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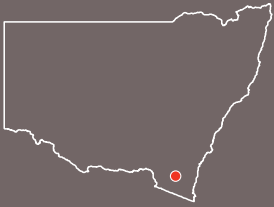


The *Bush Fire Bulletin*
celebrates 60 years
in publication



Meet Oscar, The Koala Detection Dog

Story and photos by Brydie O'Connor, Media Services



Traditionally sniffer dogs are used to track down criminals, find drugs or locate rabbits...until now. In the Cooma/Monaro area a clever detection dog named Oscar is helping to ensure hazard reductions get done by locating and saving koalas.

When a hazard reduction burn was required in one of the koalas' favourite stomping grounds in the Cooma/Monaro area, a little bit of lateral thinking was required on how to track them down.

Enter Oscar – the koala detection dog. When Oscar reported for duty he had two key tasks: to identify all koalas living on the land scheduled to be burned and any trees the koalas had been feeding off.





If Oscar detected any koalas in these areas, then burning would be postponed until the koalas had left the area.

Tracking down the koalas

Koalas don't want to be found. This has created an interesting challenge for NSW RFS and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) staff who need to carry out hazard reduction burns in an area where numerous koalas have been seen. It was decided that a 'precautionary approach' should be adopted to protect the local koala population.

The answer was to divide the burn area into manageable sections for Oscar to systematically search on the day the burn was scheduled to go ahead. When he came across a live koala he'd do a 'tree stand', which means standing on his hind legs with his front legs on the tree trunk.

The scent of a koala for Oscar is like a red rag to a bull. On hearing the words "go find the Katies" (Oscar's code word for koala) he transforms from your average friendly black labrador into a frenzied streak of black hurtling through the forest at break neck speed, determined to locate any koalas within the area and make their presence known to his handlers.

It's quite something to watch the world's first koala sniffing dog in action. As an onlooker it's obvious when he's picked up their scent as he'll do a 'bend' or sharp change of direction to show his trainer he's in hot pursuit of a 'Katie'.

Star of the show

Without doubt Oscar is the glamorous face of the current

koala management strategy in the Monaro area. Before he arrives in to find live koalas a great deal of work is done behind the scenes by NPWS, NSW RFS and volunteers from the community, to identify the local koala strongholds.

They have focused their efforts on areas that had been prioritised for hazard reduction burns in the Snowy Monaro Bush Fire Management Plan, specifically areas west of Numeralla village.

Under the direction of Chris Allen from the NPWS, koalas' scat (droppings) was found and plotted on a map to indicate koala occupancy rates. The results of these surveys were astounding – with occupancy rates as high as 80 percent

recorded in some areas. This means that if you look up a tree in the area you have an eight out of ten chance of seeing a koala sunning itself at the top.

It was assumed the koala population in the area would have dwindled after the recent drought, but following this ground-breaking research of the local koala population, it seems the koalas have in fact flourished.

Numerous trees were found in the area with koala teeth marks which indicate they were keeping themselves alive by eating tree bark, a great example of a native animal adapting to the environment. This behaviour has only been recorded once before in history.



Koalas and fire

Environmental impacts are taken into consideration for all hazard reduction burns, mitigating the risk that fire presents to koalas is just one part of the equation. Controlled fire has been identified as a useful tool to manage koala populations because they have a limited chance of surviving an unplanned, high intensity fire.

If a bush fire burns through an area where a hazard reduction burn has been carried out it will reduce the intensity of the fire and make it easier for firefighters to control and reduce the impact on the forest.

The Numeralla Rural Fire Brigade and NPWS burning crews further reduce the risk to koalas by controlling the flame and scorch height of the hazard reduction burns.

This also serves to protect the koala's food source. However it can be challenging for crews to keep flames low, with some trees only standing as high as 10 metres.

The long-term plan for the Snowy Monaro Bush Fire Management Committee is to gather enough data about the koala populations in the Monaro to support sound risk management planning decisions. Their aim is to enhance the network of 'strategic fire advantage zones' to protect both the community and the koala populations.

So now we know... thanks to the innovative thinking of people in the Monaro, koala detection dogs can help preserve one of Australia's most loved and vulnerable species.

This extract appeared in the Bush Fire Bulletin Volume 1 No 1 published on 1 September 1952.



Fires Kill Koalas.

IN A BUSH FIRE AT NEWPORT ONE HUNDRED KOALAS WERE INCINERATED.

The Chief Guardian of Fauna, Mr F.J. Griffiths, commenting on this report, said that the bush fire is the most deadly enemy of Australia's native fauna. He considers all bush fires dangerous even when homes and property are not threatened. The fire that is said to be "burning harmlessly in the bush" is destroying the food supply, the breeding places and the lives of birds and animals that live there.

"Unless we can prevent bush fires", said Mr Griffiths, "we cannot hope to save our unique fauna from extinction."

