

# WINE NEWS

## Wildlife carers across Canberra are struggling to cope as they watch helpless animals die

By Alexandra Alvaro

Updated Sat 27 Apr 2019, 10:54am



PHOTO: Infant wombats like this one are among the animals typically cared for by wildlife rescuers. (ABC News: Alexandra Alvaro)

**Volunteer wildlife carers are suffering from burn-out and "compassion fatigue" due to the stress of the job, while some are even being driven to suicide, according to a Canberra therapist.**

Frances Carleton is a counsellor and wildlife carer herself.

She said she had witnessed declining mental health among carers she knows and those who have sought her out for professional help.

"I have seen people who are verging on suicidal because they don't know how to deal with all their emotions," she said.

"Quite often there are lots of things going on, but an animal might have died and that's pushed them over the edge of 'I can't deal with it anymore'."

After seeing what she perceived as a lack of self-care within the community, she started offering her services pro bono to wildlife carers.

"We have lost wildlife carers to suicide just purely because they haven't been able to talk about what's going on for them," she said.

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### Key points:

- Wildlife carers deal continuously with death, sickness and loss
- Juggling paid work along with their volunteer work also takes a toll
- There are calls for more to be done to encourage volunteers to seek help

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# WINEWS

OPINION

## Veterinarians treating injured wildlife for free, despite the challenges

The Conversation By Bronwyn Orr

Updated Mon 14 Jan 2019, 10:05am



PHOTO: Many Australians bring injured wild animals to vets, but not many people know what happens next. (Supplied: RSPCA ACT)

**Australia's wildlife is unique and endearing, with many species found nowhere else in the world. Unfortunately, it isn't rare to encounter sick or injured wildlife around your home or by the side of the road.**

My research, recently published in the Australian Veterinary Journal, estimates between 177,580 and 355,160 injured wild animals are brought into NSW veterinary clinics alone every year.

But until now, very little was known about what happens to wildlife after it is brought to a vet. My colleagues and I surveyed 132 veterinary clinics around Australia, examining the demands and expectations of treating wildlife. We also looked for risks to animal welfare as a result of these findings.

Most clinics only saw a handful of wildlife patients every week, with birds and marsupials such as possums the most common. Sadly, the majority (82 per cent) of wildlife arrived in veterinary care due to trauma of some kind. The most common cause was animals being hit by cars, followed by undefined trauma and predation by another animal.

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Most clinics examined and treated wildlife for free, with less than 10 per cent receiving some kind of payment. These were usually made by wildlife rehabilitation groups or members of the public.

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Due to the painful and serious nature of trauma, around a third of clinics reported euthanasia was the most common outcome for wildlife at their clinic. More positively, more than half indicated that wildlife was usually passed onto wildlife rehabilitators, suggesting this is the most common outcome.

Almost three-quarters of veterinary clinics said they only saw wildlife when they had spare time. This is concerning, as delays to treatment raise serious animal welfare concerns.

Additionally, many veterinary clinics indicated they felt a lack of time, knowledge and skills interfered with their ability to treat wildlife.

As veterinary clinics are small businesses, wildlife presents a conundrum. The animals are not owned (although technically they are owned by the Crown), they expect treatment with no payment and don't look like the usual pets seen by most vets. With clinics full of paying clients expecting prompt treatment, it can be hard to prioritise wildlife.

So what is the solution?



**PHOTO:** A kangaroo with burns to all four limbs after a fire. (Supplied: Bronwyn Orr)

Ideally, either the state or federal government would take financial responsibility for wildlife. The federal government does pay for some wildlife treatment at private veterinary clinics, but this is part of a biosecurity monitoring scheme and isn't open to most clinics.

Donations from the public to treat wildlife would also likely be welcomed. However, help can come in other ways. One large clinic in Sydney is trialling an in-house wildlife carer, who triages wildlife and takes responsibility for ensuring wildlife is prioritised. Appointing a "wildlife champion" in a clinic is another option, where an interested vet or nurse is designated the "go to" person for wildlife cases.

## What should you do if you find injured wildlife?

### 1. Call your local wildlife care group for advice

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 The female wombat joey with a severe case of mange that was cornered in Sophie Boyson's backyard in Gordon on Friday. The joey, which had also been hit by a car, had to be euthanised because of the severe mange. Picture: Sophie Boyson

The Wombat Rescue manager said it was the worst case of mange she'd ever seen, forcing rangers to euthanise the joey on the spot on Saturday.

Ms Vermaak is calling for a national strategy to deal with the parasite and more resources and input from the ACT government, as well as trying to raise public awareness of the disease.

Mange is a skin disease caused by mites that has been running rampant in Australia's wombat population.

"There's this huge mange crisis. This is a national disaster but it's not really getting any traction or attention," Ms Vermaak said.

She received a call about the joey from a Gordon resident on Friday, who told her the joey was just standing in her garden.

When she saw the photo she knew it was too late. The joey's skin was crusty, with a bloody patch around its neck and its fur moulting off.

There's so many challenges that I'm facing. I'm treading water.

***Wombat Rescue manager Yolandi Vermaak***

"That's what people struggle to understand. It's not just a skin condition; their organs start to fail, they have severe secondary infections," she said.

By the time she arrived it had escaped, but it was found nearby on Saturday in a paddock where a ranger euthanised it.

"It was so sick you could just walk up to her, she didn't try to get away," Ms Vermaak said.

Inspecting the body, she found the joey had been hit by a car and had a broken leg and gravel rash to show for it.



I was contacted by one of the artists I befriended through our love of wombats, about this little one in Gordon ACT. Today another couple also notified me about the same one, out in the paddock. Fortunately the rangers were already there and we could safely help her out of her misery and incredible pain.

I have not seen many cases of mange worse than this. This was a little female joey. What got to me the worst of this scenario is that mum is looking ok, but we had to take her... [See More](#)

She said the joey would have been unable to sleep because of constantly scratching at the mange.

The body was destroyed so not to infect other animals who could feed on the body.

"It's like an atom bomb going off. This body filled with mites looking for a new host is being eaten," she said.

Treatment for mange in the wild is difficult. Conservationists use an automated flap on wombat burrows, which sprays the treatment fluid cydectin onto wombats' backs, Ms Vermaak said.

But there are difficulties - wombats tend to use multiple burrows, and other wombats or animals can trigger the flap.

In some cases Ms Vermaak has seen, sprayed wombats can also shake off all the cydectin.

Wombats with mange needed to be treated at least once a week for up to four to six months.

"There's so many challenges that I'm facing," she said.

"I'm treading water."



 A healthy wombat joey in the care of ACT Wildlife in 2018. Picture: Jamila Toderas

Ms Vermaak said a national strategy was needed to deal with wombat mange and to find a better and more efficient treatment. She said the ACT government could get involved too.

"I think what they (the ACT government) could do is help those that are doing that sort of thing," she said.

Ms Vermaak said more people needed to be aware of mange; when she posted the photo of the joey on Facebook a lot of people expressed surprise.

"Every time I post something like this, the frustrating thing for me is: 'I never knew that wombats get mange'," Ms Vermaak said.

"Now they all know and we can all put some additional pressure on the government."

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Subject: pics  
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# Our \$6 billion asset

Australia's wildlife carers invest time and money in native animals hurt by human behaviours. A report published by the CSIRO has valued the work of our native carers at \$6 billion a year.

ACT Wildlife wombat co-ordinator Lindy Butcher admitted the work could be gruelling, but said the highs balanced out the lows.

"We do this because we care about the impact of human urban spread on the animals," she said.

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