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Communicating  
with humans: a guide  
for animal people

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**Wildlife Heroes**  
Caring for our Backyard Buddies



Foundation for  
National Parks  
& Wildlife





This handbook was written by Vanessa Barratt as part of a Master of Science Communication thesis project at the University of Otago.

Designed by Ji Min at Energy Design Studio.

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“When I heard that they were non-profit, non-funded, it was much easier to think, ‘Yeah, I’ll give you money.’”

# Introduction

Animal people are spoilt for choice when it comes to finding books about communication. “Animal Talk”, “Animal Communication Made Easy”, “The Language of Animals: 7 Steps to Communicating With Animals”, “Awakening to Animal Language”... the list goes on.

Yet a topic none of these books cover is arguably the most important language for animal people to master. Communicating with other humans.

Animal people need clear and convincing communication techniques when seeking funds, influencing decision makers or recruiting new members. Animal people need these skill if they want to improve animal welfare, reduce human/animal conflict or protect species from extinction. They need to find their voice in order to speak up for the voiceless.

Vets, zookeepers, wildlife carers, wildlife managers and animal welfare advocates are often frustrated by encounters with their own species. Communication breakdowns and a perceived lack of common ground can feed the polarisation of groups in society. Polarisation is the enemy of dialogue, conversation, influence and change. If we think we already know what someone thinks, we don’t give open communication a chance. We retreat to our corner. Nothing changes and everyone loses.

This guide was born out of a surprising discovery. During research for my Master of Science Communication thesis I asked users of wildlife rescue services what they *think* about wildlife rescue, and what they *know* about wildlife rescue.

The context for asking these questions was a sector full of overworked, under-resourced volunteers. Recent studies of Australia’s 15,000+ wildlife volunteers showed that they are a group under increasing pressure.

They spend more of their own time and money than other Australian volunteers and they struggle to get help with the work they do. Wildlife rescue services rescue hundreds of thousands of native animals each year but they are running on empty. They do not receive government funding or substantial public donations and they are chronically “short-staffed”, with insufficient new volunteer recruitment and succession planning.

So what was the surprise discovery? It can be summarised in two sentences, both important and illuminating:

1. Users of wildlife rescue services consider them to be an essential and valuable public service that they are willing to support with time and money.
2. Users of wildlife rescue don’t know much about how these services operate, how they are funded or what they achieve.

The paradoxical discovery of my research was that wildlife rescue is a valued, but poorly understood, sector. This is good news for wildlife volunteers because it suggests that a little bit of public engagement could lead to a lot more practical help and support. As one participant in my research said, for example, “When I heard that they were non-profit, non-funded, it was much easier to think, ‘Yeah, I’ll give you money.’”







“ It is not possible for 15,000 volunteer wildlife carers to be effective without significant help from the wider public. ”

## PART A: Setting the scene

### Why Communicate?

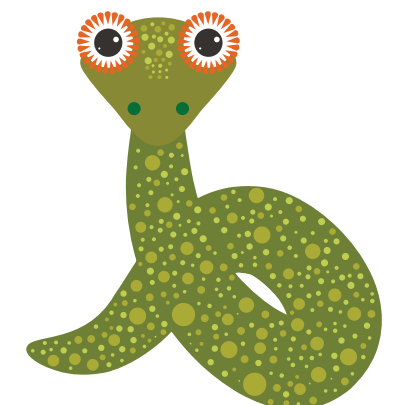
Wildlife carers say they volunteer their time to help wildlife because they care about conservation, animal welfare and nature. They aim to provide treatment and rehabilitation to as many injured wildlife as need it, alleviating suffering and helping animals to get back to the wild. Given the millions of animals that are injured, orphaned and displaced each year, **it is not possible for 15,000 volunteer wildlife carers to be effective without significant help from the wider public.**

Australians love wildlife, and value wildlife rescuer services. **They want to help** and are willing to give time and money. Communication and public engagement could significantly increase donations, volunteer recruitment and advocacy.



Communication and education could also help to reduce the amount of calls to wildlife rescue services. Better public education and engagement can improve people's relationship with native wildlife. For example:

- Most baby bird-related calls in spring are a result of fledglings being 'kidnapped' by well meaning people who think they are abandoned (while the baby bird is learning to fly or its parents are collecting food).
- Cat and dog attacks are the second and third highest reason wildlife are reported as injured. Working with pet owners to understand native animal habits can significantly reduce these events (such as keeping pets in at night when the majority of native animals are active).
- Around 85% of snake-related calls to wildlife rescue hotlines are because a snake is unwelcome rather than injured. Sometimes the caller has already tried to kill the snake. Improved awareness and appreciation could help people and snakes to cohabitate.





## Know your audience (they are a lot like you!)

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*“If we want to change the world then starting with defective thinking about the motivations of other people is likely to be a recipe for failure”*  
Changeology, Les Robinson

Knowing what people think of you, what they know about you and what they want from you is the basis of market research. Wildlife groups do not offer their callers any opportunities to give feedback. There are no follow up surveys and nobody had ever thought to ask users of wildlife rescue services what they know or think about this sector.

Products and services will never be the best they can be without an opportunity for feedback and some intel about the ‘consumer’. There is a fair bit of published research about attitudes towards wildlife in Australia. Most of it proves that people want to observe, enjoy, interact with and care for native animals. Less is known about people’s perceptions of wildlife carers and wildlife rescue services.

The following information comes from recent research...and it might surprise you!

## The ‘animal people’ spectrum

Most wildlife volunteers are motivated primarily by love and compassion for animals. The vulnerable and voiceless are the primary focus for many in the sector and this focus can consume all the hours in a day, and all the weeks in a year.

The public admire this dedication immensely, but they don’t necessarily share the same values. While not everyone chooses to study zoology, work in an animal shelter or become a wildlife volunteer – the good news is that most people are animal people to some degree. This makes communicating with the public so much easier. You already have lots in common.

### Australians love pets

- Australia has the highest level of pet ownership in the world, approximately 42% of households have a dog and 30% have a cat.

### Australians love wildlife

- One third of Australians visit wildlife parks, aquariums and zoos at least once per year.
- Up to 48% frequently feed wildlife
- 13% frequently photograph wildlife
- Most people are prepared to put up with some of the problems caused by wildlife, if they value the species and can learn to cohabitate

There are already organisations (such as thedodo.com) who know this and are building huge audiences (and making lots of money), just by talking about animals.



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Most existing research proves that people want to observe, enjoy, interact with and care for native animals. Less is known about people’s perceptions of wildlife carers and wildlife rescue services.

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## What the public thinks about wildlife carers and wildlife rescue

The lack of funding, members and support for wildlife rescue volunteering is not a true reflection of public sentiment. This is what the public thinks about you:

1. **Valued and important.** Wildlife rescue services are seen as very or extremely important by 95% of people who have called a wildlife rescue hotline.
2. **Public service.** Australians consider wildlife rescue to be an essential public service that should be government funded.
3. **Admirable characteristics.** Wildlife volunteers are seen as caring, compassionate, selfless and dedicated.
4. **All consuming.** Some people are deterred from becoming a wildlife volunteer because they think it will take up all of their time and resources.
5. **Willingness to pay.** Users of wildlife rescue services would consider donating or paying a small fee in return for the help they receive.
6. **Happy to help.** Users of wildlife rescue services are often willing to contain or transport an animal if given sufficient advice to do so safely and competently.
7. **Desire to provide support.** The public wants to help wildlife rescue volunteers in a range of ways including through donations or advocacy.

## What the public doesn't know about wildlife rescue, yet

This is what the public doesn't know about you and your work. These knowledge gaps affect the way people relate to wildlife rescue and what they expect of the services on offer:

1. **Funding.** Most people think that wildlife rescue is government funded in some way.
2. **Volunteer or paid.** Most people do not know if wildlife rescuers and carers are volunteers or employees.
3. **Your name?** Many people who said they have donated to a wildlife rescue group in the past, could not remember the name of the group they gave money to.
4. **Regular connection and engagement.** Very few people say they follow a wildlife rescue group on social media or receive e-newsletters.
5. **Trusted wildlife information.** Very few people could name a website they use when they have a question about Australian wildlife matters.
6. **How to help wildlife.** Most people lack confidence or knowledge to provide first aid to a native animal.



## What does the public want from you?

1. **Convenience**  
Everything in our society is geared to provide ultimate convenience and accessibility. If contacting a wildlife rescue group is time-consuming or technologically challenging, many people won't bother. The same goes for making a donation, searching for information on a website, or joining up as a member.
2. **Reliable and professional help**  
The public expect wildlife rescue groups to be reliable and professional just as they would a paid service. They are seeking well informed advice, timely assistance and good customer service.
3. **Relief from anxiety, guilt, environmental worry**  
Recent events have increased the guilt and anxiety people feel about wildlife and the environment. Calling or supporting a wildlife rescue group is a common way that people can express their empathy by taking action. Taking action is an antidote to negative feelings about injured wildlife or environmental crises.

### 4. To be included

Most people love wildlife and want to help, in some way. They want to contribute and be part of the team.

### 5. Clear information

Many wildlife enquiries stem from curiosity, a lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding. In the absence of any 'go to' website or organisation catering to Australian's wildlife concerns and questions, wildlife rescue groups are expected to be a source of clear information and reassurance.

## What does all of this mean for us?

Now we know a bit about what the public thinks about wildlife rescue, we can apply some tailored, but simple, communication techniques to reach more people. Well planned, clear communication can improve outcomes for wildlife volunteers, wildlife rescue groups, the people who use wildlife rescue services and for the wildlife that need help.

Examples of content and messages have been created using the place holder, YOUR Wildlife Rescue Group. None of the content in this handbook is copyrighted, except for the photos (most were taken by professional wildlife photographer Doug Gimesy). Feel free to use and adapt anything you see here, that's what it's for.

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# PART B: Human Communication Made Easy

## Start Listening

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*Unless I am willing to be changed by you – I’m probably not really listening. But if I do listen - openly, naively and innocently - there’s a chance, possibly the only chance, that a true dialogue and real communication will take place between us.* Alan Alda, If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?

**Analyse your rescue and website data:** What are the main issues and concerns your callers report when they call your hotline? Are there seasonal trends? Analyse your caller and rescue data to understand current demand and inform communication priorities. Good audience information can be gathered by analysing hotline call topics and common enquiries. Your website traffic and most visited pages will also tell you what people are looking for.

**What are people Googling?** Broader exploration of how Australians use Google to get information about wildlife would reveal the most common wildlife questions and concerns.



**Surveys:** Communication efforts must be informed by regular consultation with service users and possibly even non-users. Thousands of people call wildlife rescue services every month. It would take very little effort to set up follow up surveys using free or low-cost software such as Survey Monkey. Try to limit each survey to 3-4 questions strategically chosen to inform specific aspects of your work. Positive feedback is also motivating for your current volunteers.

Here are some survey question ideas:

### Hotline caller survey question ideas

As a recent Your Wildlife Rescue caller we would love your feedback about our service.

1. Is this the first time you have called?
2. If yes, how did you hear about us?
3. Would you call us again?
4. Did we resolve the wildlife issue that you called about?
5. Is there a wildlife topic you would like to learn more about?
6. How could we improve our service?
7. Would you like to pass on a compliment to any of our team?
8. Would you be interested in making a donation to support our work?
9. Would you be interested in becoming a wildlife volunteer?
10. If you would like to join our mailing list please provide your email address:



Once you know what your audience needs and wants – give it to them!



## Explain Who You are and What You Do

### Vision

Of the wildlife rescue groups that do have a written vision, few are inspiring, big picture or outward focused. Many are too long or full of jargon.

Your vision should tap into broader community environmental concerns. Human activities kill and injure millions of native wildlife every year. Vehicle strikes and dog/cat attacks are the most common reasons wildlife need assistance. On the global scale, the Australian continent holds the record for greatest biodiversity loss over the past 100 years. Climate change, pollution, and extinction are making people increasingly concerned about wildlife conservation. The recent Black Summer bushfires are estimated to have killed one billion animals.

Your mission may be "to rescue and rehabilitate animals and educate the public" but a vision should reveal the values at the heart of this work. Create a vision that is simple, inclusive and catchy.

Good examples include:

- **Taronga Zoo: For the Wild**
- **Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital: The Future of Wildlife Preservation in Australia**
- **Australia Zoo: Conservation is at the Heart of Everything We Do**



**YOUR  
WILDLIFE  
RESCUE**

Saving wildlife, one animal at a time

## How we operate

Tell people about your group with some simple infographics like this. You can use them in your newsletter, on your website and on social media.

Spell it out. Our wildlife rescue group is 100% not-for-profit and volunteer based. We are not government funded but use our own money to pay for animal food, vet bills and medications. Every year we sell chocolates and run market stalls and raffles to raise funds.

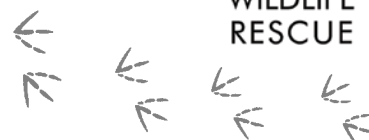


### Did you know?

- **(Your) Wildlife Rescue Group** has **57 members**
- All our members **volunteer their time**
- We answer **2,500+** calls from the public every year
- Our volunteers use their **own money** to pay for animal care
- We receive **no government funding**



**YOUR  
WILDLIFE  
RESCUE**



## What we do



**Who has the data,  
has the power.**  
**Tim O'Reilly, tech  
entrepreneur and investor**

Wildlife rescue group statistics reveal that 'real' wildlife disasters are not cyclones, floods or fires but the hundreds of animals that are rescued every day as a result of human activities.

Tell the public what your group does every day, every year.

For example:

### 2019 was a busy year

for us...

- We attended 5,432 rescues
- We returned 3,512 animals back to the wild
- Our most rescues were for possums, blue tongue lizards and magpies
- The most common causes of wildlife injury were car strike, dog attack, entanglement and cat attack.
- We rescued 83 different species



**YOUR  
WILDLIFE  
RESCUE**



## Who we are

*"The consensus amongst psychologists is that role models are most effective if they are a similar age, gender and background to the people they want to influence"*  
Changeology, Les Robinson.

Break existing stereotypes and attract new and different members and followers by showcasing your diverse membership. Profile a mix of members to include different genders, cultural backgrounds, professions and animal skill level. Demonstrate that some wildlife rescue volunteers only help out for a few hours every month while others dedicate many days of their time. Some people fit wildlife care in with full time work, some are students, others are retired.



### Journalist by day... bird carer by night

*"People are amazed to see  
tawny frogmouths in my  
living room"*

Michael, 34, is an award-winning journalist and (Your) Wildlife Rescue Group volunteer.



**YOUR  
WILDLIFE  
RESCUE**



# Build Your Team

## Create new roles

Wildlife rescue groups need people with diverse skills. Rescuing and caring for animals may be your core business but it is not the only job that needs doing. Create opportunities for people to donate their time and skills in different ways.

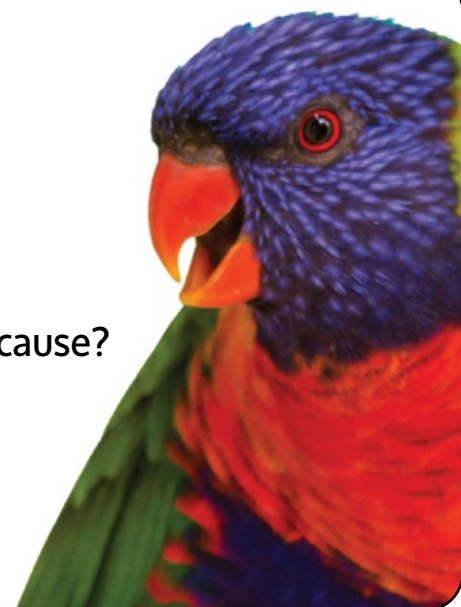
Design volunteer positions that have titles and position descriptions and advertise them as you would a paid job. Younger members are especially interested in gaining this kind of experience to build their CV.

## Bring some noise and colour to our team

Are you a social media whiz who loves animals?  
Can you spare 3 – 5 hours per week for a worthy cause?  
Apply now for the role of

**Volunteer Social Media Manager**

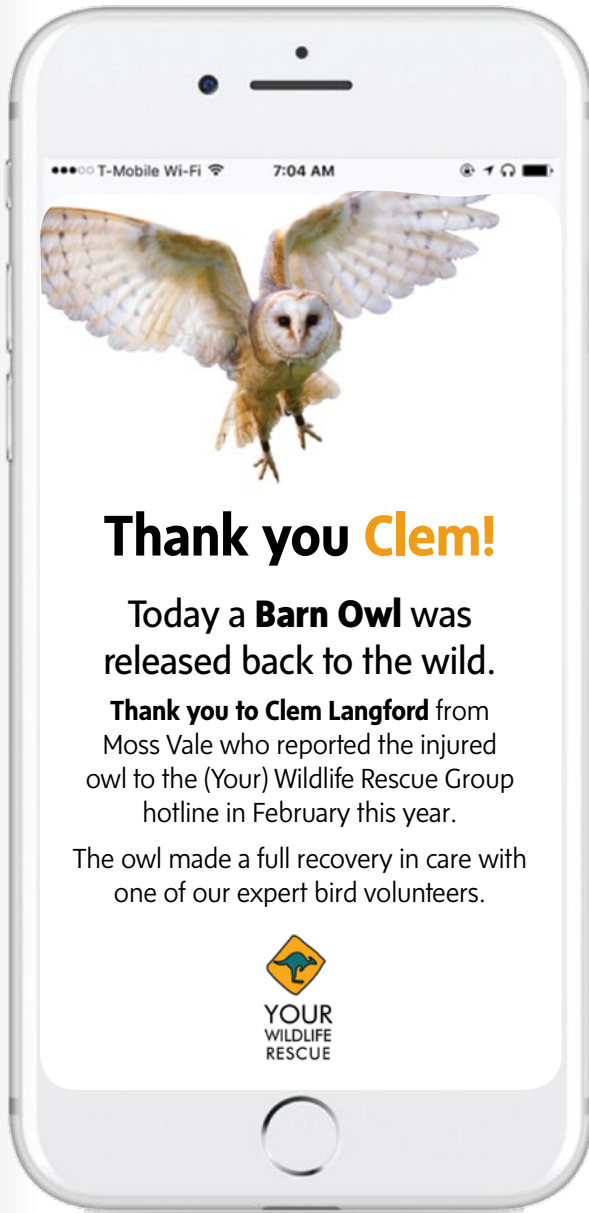
*No animal experience necessary*



## Stop the MOPs

People who call wildlife rescue services are often referred to as MOPs (members of the public). This language devalues the contribution that person has made to saving the life of an animal. Give callers a name, such as 'incident reporter', that better reflects the effort they have made and the part they are playing. People who call your group for help are your biggest potential source of funding, recruitment and future incident reporting - befriend and respect them.

Send them a sticker for their car to further acknowledge and include them:



## Reward and acknowledge

The Australian Red Cross are good at verbally thanking blood donors when they attend a donation centre but a recent addition to their donor communications is an even more powerful reward. Donors receive a text message on the day their blood is given to a patient.

Callers to wildlife rescue services could be followed up with updates about the animal they helped to save. A shareable update such as the one below would be effective in adding 'social value' to the experience.

Fundraising managers know that charity members and donors often like to share their charitable activity on social media, as a bumper sticker on their car or by wearing branded clothing. The social media age has made it easy and cheap to provide donors with 'social value' using personalised acknowledgements like this example.

## Stay in touch

Donors, hotline callers, volunteers and followers have all taken the first step to connect with you. Stay in touch and build your audience with regular communication such as newsletters, social media updates, fundraising campaigns, petitions or a blog.



## Want to hear about our lifesaving work with wildlife?

Join our mailing list to receive a monthly newsletter





## How can you help wildlife?

*Donate to our emergency fund today.*

Your donation will pay for urgent medical supplies and veterinary support so we can give animals the best care during this emergency.

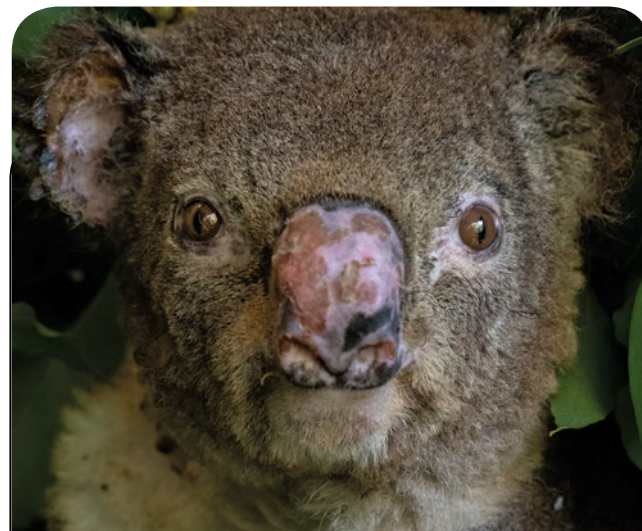


### Tell people how they can help

One of the most common reasons people called wildlife rescue hotlines during the Black Summer bushfires was to ask how to donate or how to help. People wanted to contribute but didn't know how. Invite people to do the things you want them to do. Sometimes you just need to ask.

Give people lots of different ways to get involved, for example:

- Ask hotline callers to make a small donation at the end of each call.
- Request that website visitors send in a story or photo from a wildlife rescue they were involved in.
- Engage social media followers with competitions, trivia, quizzes or questionnaires.
- Suggest wildlife friendly actions people can take in their own backyards.



## Three ways you can continue to help wildlife:

1. **Join us:** volunteer some time
2. **Support us:** become a regular donor
3. **Talk about us:** share our stories



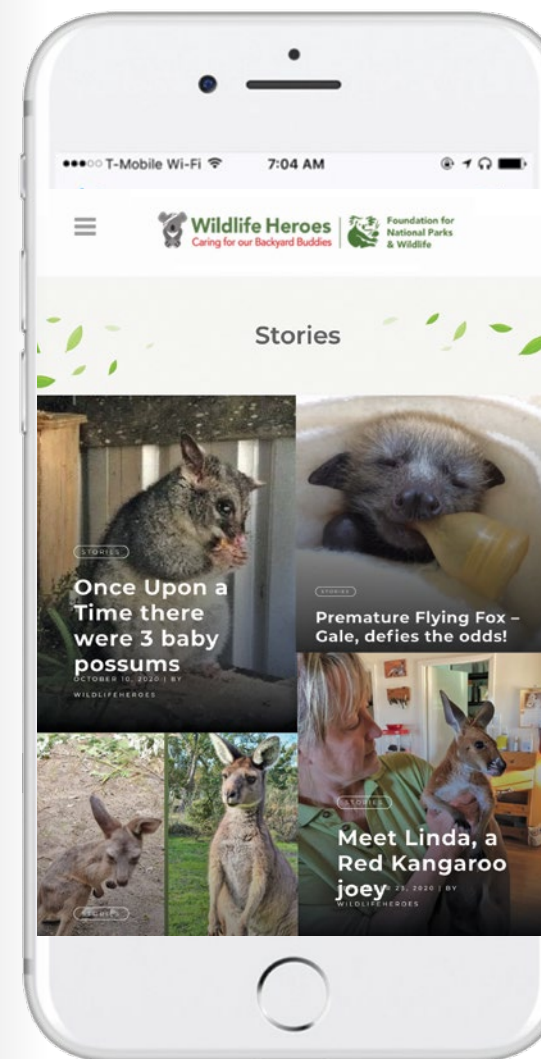
## Inspire, Inform and Entertain

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*Storytelling is the emotional transfer of information. Storytelling allows us to digest and remember content more easily because it helps connect information with emotions in a way no other form of communication can.*

*Brand storytelling, Mimi Rodriguez*

The Foundation for National Parks & Wildlife created the Wildlife Heroes website as part of a new program supporting the work of wildlife carers. All of the project's grant recipients are asked to share a story about the work they do. For many carers, this was their first attempt at storytelling. The stories are published at: <https://wildlifeheroes.org.au/stories/>



## Be interesting

*“People don't forget things, they just never remember them in the first place because they are too boring.” Richard Saul Wurman, Information Anxiety*

What is interesting to a wildlife carer is not necessarily interesting to the wider public. Stories about wildlife should be funny, personal, surprising, hopeful and inspiring (see thedodo.com for ideas!). Stories don't need details about how much an animal weighs or what medication it was given. Don't complain about members of the public or the frustrations of your work as a volunteer – storytelling is public relations, put your best foot forward!

## Tap into emotion

*“Speak to your audience in their language about what's in their heart.” Jonathan Lister, VP Global Sales Solutions, LinkedIn*

People connect with nature through contact, emotion, compassion and beauty. Emotional responses are at the heart of human attraction to wildlife. Emotions can significantly increase the effectiveness of an appeal as was evident when footage of Lewis the Koala were shared during the Black Summer bushfires.

### 'Lewis' the koala rescued from NSW bushfire dies due to extensive burns

The koala was saved by a woman using the shirt off her back, but had to be put down after his burns worsened



▲ Lewis the koala has died from his injuries after video footage of Toni Doherty saving him from the Long Flat bushfire near Port Macquarie in NSW went viral a week ago. Photograph: Reuters



## Offer hope and humour

*"A light touch beats a wrinkled brow"*  
Les Robinson, Changeology

Endless sad stories about injured wildlife will fatigue your audience. Hope is a great motivator. Humour will keep people coming back for more. Wildlife rescue and care is full of heart warming and hilarious moments, sharing them will make you and your audience feel good about your work.

## Choose flagship species

People are more likely to donate and support species that are familiar to them. There is a reason why so many charities use koalas in their marketing. Choose a local charismatic species as your mascot and theme your communications around that animal.

## Provide trusted advice and information

The Backyard Buddies website [www.backyardbuddies.org.au](http://www.backyardbuddies.org.au) is visited by up to 4,000 people per day. It provides basic information about the wildlife people commonly see in their gardens and encourages positive interaction between people and native animals.

Questions about Australian wildlife are an enormous source of Google traffic but no one organisation has cornered the market or become the 'source of truth' for advice about injured wildlife.

Wildlife rescue organisations can improve their service and increase traffic to their website by providing good information that answers commonly Googled questions such as:

“

'What's that snake?'

'Does this baby bird need to be rescued?'

'How do I check a dead kangaroo's pouch for a live joey?'

'How can I avoid swooping magpies?'

## Practical things your group can do right now to communicate better

### 1. Take good photos

#### Tips:

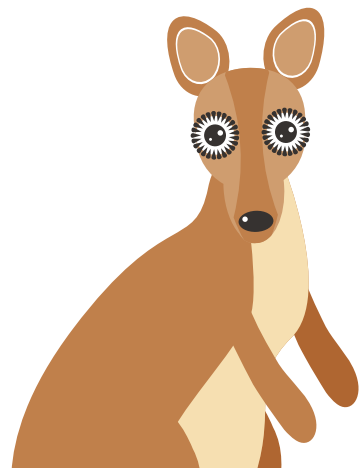
- Include people in photos if possible, they are more engaging than just animals alone
- Photos should present clean and tidy people and places. Tidy up or crop out mess, poo, dirty fingernails etc.
- Before and after photos are great
- Animal faces are the most appealing

Good examples: <http://gimesy.com/>

### 2. Capture video content

#### Tips:

- Film in landscape (turn phone on side)
- Stabilise your phone while filming (use a tripod or rest your phone on a fixed surface)
- Keep it short, each shot should be no more than 15 seconds. Social media videos should be no longer than 1 minute.
- Use a new shot for every new scene, don't move your phone around while filming.
- Don't use the phone's zoom function



### 3. Change your phone message to include information and/or a call to action

#### Example:

**"Thanks for calling Your Wildlife Rescue and doing your bit to help Australia's native animals. We are a self-funded charity and all our members are volunteers. Your donations are very welcome to help us pay for animal food, medicines and vet bills."**

### 4. Get professional help to set up your website

Some people do judge a book by its cover and many people make donation decisions based solely on the aesthetics of a charity's website. Make sure your website is clean, clear and easy to use. Cull out the daggy old photos and long-winded paragraphs. Make sure it is easy for people to contact you and even easier for people to donate.



**October is  
Baby Bird Month**



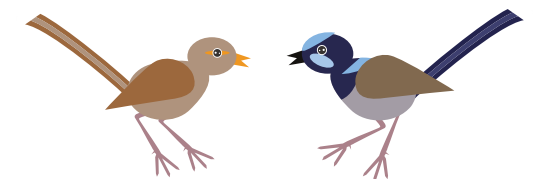
#### Tips:

- Have a donate now button on your home page
- Prioritise imagery and make sure photos are high quality
- Link to a newsletter sign up
- Include informative content that will drive Google traffic to your site

Good example: [www.wildliferescue.ca](http://www.wildliferescue.ca)

### 5. Create a seasonal content calendar that can be reused every year

For example, spring baby bird rescue advice could be shared across a themed month on your social channels and in your newsletter.



## Quiz Time



The Baby Bird Month Quiz is here.  
How many baby birds can you recognise?  
[#babybirdmonth](https://www.babybirdmonth.com.au/#babybirdmonth)



[QZ.APP.DO](https://www.babybirdmonth.com.au/)

**QUIZ: NAME THAT BABY BIRD!**

Some baby birds look just like their parents but others are a bit tr...





## Resources for further exploration of communication and audience engagement

Miri Rodriguez's book *Brand Storytelling: put customers at the heart of your brand story* is full of ideas from the corporate world. Rodriguez perfected her craft working at Microsoft but her methods translate to any product/customer situation.

Les Robinson is Australia's most experienced and knowledgeable changemaker and has helped many environmental organisations design successful and innovative behaviour change programs. Robinson is adamant that we need to understand people better if we want them to understand us. His book *Changeology: how to enable groups, communities, and societies to do things they've never done before*, is a must read for anyone wondering how to get other people involved.

Alan Alda, the actor most well-known for his role in M.A.S.H., is now a communications guru. His book *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* is a New York Times Bestseller that explains the ingredients for relating and communicating. If you like the book you will also like Alda's fascinating podcast *Clear and Vivid*, where he asks other famous people what they think makes for good communication.

*Don't Be Such a Scientist: talking substance in an age of style*, by Randy Olson, is a funny and accessible book about communicating complex messages. Olson talks about the power of humour, personality and storytelling - the universal ingredients of all good human communication.



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