no choice but to hard release our animals. Releases sometimes involve travelling between 40 and 600 kilometres to release animals back where they came from.

A challenge for us into the future is to obtain some land to do soft releases from. This land could also be utilised to house and possibly breed some of the endangered species we have had into care that cannot be returned to A class reserves such as Barrow Island due to quarantine issues. In the past we raised a Spectacled Hare Wallaby and put it into a breeding program with Malcolm Douglas in Broome WA, which has successfully produced offspring.

The main points I wish to highlight are :

- If you are living remotely, you need to be organised.
- Advertise your services, but make sure you can keep up with the demand.
- If you are an individual carer, join a group or get enough interested people together to form one.
- If forming a group become incorporated - businesses and companies generally won't donate to you with out having this.
- Call your local hospital and see if they can offer you out of date supplies that will still be useful for animals.
- Have contact numbers for freight services, airlines and local businesses.
- Contact your local industries or local companies to see if you can get sponsorships or donations to help with your cause. Ask for help with purchasing of certain items phones, computers, hot boxes etc.. at least then it will be an asset to your group.
- Network with other groups around the area or nearest capital city so they can be of assistance when the need arises.
- Be prepared with your supplies so you don't run out.
- Source training from other groups, organisations and professionals on a regular basis to keep your members interested and up to date. Just because you are remote does not give you an excuse to not further your training, modern technologies including the internet make this more accessible.
- Keep the public informed and provide awareness where possible to schools and the like.
- Find appropriate release sites around the area that you live or make contact with other groups that already have these.
- And network, network, network. The more people you know the more you can learn, get assistance when needed and also make some friends along the way.

I hope this has given you some things to ponder if you are living in remote areas within Australia or if you don't, now understand some of the positives and negatives of living in such a location.

You also now have one more person's details who lives in Karratha WA who just might come in handy one day.

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