BEHIND THE SCENES OF A WILDLIFE RESCUE GROUP

Volunteer-run organisations such as AWARE Wildlife Rescue work tirelessly to not only rescue and rehabilitate wildlife, but to increase community awareness of the challenges to their survival - and how everyone can help.

MAGGIE CHEN AND SHARON BONDY

The phone doesn't seem to stop ringing at wildlife carer Gillian Donath's place. The long-time AWARE Wildlife Rescue carer often mans AWARE's hotline, which the public can call to report sick, injured or orphaned wildlife 24 hours a day. It's a task that requires wildlife knowledge so that on-the-spot advice can be provided. The organisation's volunteers often rescue and transport animals so that they can receive urgent veterinary care, before being taken to a wildlife shelter where they will be nursed back to health. Gillian, who is also AWARE's vice president and runs the Warrawee shelter in Langwarrin in Victoria, gets hundreds of calls a year and cared for about 1,000 animals in 2016.

Founded by five wildlife carers (including Gillian) and two rescuers in 2005, AWARE is one of the many small volunteer-run not-for-profit organisations dedicated to the rescue, care and rehabilitation of wildlife across Australia. Covering Bayside and the cities of Frankston, Kingston and Casey – south-eastern bay areas of Victoria – the group's coverage is only limited by where they have people to rescue and care for animals, says Cinzia Giannelli, AWARE's Secretary. "There's a lot of areas that are not covered, because of the lack of carers and rescuers," she adds.

On an early spring morning in late September 2016, someone has called about a fledgling that has been found. Gillian endeavours to ascertain the condition of the bird. "Is it standing? Is it walking?" she asks. Sometimes young birds just stray from their nests for a bit – in which case they just need to get back as soon as possible and they shouldn't be taken unless they are injured, Gill explains. "Every bird has to go through the 'learning to fly' stage."

Warrawee, on just over one hectare of land, is temporarily home to over 60 animals, including lorikeets, a kookaburra, ducks, tawny frogmouths, seagulls, magpies, brushtail and ringtail possums, kangaroo joeys, a turtle and a wallaby. "She spends all night feeding young animals," says AWARE volunteer rescuer Nicky Rushworth. "She's so dedicated and passionate." With dozens of animals to feed and many enclosures to clean, Gillian needs several shelter helpers to assist her each day.

Gillian specialises in birds, having looked after over 80 different species. "You never stop learning," she adds, citing where and what different birds feed on and how best to rehabilitate them as examples. "We do it because we are losing our wildlife," says Gillian. "It's about just trying to keep species going; keep viable populations out there. And we have such a diversity in our region."

Wildlife groups do more than you may realise

While people may consider AWARE volunteers to be primarily involved with the care and release of wildlife, AWARE provides a far wider range of services than most people initially recognise or appreciate.

In addition to providing volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, the group is big on educating the community, with volunteers also spending considerable time educating the public about wildlife. They provide information to the public in one-on-one conversations when they respond to phone calls on the wildlife emergency hotline and regularly hold information or education events on raising the awareness of the impacts of humans on wildlife (e.g. by offering improper food) and offer easy solutions to reduce negative impacts and empower the local community on helping wildlife survive urban habitat (e.g. wildlife-friendly fruit tree netting, guides to creating wildlife-friendly gardens, etc.). Sometimes after seeing AWARE rescuers in action, AWARE is asked to educate a local group on what they do (e.g. in October 2016 AWARE ran a free workshop on wildlife rescue techniques for the staff at the Cranbourne Botanical Gardens).

"Conservation is a major part of our work," says Cinzia Giannelli, AWARE's Secretary. "This is why our education component – with scout groups, schools and anybody who's interested – is extremely important. We teach the value of our natural environment. Once it's gone, it's gone – you can't get it back. Everything's interconnected. We can't be saving and rehabilitating animals if there's no environment to put them back in," says Cinzia.

One major concern has been loss of habitat. Urbanisation has a huge impact on the environment, with the demolition of old houses and the removal of vegetation to make way for new developments, remaining animals have been over-browsing some areas because they've got nowhere else to go, says Gillian. "We're cutting

down the trees with hollows. We've got more animals in the world that need a hollow to breed than any other country: a lot of our parrots, our microbats, brushtail possums and sugar gliders are all originally from tree hollows."

Paving or decking areas and using ornamental, non-native plants can deprive wildlife of their food and habitat, says Gillian. Paved areas mean dead soil, where there are no worms or insects for birds to get. This affects the whole food chain. But there are ways in which people can make a difference. All of us can help ensure the survival of our native fauna by planting local native species in our backyard. "Most councils have indigenous native nurseries now, especially along the Peninsula area," says Gillian.

Another concern is the loss of wildlife corridors, which connect remnant areas of bushland. This has resulted in animals such as koalas found travelling on freeway overpasses. "The animals will follow the path they've always followed," said Cinzia. "They don't stay put in their own area. They're wild animals; they will do what they have always done and roam."

AWARE encourages responsible pet ownership (it recently had a marquee at the Frankston Pets Day Out), safe driving in areas where wildlife roams (it's been working on getting more wildlife-related road signs up) and how to help out wildlife during heatwaves. "It's about people appreciating what's there," says Gillian. "We think it's important to educate people that these animals are not pests, they're just trying to survive and were here before you," says Nicky.

In addition to AWARE's talks to local schools and scout groups, they educate and support professionals working with domestic animals about wildlife.

In November 2016, AWARE held a free wildlife first aid course featuring well-known Adelaide-based veterinarian Dr Anne Fowler. The course educated those who assess injured animals (vets, vet nurses, wildlife carers and zoologists) on how to handle, assess and give first aid treatment to injured wildlife.

People concerned about injured wildlife often do contact vets and other groups who work with domestic animals. While some of these professionals may have limited knowledge of, and experience with, wildlife, most have limited experience in the safe and appropriate handling and assessment of wildlife, says Sharon.

Juvenile joey kangaroo - orphaned when its mother was hit by a car in Cranbourne, Victoria. Photo courtesy of Kim Croker.

"If we can better educate and support vets and vet nurses, the animals will come into our care [in better shape] and will have a better chance of survival," says Sharon. Over 100 people attended the fully booked workshop, including carers from other wildlife groups who would not have otherwise been able to afford such a course.

Sharon Bondy, AWARE's president, describes how AWARE sometimes gets urgent calls from project managers on construction sites who see native animals in harm's way. By law, such animals are protected and AWARE volunteers can be called in to rescue such animals. Performing rescues on construction sites often requires the rescuers to hold a 'white card' for access to the site and may also require a 'working at heights' certificate to reach animals high up on construction sites, for safety reasons, she adds. These courses required by volunteers are paid for by AWARE.

"Human intervention is making it difficult for animals to survive," says Nicky. "Cars are hitting them and cats and dogs are attacking them. We've been seeing some unusual behaviour as we encroach more and more onto their environment." For example, they recently saw a ringtail possum out during the day, despite it being a nocturnal animal, says Nicky. "Competition for food sources is so great at night that they're

Tawny frogmouth found entangled in a barbwire fence in Sandringham, Victoria. There was some damage to feathers but it only required some 'clipping' of the damage and was successfully released that evening. Photo courtesy of Kim Croker.

breaking all their natural instincts by looking for food during the day. It's heartbreaking."

Collaboration for the best outcome

AWARE works with other rescue and environmental organisations, such as the Frankston Environmental Friends Network, as well as vet hospitals, vets and park rangers. Some calls to AWARE come via other organisations, such as Wildlife Victoria which sends out SMS messages to volunteers of various Victorian wildlife rescue organisations to see which one is best placed to assist an animal, says Sharon. Once an organisation responds to this SMS, it receives an email with more details of the animal reported, and then contacts its own volunteers to see which rescuers, transporters and carers may be mobilised to help out the animal.

But as in a human medical emergency, time is of the essence in a wildlife emergency, so AWARE always stresses to those in their area of coverage, if they see wildlife in distress to call AWARE's hotline directly (Ph.: 0412 433 727), to reduce the time between when a call is received and when a rescuer can be mobilised to help an animal, says Sharon. It's important

Boobook owl rescued from a swimming pool fence in Hampton, Victoria, by AWARE. It was chasing prey and became stuck under the clear glass pool surround. Photo courtesy of Kim Croker

that a local group becomes involved as quickly as possible, as they have specific knowledge of local wildlife as well as the local area. AWARE's hotline is manned by trained volunteers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Fundraising and volunteer support

The public is often not aware of the benefits of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, including the many public services that wildlife rescue groups provide free of charge. Commonly, the public does not realise that there are no government authorities that include rescue and rehabilitation of wildlife in their activities.

AWARE Wildlife Rescue was formed to assist rescuers and carers who take on significant costs and efforts to help Australia's wildlife. It relies on grants, memberships, fundraising efforts and donations to keep going.

The group's biggest single expense is food: it spends about $30,000 a year just to feed the animals it cares for, says Sharon. A huge variety of food is required, much is specialty food and very expensive, e.g. milk powders for marsupials and live food such as meal worms. Pelican food can be particularly pricey; it costs $20 a day to feed them, says Gillian. Other expenses include petrol and volunteer-training (ranging from technical training on wildlife assessment and care to courses such as those legally required for rescuers to attend rescues on construction sites).

"We always need more volunteers," says Sharon. Because human population and building has been growing in our area, and our native wildlife continues to get pushed out of its natural habitat, we are seeing more injured, orphaned and displaced animals as a result. Volunteer roles include rescuing, transporting, caring (by running a wildlife shelter) and being a 'shelter helper'. While requirements vary from state to state, in Victoria, carers need to be licensed to run a wildlife shelter, explains Gillian. Shelter helpers who assist with cleaning enclosures, food preparation and washing can learn about what each species of animal needs. AWARE's busiest times are in spring and summer, when many baby animals are born and there are many heat stress events. In a recent heatwave, over 50 ringtail possums had to be helped within 24 hours, says Gillian.

Seal juvenile on Frankston beach, Victoria, monitored by AWARE volunteers for several days until it returned to the bay. Photo courtesy of Kim Croker.

"Not all our volunteers need to be on the front line with animals," says Sharon. Other ways in which people can volunteer include manning the rescue hotline (after receiving training from AWARE), assisting at events and fundraising efforts, helping with social media, growing native grasses and other food (such as mealworms) for animals, making hollow and nest boxes for possums and birds, knitting hand puppets for feeding orphans, and sewing joey pouches.

Gillian, whose love of wildlife was fostered when she went camping as a child, started out as a foster carer for a shelter over a decade ago. Rescuing and caring is not easy. Bites and scratches can happen. Some young animals need feeding every two to three hours and months of care. "You have to be emotionally and physically strong," says Nicky. But the rewards can be priceless. "There is no greater feeling than putting an animal back in the wild," says Gillian.