

Forest

How a baby koala was saved from Australia's bushfires...

RESCUE

A tiny baby koala walks slowly along a lonely road in Victoria, Australia, calling for his mother. Behind him, the trees in the national park he once called home are burning. The air is thick with smoke and just a few kilometres away, scorching flames are tearing through the forest...

A few weeks later, and the koala, George, is safe and sound. He is one of the lucky animals to be rescued from the bushfires that tore through parts of Australia earlier this year, destroying people's homes and huge areas of wild forest.

A lucky escape

"When we found George, he was very scared and dehydrated," says Michelle Thomas, a wildlife carer in Victoria, and part of the bushfire wildlife rescue team. "We think his mum had probably tried to outrun the fire, while George clung onto her with his legs wrapped around her back, exposing his feet to the flames."

Michelle doesn't know if his mum escaped to safety, but somehow brave little George made it out of the forest, through burning branches, and onto the road where he was finally found. But with burnt feet and scorch marks on his back, six-month-old George was one very poorly koala.



Poorly George was badly hurt in the fires

Care and cuddles

Thanks to lots of loving care and hugs from Michelle, whose house has been transformed into a wildlife rehabilitation centre, George is on the mend. He's even able to climb on the tree that Michelle has put up in her lounge, so that George can feel at home!

"In the wild, koalas stay with their mums until they're almost a year old," Michelle told NG Kids. "So I'm now playing Mum's role, feeding him milk formula and eucalyptus leaves. George loves to eat!"

Home, safe home

Michelle's garden is also home to other amazing animals, including pygmy possums, wombats and kangaroos – all refugees from the nearby forests that were destroyed by the fires. Sadly, many more creatures – big and small – didn't escape the flames, and this region of Australia, and its trees and animals, will take some time to recover. But thanks to Michelle and the wildlife rescue team, George is now safe, and will one day be free to roam the forest again...



George gets a cuddle from new 'mum' Michelle!



The brave firemen fought to put out the forest flames...



... and many helped to rescue the forest animals, too



Australia – home to the koala

- The light purple areas show where the koalas live in Australia. Sadly, even before the fires, many of the eucalyptus forests where koalas once roamed were being destroyed, to make way for houses and farming. Find out how you can help save the koalas' habitats by joining Koala Campaigners – follow the links at savethekoala.com

Did you know...?
Koalas are marsupials, so mums keep their babies in pouches until they're old enough to stand on their own four paws!

5 CUDDLY KOALA FACTS



- 1 Koalas snooze for up to 20 hours a day, which leaves them four hours to sit, eat and... poop!
- 2 Koalas eat a kilogram of eucalyptus leaves every day – the equivalent of about 40 chocolate bars.
- 3 The leaves have a very strong smell, which acts as a bug repellent – and makes the koalas smell of cough sweets!
- 4 Like us humans, koalas have individual fingerprints.
- 5 You won't find a sweaty koala – they have no sweat glands, so they cool themselves by licking their arms. Slurp!

George pictures: Michelle Thomas. Main koalas image, bushfire pictures © Getty Images UK.