

North East Victoria Bushfires: Wildlife Victoria Response

Peter Myroniuk & Judith Tomlin
Wildlife Victoria
247 Flinders Lane
Melbourne 3000
wild@vicnet.net.au

In the summer of 2003, over one million hectares of land was burnt in north east Victoria, in one of this states largest bushfires since 1939. Similar destruction also occurred in southern NSW.

Wildlife Victoria was very active over January, February and March during the fires with wildlife rescue teams conducting search and rescue operations in the areas around Beechworth, Stanley, Eldorado, the Pilot Range, Mt. Buffalo, Harrietteville, Mt. Beauty, Falls Creek, Omeo, Swifts Creek, Benambra and Dartmouth.

Many dedicated people volunteered to help. The teams made contact with local communities, letting authorities and residents alike know we were there to help the wildlife. We were made to feel welcome by the locals and in many cases were approached by them to help with distressed wildlife on or near their property. We also made contact with the local wildlife carers to offer our help and support.

The local media was interested in our activities and our President, Peter Myroniuk, was very busy giving interviews. Thanks to the media, we were able to get the message out to the public that we needed donations for our work to continue and the results were spectacular, with over \$14,000 raised in donations of money alone during the Bushfire Appeal. Much of the donated money has been used to provide support to pockets of surviving wildlife coming down to farming land and towns to seek food. Many landholders are already low on pasture because of the drought and are unable to sustain wildlife and are either culling animals or seeking assistance from Wildlife Victoria to help feed kangaroos, wallabies and wombats. In towns such as Mt Beauty and Omeo large numbers of wild birds have left the burnt alpine areas in search of food months ahead of the winter move to lower altitudes. Wildlife Victoria is assisting these communities to deal with this influx of hungry birds with two Mt Beauty schools involved in feeding programs with students and parents. This program will continue until natural foods are restored.

Whilst Wildlife Victoria did its best to aid animals after the fires, a delay of two or more weeks was far too long for animals needing immediate attention and we have made a strong recommendation to the government inquiry that wildlife rescue organisations be a part of emergency wildlife rescue plans and access staging areas alongside emergency services and other animal welfare organisations.