

# Want to care for a koala ? This is what it takes

WHEN Sue Moore, the Wildlife Shelter in Tarwin Lower, receives an injured or baby koala, she takes on a big task. These wild animals are frightened, in pain, and suffering. The first thing she does is soothe them by squatting next to the cage they are in, grunting koala speak and rubbing noses. She visually assesses injuries and if necessary arranges a trip to the local vet. Following a veterinary diagnosis she puts the koala in a cage in the spare bedroom she has converted into a safe, warm and quiet place. A baby koala will need bottle feeding every couple of hours, day and night. An adult will need treatment and to be kept clean and fed.

Koalas will eat leaves from only a few trees and Sue has identified where these are near her. Most of course are on private farm land and she has negotiated with kindhearted and generous farmers for access to the trees. She can recognise exactly what the koalas like by the shape, size and condition of the leaves and has been seen perched on the top of her car to reach high enough to retrieve them. The koalas need fresh leaves every day, so rain or hail or heatwave Sue heads out harvesting.

To clean the cages she puts favourite leaf tips in one side of the cage and when the koala moves over she cleans the other side, puts in clean blankets, then puts the rest of the leaves on the clean side. When the koala is eating she can stroke, reassure and then attend to the injection, clean the wound, bandage or other treatment it may need. Every day.

The adults learn to trust her and the risk of them biting or clawing becomes less as they get to know each other. When they are well enough Sue moves them to an outside enclosure with tree trunks and branches. She ties the leaves to the branches and the koala has space to climb about and choose what to eat. When she has more than one koala they keep each other company even though they are solitary creatures. The young ones like being near an adult.

Caring for baby koalas is even more intense. They need play and company as well as food and care and they are nocturnal. So just when the rest of us are giving in to tiredness at the end of the day, Sue has up to an hour of playtime ahead of her. The canny ones learn that if they do not eat or take the bottle immediately Sue will play with them. She wears a towelling dressing gown and they climb over her, sit on her shoulder, jump on her, sometimes perch on her head. Every day and night.

Sue has years of experience and deep knowledge and instinct about what these wonderful wild creatures need. She works closely with vets and other carers and has kitchen cupboards filled with feeding bottles, teats, mixing bowls, medicines, bandages, antibiotics and powders. She is supported in this work by her husband, Michael, who is



the captain of the Tarwin Lower Fire Brigade. He was hungry one night when it was Sue's turn to cook. The animals were being fed, it was late and he asked 'what about me ? I am a mammal too'.

They look after other wildlife as well; birds, reptiles, wombats, echidnas, possums, bats. I have driven Sue to release an eagle. Sue and the eagle, tucked under her arm, in the front seat. Like rubbing noses with a wild koala, I do not recommend doing this at home !

Jo Wainer

Watch for Wildlife, a special interest group of ACF Prom Area Climate Action

