

BLACK SATURDAY

The weeks preceding Black Saturday were exceptionally busy ones for the Help for Wildlife Response Teams, these teams are specially trained to deal with various emergency situations are fully equipped. They are a close knit group and train constantly throughout the year – The Response teams attended a number of bushfire incidents in those weeks before Black Saturday, then a call out on the Friday before Black Saturday from the EPA and DSE to attend an oil spill in an outer Eastern Suburb of Melbourne.

Temperatures were extremely high with dire warnings of potential disaster situations – however the Response personnel immediately swung into action to retrieve oil affected water birds under extremely difficult conditions. The rescue was called off at dusk due to dangers with the terrain and plans made to return on the Saturday for further rescue activities.

However, Saturday dawned with an ominous feeling – the bush was silent, the air was dry and hot, the very air crackled and there were feelings of great trepidation amongst the emergency services. In fire prone areas, families were making arrangements to leave their homes for the day, others decided to stay and were checking pumps, hoses and fire plans.

We all felt nervous that morning. I was particularly nervous being located in a fire path area and conscious of the wildlife in my care. Packing and moving 28 animals including 12 macropods and 2 horses was an impossible task so we had our own fire plans in readiness.

Mid-morning we received a request for help to attend to Flying Foxes suffering from heat exhaustion and stress at Yarra Bend where some 40,000 flying foxes had made their homes by the edge of the river. We immediately called our Flying Fox team, packed our Air conditioned Mobile Response Unit with the necessary equipment needed and traveled to the designated assembly point. It was all systems go on arrival for the ten rescue personnel which included DSE personnel and other volunteers as many distressed and dying flying foxes were already being found and were in need of treatment. The steady trickle became a flood, and then a deluge with rescuers losing all sense of time as they desperately tried to save lives. Hours passed in the intense heat with rescue operations being carried out under extreme conditions – hundreds of flying foxes were being found and rescue crews were suffering from exhaustion but still they worked on. There were flying foxes everywhere we could put them, and the air-conditioning of the Wildlife Response Unit struggled to cope. Tragically 5000 flying foxes died that day from the heat despite our

desperate attempts. We were so busy I had not had time to answer my phone – the priority on everyone’s mind was to save as many bats as possible.

It was not until approximately 8.30pm that night that I noticed my private number had come up a number of times on my mobile and I briefly phoned in to see why I was needed only to be told to get home as quickly as possible as our home was under ember attack and my husband was heading out to fight a major burn in the mountain directly opposite our house.

At this stage none of the rescue personnel at Yarra Bend had any knowledge of any fires - whilst on the phone my husband told me that Kinglake ‘had gone’ and that Marysville had also although communications were down and very little information was coming through. There was stunned silence when I relayed this information to those standing nearby. None of us could comprehend the enormity of what had happened.

We hurriedly packed the Response Unit and raced home - as we neared our Valley we could see fires on three sides. Driving home along our road was a surreal feeling and those of us in the vehicle were in total shock. It was hard to describe the feeling knowing so many people were involved in those fire areas, particularly with so many close friends and loved ones.

On arrival home we found that my husband had gone with local farmers battling to put the flames out on our mountain, without the support of any fire trucks which had all been called out to other areas. Our men saved many lives that night when they fought and won that battle, and they only won because they were all experienced firemen and knew the terrain. One house was lost though.

That night was the longest night of our lives. Throughout that long sleepless night we unpacked the Response Unit, disinfected it and then repacked it with our fire equipment and burns medication in readiness to get to the fire scene as soon as we could. Our specialist fire response crews were all on standby.

With the dawn came a stillness and a feeling of such dread it was indescribable. Some news began filtering through telling some of the devastation and destruction the fire had wrought but other areas had no communication and we could only wait and hope and pray. The news filtering through was fragmented and difficult to find out a great deal. We couldn’t reach many friends and family in the fire affected area and we had no idea how they were or where they were.

Roads were blocked, information sketchy to say the least, but we all knew that we would be facing a monumental rescue operation. We were ready for that as we have been heavily involved in bushfire rescue since Ash Wednesday and had many years accumulated experience amongst us.

The police called with our first patient early on Sunday morning (a little orphaned eastern grey joey we called John) and from then on it became a flood with our teams collecting injured wildlife from police at the roadblocks and so it began.

As soon as we had permission we entered the Whittlesea staging area and literally hit the ground running – we had hardly time to unhook the unit when to our utter amazement we saw Dr. Howard Ralph and Tania Duratovic from IFAW walk across the oval where the staging area was to our unit – I remember standing there with tears of relief running down my face to see them and I could not even begin to describe how grateful we were to see them. Howard and Tania stayed there with us throughout those weeks and never left the site sleeping beside the response unit.

Those two incredible people walked every step of the way over that black and devastated land with us and literally were the wind beneath our charred wings – they not only worked miracles but their inspiration and gentle care held us all together.

I cannot even begin to describe how grateful we all are to those two wonderful people and to IFAW for their incredible support.

Our Help for Wildlife response teams were the first rescue teams onto that blackened mountain and nothing prepared them for what they saw. It literally tore the very soul from us. However, they swung into action as they are trained to do and over those long days and nights treated everything they could find that needed help.

We were so busy we became desperately low in stocks of burn creams and at one stage had two tubes of Silverzine left in those first days.

We were desperate for medical supplies and had great difficulty in sourcing any as we were told that none was available but gradually it began to filter in a tube at a time after we sent out an SOS, then when our wildlife colleagues interstate found out how serious the fires were and how desperate we were, the donations of bandages, burn cream, fluids and other necessities began to come in. We were so very very grateful for this help and very much for the messages of love and support that came with them. One wonderful carer sent a box of sweets which were eagerly accepted and bought I think the first smile during that time. We were also very grateful to receive desperately needed supplies from Bob

Irwin. All of our medical supplies came from interstate from colleagues and friends.

Meanwhile our response teams continued searching desperately for those in need, they rescued and treated horses, dogs, cats, geese, chooks, deer, echidnas, wombats, koalas, reptiles, many species of birds, kangaroos, wallabies, greater gliders, sugar gliders, feathertail gliders, ringtail possums, squirrel gliders, brushtail possums, bo-bucks or mountain brushtails, lyrebirds, birds of prey – even a peacock called George.

We reunited much loved pets with owners, we babysat George until his owners who had fled the fires with their lives convinced that their dearly loved peacock had perished, found a temporary home and could be reunited with him. Our teams buried much loved pets and cared for residents, they carried tons of hay to horses and cattle that had survived and provided fresh water for them. They did what they could and more..

Meanwhile, the flood of burnt and suffering wildlife was so great we ‘borrowed’ the facilities of the footballers changing rooms and set up an intensive care area there. We made temporary pens from bales of hay we sourced from the Farmers Federation, we erected big commercial air coolers to try to give some comfort. Once the wildlife was stabilized they were moved out to specialist carers and the Healesville Sanctuary. Some came home to our shelters where we ourselves nursed and cared for them while we continued with our work.

Once the staging area was dismantled we split into strike teams and went into the bush across a huge area to continue the search for wildlife in need. We covered areas from Whittlesea, Flowerdale, Kilmore, Clonbinane, the whole of the Kinglake complex, Nillumbik, Steels Creek, Dixons Creek, Chum Creek, Marysville Bunyip and other areas. I cannot even begin to add up the amount of kilometers the response teams traveled.

At the same time, we along with colleagues, Nigel’s Animal Rescue, Australian Animal Rescue, Wilsons Transport, and 1800 Animal Cruelty under the guidance of Barry Tapp, distributed 70 tonnes of food, goods and equipment which were transported throughout the fire affected areas.

The need was overwhelming, the devastation so complete, the agony indescribable, and then we found we had lost so many dearly loved friends.

However once the staging area was dismantled we split into strike teams and went into the burnt areas across a huge area to continue the search for wildlife in need. We covered areas from Whittlesea, Kilmore, Clonbinane, the whole of the Kinglake complex, Nillumbik, Marysville through to Gippsland. Time became meaningless, exhaustion became the norm. One couldn't sleep or even rest, the need was so great.

In many areas where there were survivors that were not burnt we made the decision to help and maintain them within their own area. We felt that the trauma of removing them to unknown territory would be too much after what they went through so we began to set up our feeding stations.

Over the following months we took food to them daily. We built shelters for them to protect them from the cold wind and rain, we prayed they would survive.

Many did survive with this help and our last feeding station was dismantled at Steels Creek two weeks before Christmas – a long long 10 months for them and us but they survived to forage on the new shoots that slowly started to come through the ground and at times to move onto regenerated areas on the fringes of the fire affected ground.

There were many problems we encountered during this time, many areas that need addressing, many lessons we need to learn because this will happen again and we ourselves need to be better prepared.

This is just our story – we were only one of the many that answered the call on that Black Saturday. We all did the best we could.

Denise Garratt
President
Help for Wildlife Inc.
24 Hour State-wide Wildlife Emergency Service.