

Sorry I haven't been able to get back to you sooner - been a "tad busy" of recent.

As many of you may have heard we have had a major drought here, and this has resulted in a very dry summer, with extreme fire danger being declared in the forests and grasslands around the Canberra region, as well as through NSW, Victoria and other areas. The long, hot dry conditions led to a lot of the grassland pastures being eaten down to almost nothing, and a real loss in condition of many free ranging wildlife around the Reserve.

In addition to my normal work responsibilities, I have also been required to be on fire standby and fire fighting duties, and have attended a number of fires up until a couple of weeks ago, often crewing fire units for 16 hours or more at a time, and often overnight.

I managed to take a few days off the week before last, and spend some time with Laura & Shantelle down at the coast, as we all needed a break. Upon ringing the duty co-ordinator on the morning of Friday 17th January, I found that they were surprised that I was not on the Reserve, and asked me (as the senior member of staff and therefore acting as the Manager for the Reserve) if I wanted to evacuate the residents from Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. Apparently a fire had started in one of the wildlife enclosures that morning, which had spotted from one of the wildfires burning in the adjoining Namadgi National Park.

After quickly packing up the house we were staying in at the coast and driving back to Canberra, I dropped the girls off to their mother, drove out to the Reserve, threw some fire gear on, grabbed my fire pack, arriving at the Visitors centre (now a "command centre for the fires) at 4pm. I worked throughout the night as an assistant to the incident controller, helping to co-ordinate fire units, communications and other resources. At about 3am I was given permission to go into the Reserve and spend a maximum of 45 minutes with a couple of colleagues, shifting the most valuable animals from the threatened "Animal House" area to the "safe haven" of the education facility. We worked quickly to relocate or put sprinkler systems on for Regent Honeyeaters, Corroboree Frogs, Freckled Ducks and other high priority species. Fires continued to build up just over the ridgelines that surround the Reserve. I finally headed home for a sleep at 11am on the Saturday, having had no sleep for the previous 30 hours. Whilst there was still a lot of smoke around, the winds had dropped and all seemed relatively quiet. After feeding and watering the girls pets (which turned out to be a wasted effort) and turning on all the sprinklers around the house, I showered and got into bed at midday. At 12.30 I was awoken by a phone call, and was told that I had 15 minutes to get out of the house! I quickly got dressed, threw a few things into my car and drove down to the Visitors centre in my car, returning home to grab my work vehicle. The winds had shifted and strengthened with the Reserve now blanketed in smoke, and lots of the grasslands and bush in the Reserve in flame.

Power supply to the Visitors centre ceased at approximately 1.15, and so Kevin and I went back into the Reserve to grab a generator to keep radios and phones operating. On the way in to the Reserve we saw a "fire tornado" which was sucking a column of flame at least 150 metres into the air. Kevin's comments summed up the situation, saying "I think we better make this quick lad". This was an understatement if ever I heard one!

At around 2pm that afternoon, the gates of hell blew open! Two fires burning in Namadgi came over the "Camelback" and "Fishing Gap" areas of the mountains which surround the Reserve, and very soon after joined up with the spot fire in the wildlife enclosures (which had re-ignited). Winds in excess of 120km/h were recorded at the Visitors Centre, with a Navy chopper pilot water bombing an adjoining property later telling me he was recording gusts of up to 160km/h.

This was no ordinary "running flame" type fire, but can best be compared to a massive blast of burning gas, a firestorm of such intensity never before experienced by my colleagues, some with more than 40 years of fire fighting experience. The firestorm raged for over an hour, during which time we lost contact with the Deputy Fire Captain, two tankers and light unit still in the Reserve trying to protect buildings. By 4pm things had quietened down enough for the incident controller and I to go into the Reserve and assess damage.

Nothing could prepare me for the death and destruction we were about to find.

The old entry box was lying on its side, unburned, but blown over with securing bolts sheared off by

the force of the winds. Arriving at the top of the first hill, we were confronted by the education centre flattened and still burning. All the animals we had relocated to this "safe haven" were gone, along with all the animals we had used for school groups. Nothing survived. We then went and had a look at Brett and Michelle's home, only to find that this had burnt to the ground and Brett's work car burnt out. Luckily Michelle and the kids had left earlier that day, and were safe with friends in town. Brett was lucky to escape his burning home and had jumped into a volunteer fire unit with only minor burns.

We continued our drive into the Reserve, with the next building we saw also in flames - Rock Valley, the 107-year-old historic building which my children and I had called home for the past 6.5 years. Still burning, there was nothing to be done to save anything and even the girls' pets had all been killed.

We continued to the main office, to find that Tango and the tanker crew had remarkably not only survived the inferno, but had managed to save most of the depot area. The house that Rod and his family lived in had also survived the fire, but the garage and other buildings were all burnt, tiles had been blown from the roof and other damage sustained as a result of the fire storm.

The last building we were to check was the Animal House. Again, we were confronted by the sight of burning ruins, but incredibly we were later to find that a Whistling Duck, Chestnut Teal and 5 Freckled Ducks (one of which was later put down) had all survived.

Of the 5,500 hectares which make up Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, 99.9% of it was not just burnt, but incinerated. Dead and dying animals littered the valley floor, not only within the wildlife enclosures, but scattered outside as well. The closest description of the scene before me was the images of the victims of Hiroshima - it was like a nuclear holocaust had occurred in this beautiful, tranquil valley that I had been lucky enough to call my home and workplace for many years.

The wildfires were not content with what they had achieved so far, and moved on to the outer suburbs of Canberra, and by the end of the day had consumed a total of some 530 homes, as well as numerous offices and other buildings. With nothing left to save in the blackened landscape that was now Tidbinbilla, fire crews raced into town to do what could be done to save further destruction.

In the time since the fires raged we have been flat out putting badly burnt animals down, transferring animals that could be treated into other facilities around Canberra, finding out what animals survived, and securing enclosures. Portable coolrooms and freezers, generators and other equipment were found and set up around the office area, and food purchased for those captive animals that had survived. The fires had consumed all the grass and other native vegetation in our large enclosures, and so for the first time our animals would be 100% dependant upon what we fed out to them.

With over 900 power poles burnt down around Canberra, it was obviously going to be some time before power would be restored to the Reserve, and as a result our electric bore was unable to operate. We had no electricity, water or phones for around 11 days after the fires.

Chainsaw crews have been kept busy clearing roads, trails and trees which had fallen onto enclosures, and the "cleaning teams" undertook the grisly task of picking up as many of the thousands of burnt animals as possible and placing them into two massive pits dug in the Reserve on Monday. Stock from adjoining properties were also collected and placed into these pits.

The wildlife staff commenced the process of determining what had survived, securing enclosures, returning escaped animals to their enclosures, capturing animals and undertaking health assessments and setting up temporary feeding arrangements. Remarkable around 10% of the captive wildlife survived, including 2 pairs of Freckled Ducks and 1.5 Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies. It would appear that you can't "kill Long-nosed Potoroos with two bricks" - around 60% of these animals survived in an enclosure which was razed by the flames and killed all other wildlife in the enclosure!

As for myself, I have taken up temporary residence in a Motel, and it looks like I may be here for another couple of weeks as rental accommodation around Canberra is in short supply as a result of the loss of so many homes. I have surprised even myself (and many other people) at how well I have coped with all that has happened of recent, although I must admit that the huge challenges faced at work have kept me very busy, and has provided me with some real things to cling to when the rest of the world seemed to be completely out of my control.

Despite the devastation, I continue to be well, and am glad that Laura & Shantelle also appear to be coping well with events. In addition to the girls losing everything they had at my home, their mother (Simone) also lost her home, and their stepbrother also lost his home in the fires at Birrigai on the same day.

Fires continue to burn in many parts of the ACT, NSW, Victoria and other parts of the country, but at least I know that we will be safe for the rest of this fire season out at Tidbinbilla!

Just as we thought we were getting back on top of things, the low water levels and hot dry conditions over the last few months have now resulted in an outbreak of botulism in our wetlands area, threatening to kill the wetland species which survived the fires. It seems now that we have had famine, fire and pestilence, the only thing left would appear to be floods - I am almost looking forward to them!

I would just like to take this opportunity to say thankyou to the hundreds of people that have phoned and/or e-mailed me offering their support, assistance and comfort. My apologies to you all that I have not been able to get back to you sooner, but I will try and contact you each individually when things become a little more "normal" here.

I now look forward (albeit with some trepidation) to the enormous task ahead of rebuilding Tidbinbilla, and re-establishing it as a major conservation centre for threatened Australian wildlife species and their display in large natural enclosures.

Again, my deepest gratitude to the hundreds of people that have helped me get through these very trying times - I look forward to shouting you all a beer at some stage down the track.

Geoff Underwood,
Senior Wildlife Officer,
Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.