

Mystery Salt Craving Constipated Lignivore Lurks Somewhere in the Mundoonens

The Hunt for the Mundoonen Koala: Survey Report

In 2005 a local landcare member made the first confirmed sighting of a koala in the Mundoonen Nature Reserve. This was an occasion for great delight. Are koalas still there now? Some of us have been helping NPWS Rangers to undertake surveys to see if we can find evidence of their presence.

Recently five GDL members (Sonya Duus, John Hyams, Will Luck and Rosemary and Bob Spiller) joined two Yass locals and an international team of overseas students put together by Australian Conservation Volunteers in another day of searching. This scientific expedition was organised by Ranger Libby Lindsay and Debbie Hunt from OEH.

“Searching” involves trekking through the bush to GPS marked sites and then rooting around the debris and litter under 30 trees in search of scats. The trees’ vital statistics are recorded together with a noting of the scat species found. We also, of course, look up in the trees in case a koala is there waving at us from above.

We divided into two groups, with John and Sonya setting off with Libby’s group while the young polymath Will Luck drew the old codgers and rank beginners team comprising the Spillers and the international visitors led by Debbie.

Debbie’s team was highly excited to find a "chew tree" which had been severely mauled by foragers. Team leader Deb thought we had made a very significant find - a rare example of a newly discovered phenomenon in which koalas eat significant portions of tree stems probably because they are very high in sodium compared to neighbouring trees. A photo sent to an expert from the site elicited the response that the salt craving lignivore causing this damage was more likely a possum than a koala – still very interesting nevertheless.



The Mundoonen "chew tree".

Libby and Debbie follow strict scientific principles in managing these koala surveys – going to pre-identified sites along a grid and searching around 30 trees meeting strict criteria. But when they come upon a promising tree like this we can abandon scientific detachment and search feverishly beneath it. This we did – finding not a single scat. This suggests to me there is a constipated salt craving lignivore somewhere out there in the Mudoonens.



Rosemary Spiller and Will Luck in full GDL field uniform searching fruitlessly for koala scats around the “chew tree”. Interestingly, there were no scats of any sort found around this promising tree. This inverse relationship between number of scats found and clear visual evidence of something having been up the tree demands urgent scientific investigation.

Neither group found certain evidence of koalas being about. This does not mean they have gone forever. If present, they will be in very small numbers and difficult to find. A koala recently put in an appearance near Port Kembla, the first time one had been recorded since the 1930s.

Did we go home tearful? We did not. All of us had a great time and the locals enjoyed meeting young people from Japan, China, Saudi Arabia and Germany. I am pretty sure they enjoyed meeting us too. They have gone home with important scat ID skills and those in the Spiller group can now recite every word in English for faeces ranging from the scientific to common vernacular. And a young Chinese economist may never again have a fit of hysterics when discovering a partially decomposed echidna beneath her feet.

The Spiller group was delighted when Will found a small dense sward of around 30 Nodding Greenhood orchids. We had only ever seen them singly before.

Sonya says "It was a real treat to be driven in so far into the reserve - I certainly didn't expect it and am not sure I'll ever get another opportunity to see so much of the forest/country in there. No sign of koalas, but I really enjoyed learning about scats (I wouldn't have known how to distinguish ring-tail from brush-tail in the past), and encountering all the secret life under the forest litter around the trees (centipedes, cockroaches, ants, beetles, grubs, fungi etc etc). I also very much enjoyed spending time with our little gang - meeting them all for the first time. Libby was very impressive in her role, two kind and interesting local landholders, and a young man from Saudi Arabia... a nice diverse mix!". Will be back there sometime with friends to wander around, and I will certainly be keeping an eye out for eucalyptus-smelling olive-pip-look-alike scats."

John says that "despite lack of discovery an excellent day: rare opportunity to explore so much of the Reserve and to discuss ecological/environmental matters with Ranger and other surveyors. Certainly I hope to be included in future events and would recommend them to other interested members."



Debbie's team bearing up bravely despite our failure to find the elusive Mundoonen koala

This was the last NPWS led Mundoonen survey for the immediate future. Ranger Libby will be organising further surveys in the Bellmount Forest area next year and GDL will let you know when these are happening.