

## Conserving Koala Country 2011 Field Report

Dear Volunteers,

This has been an amazing first year for the 'Conserving Koala Country' project. I hope you realise how much I appreciate each of you being part of this project as enthusiastic and passionate volunteers are hard things to come by. I enjoyed sharing the fun, and challenges, of field work with you and hope that the experience was just as rewarding for you.

Below is a brief summary of what we accomplished during the trips this year. I have also started a blog at <http://otwaykoalas.blogspot.com/> to keep you updated throughout the year. Please also feel free to email me if you have any questions.

**April** - We caught 10 koalas (5 male, 5 female) at the Bimbi site and fitted them with radio collars. In addition to tracking these koalas each day, we also completed 49 tree assessments which is pretty amazing considering that there were only 4 volunteers on this trip. Koala counts were also completed at Bimbi and in the Parker Hill blue gums. I'm sure the day in the leech-infested blue gums still haunts many!

**September** - We started work at Aire River where we caught and radio collared 4 koalas. We also had to do some re-catching at Bimbi as a few koalas had managed to lose their collars (due to weak-link breaks), and we also had to remove collars from a few koala's that had suffered some abrasions under the collar. We also did koala surveys in five sites and continued with habitat and tree assessments. A highlight was discovering a new manna gum site and a 3-legged koala (alive and apparently doing well). A good rainy day activity was listening to recordings from the Songmeter that I'd placed in the site in August. This device is set to record sound for 5 minutes every hour. An increase in frequency of bellows will tell us when breeding is starting.

**October** - We added another 2 males and 1 female to our radio collared group at Aire River and recaptured most of our koalas at Bimbi. We added GPS loggers and accelerometers to all the collars. The accelerometers record movement each second for a week so will give us an idea of when koalas time their activity, and how active they are. To understand the data, we needed to record behaviours (resting vs active) for blocks of time. These observation periods were enjoyable and surprisingly often quite action-packed. Breeding season was in full swing and I think most of us observed at least one interaction between koalas. Again, habitat and tree assessments featured in this trip and some of us found ourselves crawling on hands and knees to get out of the Lighthouse site. I wonder if I will ever work out an easy way to get out of there!

Much of the data we have collected this year is important baseline data on which we will continue to build to give us an idea of how the koala-habitat system works. Our surveys indicate that Manna Gum supports up to 15 koalas per hectare which to my knowledge is the highest density ever recorded. Tree condition is obviously suffering in some locations so it will be interesting to see what our koalas do when resources decline even further. The radio tracking and GPS loggers also provided some interesting results. It appears that our boys occasionally wander large distances into unsuitable habitat before returning to their core area. We'll have the tracking data analysed fully by March 2012 so 'stay tuned' for that.

Again, a BIG THANK YOU for your help in gathering this data. If you're ever in the area and in need of a koala 'fix', please give me a call. I'm at Cape Otway when in-between Earthwatch trips and would be happy to have you join me.

Kind Regards,

Desley Whisson