

Fire

BY DEBRA BOLAND

Located in the town of Coldstream in the state of Victoria, Australia, Animal Aid is a nonprofit animal shelter that handles more than 5,000 animals each year; most are stray or surrendered cats, dogs, or “pocket pets.” We also have a veterinary clinic and pet boarding facility on site. Victoria is in the southeastern corner of the Australian mainland; Melbourne, our second-largest city, is located here.

Bushfires in Australia are a regular and often frightening phenomenon. Our shelter is in an area of the country that endures an annual fire season, during which drought and extreme temperatures raise the fire hazard level enormously. The vegetation and climate of our state are comparable to areas of California, and during our fire season, no one wonders whether bushfires will happen—we only wonder when, where, and how bad they’ll be.

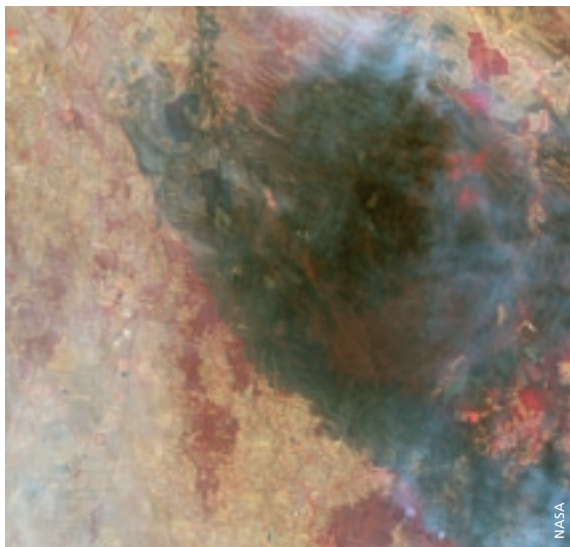
On Saturday, Feb. 7, 2009—the height of Australian summer—Victoria was hit with the worst fire event in its history. High temperatures of more than 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43 C), strong north winds, and what seemed to be never-ending periods without rain left our landscape parched and tinder-dry.

We have had deadly and devastating fires before. But never has a fire entered such highly populated areas with such ferocity, bringing such complete devastation. An unprecedented 173 human lives were lost—120 of them in a single firestorm that burned northeast of Melbourne. More than 2,000 homes were destroyed along with 1,500 other structures—such as shops and sheds—and 7,000 people were left homeless. Four hundred individual bushfires burned 1.1 million acres of territory.

Our shelter is located slightly to the south of where one of the largest fires burned. Black Saturday, as it has been dubbed, and the weeks that followed have left a mark not only on our landscape, but on the lives of the people and animals who live here. Throughout this period, our shelter strove to help those who’d been affected. What follows is a journal of what we experienced.

Feb. 7-13

Black Saturday: The predicted extreme fire danger became an ominous reality as fires swept through the area. Our shelter enacted its fire plan and prepared for emergency response and an influx of animals. Working with our local municipality, we let people know they could bring their animals to us if they needed to evacuate.



A shot from a NASA satellite shows the burning area from space.



The season that brought the worst ice storm in decades to Massachusetts brought the worst bushfires in history to the Australian state of Victoria. In this double feature, two shelter staff who worked through the disasters tell their stories, and emphasize the value of being prepared.

BY LEIGH GRADY

The worst ice storm in decades hit our community in Central Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire last Dec. 11. Nearly a million homes and businesses throughout New England faced a week or more without electricity in single-digit temperatures after a rare combination of low pressure, moist air, and cold, powerful winds produced a punishing ice storm that swept through the region, felling countless power lines and trees and closing hundreds of roads.

Our shelter—Sterling Animal Shelter Inc. of Sterling, Mass.—was smack in the middle of this storm and had a full kennel of 47 dogs and puppies, multiple nursing moms with kittens, and dozens of cats and kittens awaiting adoption. (The puppies had been rescued from Virginia and Tennessee through one of our transport programs.)

We lost all power, heat, electricity, phones, cable, and Internet. Cell phone service was sporadic for the majority of the long weekend. The idea of cell phones not working was almost unimaginable to me, and I thought of how the rescuers on 9/11 felt. It felt as if we weren't able to reach the outside world.

Our shelter was down for almost an entire week, and much of New England was dark and quiet; the only thing you could hear were generators and chainsaws cutting through trees that had fallen. It was downright eerie.

All roads in and out of our town were closed. Some had opened temporarily, but were shut down again as emergency teams tried to deal with ongoing dangers such as fallen trees or electrical wires. But I am proud and fortunate to say that our staff and volunteers are wonderful and extremely dedi-

cated. Their homes had no power or heat, and dozens of roads and highways were closed, but against all odds, they made it here to our shelter to care for our pets, maneuvering down back roads through our town to reach other staff and volunteers who were stranded, bringing them safely to the shelter.

That weekend, all we could think about was the animals in our care. At the time, nothing else seemed to matter—not even that we lost thousands of dollars worth of vaccinations, medications, and medical supplies; not that we had to feed, clean, and medicate in the pitch dark until the generators were started up; not that the dirty laundry was stacked in dozens of bags; or that none of us had been able to shower for days.

Luckily I live next door to the shelter, but having two kids (ages 2 and 8)—and having no lights,



BUCKLAVA/FICKR CREATIVE COMMONS

The ice storm left beautiful scenes across Massachusetts, but dealing with the cleanup wasn't as pretty.

As fires began to threaten Coldstream, hot ash and debris were blown toward our shelter, increasing the chances of new fires igniting.

Sunday: The first evacuee arrived at 1 a.m. As the day progressed, another 160 cats, dogs, and assorted poultry poured in. The first burn patient arrived at our vet clinic: Happy, a Queensland heeler who was rescued from a burning house, was suffering from severe burns to her face and feet.

We were battling mixed emotions: dismay over the enormity of the previous day's events,



The shelter's first burn victim, Happy the blue heeler, recovers at the facility.

and relief as all Animal Aid staff and their animals were confirmed safe and relatively unharmed. The phones rang constantly. Emergency response teams asked us to help equip relief centres with animal supplies.

This was a very long day for staff members—the last one left at 11 p.m.

Monday: Our phones started ringing at dawn, as calls for assistance and offers of help flooded in. Injured wildlife was admitted to the clinic, where staff administered first aid and arranged for their transfer to wildlife specialists.

Desperate Kinglake evacuees, unable to return home, feared for their pets and sought our assistance. Staff members whose homes were no longer in immediate danger undertook search-and-rescue operations and water distribution runs in Kinglake. It was another very late night.

Tuesday: A local equestrian center came to the rescue with the offer of storage space and horse evacuation assistance. We issued an appeal for supplies of all manner of animal paraphernalia, including cat and dog food, bird cages and wild bird seed, crates and carriers, and stock feed for livestock. We also called for emergency pasture space

and transport for evacuated horses, and rented a truck to make delivery runs.

Wednesday: Our urgent request for supplies was answered with a flood of donations. Volunteers mobilized to unload and sort donated goods and dispatch relief supplies. Hundreds of bales of hay, hard feed for stock, and cat and dog food were transported to Kinglake.

By then, more than 160 evacuated animals were being housed at the shelter. Burn victims—including cats, dogs, and a goat—were arriving at the shelter for first aid and treatment. Animal Aid prepared an emergency response veterinary team to go into the field.

Thursday: Animal Aid set up an emergency 24-hour vet clinic at Toolangi, catering to small and large animals, including wildlife. We sent truckloads of animal care supplies to relief centres. The fire risk increased once again, as fires burned on three sides of Coldstream. It was a very tense day, with warm and cold embers raining down again. We actually refused donations of bedding due to the increased fire risk.

Evacuees continued to arrive, and there was an increase in calls for assistance with large animals as hay supplies ran out. Our appeals were generally focused on livestock, since small-animal needs were well met.

Friday: Our Toolangi clinic offered first aid, food, supplies, and evacuation opportunities to animals with a range of injuries and conditions. We delivered supplies to neighbouring towns Flowerdale and Narbethong and evacuated a badly burnt mare and her companions. We topped up the supplies sent into the affected areas and made food deliveries to animal caretakers and property owners looking after fire-affected animals. We saw an increase in evacuated animals as Healesville, to the northeast, came under threat. We had to buy a large quantity of hay due to high demand for assistance from farmers; fires had burned through paddocks, leaving nothing for their livestock to eat.

Feb. 14-20

Saturday: Road access into the fire zone was improving, and a large convoy of supply vehicles was dispatched to Narbethong, Buxton, Alexandra, and Glenburn—a major logistical operation! Toolangi Clinic, still operating 24 hours a day, received some fire-weary wildlife. Staff offered first aid and food, then referred the animals on to caregivers.

Sunday: We were getting an increased level of frantic lost reports from residents in Marysville,

heat, or hot water—made it annoyingly chaotic and stressful to also care for almost 100 pets. I chased my children and promised to buy anything for them if they sat still in one place for one hour. (I think three minutes was tops.)

My husband was busy running around with generators, checking the various heating options in the shelter's four on-site buildings, stocking wood, trying to maintain all the buildings, and making sure that the falling trees were safely out of the way. Thankfully, because our kennel has a wood stove, we were able to keep our pets warm and safe. It was an exhausting and frantic five days of filling the wood stoves and putting gas in the generators every two hours, 24 hours a day.

By Saturday, Dec. 15, we were 48 hours into the power outage with no repair in sight. Out of concern for our furry friends' well-being, and since we didn't know when we would be up and running again, we opted to transfer 26 puppies and dogs to our "big sister shelter," the Boston Animal Rescue League (ARL). Our little shelter in Sterling has a long-standing relationship with the ARL staff, and we work closely with its extremely dedicated, hard-working law enforcement department, headed by Lt. Alan Borgal. Over the years, we've assisted them with hoarding situations and rehoming pets ... and now the shoe was on the other foot!

Our decision to transfer our pets was based on the fact that our shelter in Central Massachusetts has been approved by the state as a disaster-assistance facility. We work with several state/regional animal-related disaster programs. Being a certified facility meant that we had to be available to assist pets in our own community—but thankfully, we only had a few community pets who needed sheltering.

Our staff and volunteers knew that the ARL's entire staff would take great care of our furry friends and their every need—medical, emotional, and psychological. We knew that they would be spoiled rotten!

On that dark, freezing Saturday afternoon, Boston ARL rescuers maneuvered through downed trees and power lines and rolled in with two of their mobile rescue units. Working together with tears in our eyes, we carefully loaded our precious cargo into ARL's Mobile Adoption and Rescue Vehicle (MARV). It's funny: As a certified animal disaster rescuer, I have responded to multiple disasters over the years, such as Hurricane Charley in Florida and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. I have traveled to assist in spay/neuter clinics in Saint Lucia, the Galapagos Islands, and other

Caribbean destinations. Our staff has always responded to disasters, assisted shelters and rescues needing more help than us ... and now we needed to be rescued!

I can say the storm really brought out the best in people. Our community was thinking about our pets and our little shelter. Concerned community members and all our neighbors stopped by many times to check on us and ask if we needed supplies. Donations of cleaning supplies, towels, blankets, and sheets filled our office. Our staff's family and friends came with chainsaws and cleanup equipment, and slowly we cleaned up our property and buildings.

I am especially thankful that we also have a wonderful working and friendly relationships with many local shelters and rescues in our community. Many of our regional shelter and rescue folks talk to each other more than we talk to our own families! We have each other's cell phones, home phones, and personal e-mail—which was crucial during the storm when our phones and Internet were down. Our colleagues all offered help and a shoulder to cry on. Though many of their own shelters were filled to capacity, they offered to squeeze in some of our pets.



Storm or no storm, the dogs were still hungry. Sterling Animal Shelter staff were on hand to make sure their animals were cared for.

It's amazing to me when I hear about shelters and rescues not getting along, or about one badmouthing another. Animal welfare is about so much more than egos, personalities, and who has what or knows who or can do better than another. It's about the animals—the ones who didn't ask to be born into a world where they aren't wanted or have become an "inconvenience." This ice storm disaster really confirmed to me that though most all of us are self-sufficient, we should never be afraid

Veterinary staff attend to a dehydrated kangaroo suffering from shock.



focused mainly on cats. Residents and shelter staff alike were frustrated at the lack of access. Our pleas for hay were answered as donations of stock feed arrived from all over the country. One hundred and fifty evacuated animals were still at the shelter.

Monday: The first fire-affected staff members were able to return to work at the shelter. Many evacuated animals returned home as the fire threat to Healesville eased, but 70 evacuated animals were still in care, and hay and feed continued to arrive.

Tuesday: Toolangi clinic reduced its operating hours to 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. We delivered supplies to Kinglake West, Castella, Chum Creek, and Dixons Creek. The fire threat was relentless, taking a toll on weary staff members and volunteers. We got increasing requests for feed and assistance for wildlife and were relieved to see that so many animals had survived—some were seeking water and refuge in people's paddocks.

Wednesday: The hospital ward started to fill up. We had lots of cats with burns to their feet and faces; bandage changes were painstaking and time-consuming, but cats are resilient and resourceful, and we were happy to see them respond to treatment. We dispatched cages, crates, food, bedding, and other supplies to the local municipality relief centre at its request for assistance.

Thursday: We sent more supplies out into all surrounding areas, including cat traps to local residents to help them catch injured and displaced pets. With more extreme weather forecast for the weekend, Animal Aid staff braced for another wave of evacuees.

Friday: Warburton and Yarra Valley residents evacuated en masse in response to the weather

warnings. More animals arrived. On a brighter note, we were able to close the vet clinic at Toolangi, as local veterinarians were permitted to enter the area to attend to their clients. Road blocks were still in place, but major arteries were deemed safe for residents and significant others to use in lower-risk areas. We had 215 evacuated animals in our care at the shelter.

Feb. 21-27

Saturday: Top-up supply runs were still taking place, and evacuees continued to arrive. We compiled a list of alternative accommodation resources from willing boarding facilities, vet clinics, and individuals. Animal Aid was a vital source of information and resources for anyone who was fire-affected.

Sunday: A survivor was found in Kinglake: an orange cat, who was a little singed but otherwise unharmed. We hoped to find more.

Monday: Another extreme fire alert was issued for areas around and including the shelter. We revised and enacted our fire and emergency action plans and readied the fire hoses. It was a very tense time; we monitored the weather maps and wind patterns throughout the day. More emergency-accommodation animals arrived at the shelter, and as predicted, there was a greater demand for space than we could provide.

Tuesday: The fire threat eased slightly, but 215 evacuated animals were left with us. A badly burned kitten from Glenburn was admitted to our clinic.

Friday: Strong northerly winds raised the fire risk again, fanning existing fires and threatening to start new ones. More roadblocks were lifted from burned-out areas, while other roads were closed due to new threats.

Feb. 28-March 6

Monday-Tuesday: Both the shelter and boarding facility were operating at full capacity housing evacuated animals, and food relief efforts, particularly for livestock, were still in full swing.

Wednesday: We got rain—hooray! Many emergency boarders went home, giving exhausted staff members a breather as the fire threat eased. Marysville residents petitioned local police to start up an animal trapping program in and around the township.

Thursday: We got an increase in calls for assistance from local people, wondering what they should and shouldn't be doing with fire-affected wildlife. We posted information and feeding guidelines on our website.

to reach out to others when we need help. Having a big ego in times of trouble certainly doesn't help the pets who don't understand.

I never thought Central New England would ever be a "disaster site," so I stupidly never thought long and hard about having a disaster plan. We don't have hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Snow is the most we ever had to deal with ... until we had to deal with ice. We've learned a lesson and will be creating disaster plans for the future and researching grants that might fund a permanent generator so we won't have to worry about heat in times of such disasters. This storm was certainly an eye-opener!

I thank the Boston ARL and its multiple facilities and staff that were there to help us. I hope other shelters—especially the smaller ones on a

shoestring budget and staff—might learn something from our disaster: Develop a relationship with other shelters/rescues in your state. Open a dialogue and work together. Have a disaster plan, and never think it can't happen to your shelter or rescue. We are proof that it can.

As a footnote, the Boston ARL adopted out our dogs/puppies from three of its four facilities, and we've had a couple of calls and e-mails from adopters who wanted to thank us for sending our pets to safety because they've now adopted one. That just reconfirmed for us that we did do the right thing. We reached out for help, and it was there waiting!

Leigh Grady is the executive director of Sterling Animal Shelter.

Friday: The Marysville trapping program was given the go-ahead—woo hoo! We were one of the first agencies allowed into the township after the fires. A truckload of hay arrived all the way from Charleville, Queensland—more than 900 miles away.

March and beyond:

Almost a week after its commencement, the Marysville cat trapping program had its first success, quickly followed by another and another. All of the cats we went on to trap had anxious owners waiting for our call. It's hard to describe just how fantastic it felt for our staff to be able to facilitate these reunions! Trapping has continued in

Marysville and on request in other areas—we'll keep it up until communities are satisfied they are no longer needed.

The weeks continued to roll by, and requests for assistance started to wind down. As people returned home or moved into temporary accommodations, the majority of pets brought in as evacuees were returned to their families. We finally returned the rental truck, and the majority of our volunteers went back to their regular jobs. While we were still kept very busy, we were able to cope with the workload.

Now, out of the ashes, people are rebuilding their homes. Wildlife is returning as the Victorian bushland regenerates, but the ripple effects of Black Saturday will be felt for some time to come. As the months pass, Animal Aid will continue to offer assistance to those in need.

Debra Boland works in communications and marketing for Animal Aid. She started as a volunteer dog walker and has been with the shelter for 15 years.



Veterinarian Jo Stueten attends to a smoke-affected kookaburra.