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Image: Courtesy John Ditchfield

Koala Forum: National Icon - Local Treasure

Eureka Centre Ballarat

September 14th 2023

Koalas have always existed in Ballarat.

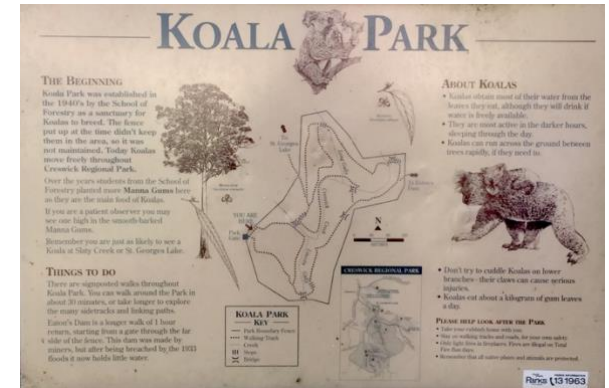
Within Indigenous communities in Victoria, “Ngaambulmum” or Koalas were “*both a revered animal, esteemed as a knowledgeable counsellor—but also, in some areas of Victoria, references were found showing that they were used as a food source, but not for skins/fur for clothing*”
Report by Rolf Schlagloth, Fred Cahir & Ian Clark (2018) The Importance of the Koala in Aboriginal Society in Nineteenth-century Victoria (Australia).

Koalas became protected by Legislation in Victoria in 1898, but the protection came too late and by the early 1900s, a combination of habitat destruction, hunting, bushfire and disease had caused drastic population declines. By 1920 Koalas could only be found in Gippsland, French and Phillip Islands. Paradoxically the Koala population increased on the islands in late 1920’s to a point where Koalas began to be relocated across Victoria including Ballarat.

A Koala Sanctuary for the Ballarat Town Common was proposed by the curator of the Healesville Sanctuary Mr David Fleay at a meeting in 1939 with the City of Ballarat. Wendouree was near the current Central Highlands Water Head Office. A worker at the nearby Country Roads Board Depot remembers the trees in the 1960’s. There is no evidence of any actual Koala habitation. The Ballarat Courier in 2021 reported “*As early as 1940 a portion of the Common was planted with eucalypts to create a koala sanctuary for the region’s nearly disappeared marsupial.*”

The Creswick Koala Park was established in the 1940s by members of the School of Forestry as a breeding ground for koalas.
Image right: Creswick Koala Park sign.

Koala translocation occurred from French Island, Phillip Island and Sandy Point to the Brisbane Ranges, south east of Ballarat at regular intervals during the 1970’s and later. The Koalas were ear tagged for tracking purposes prior to release. Over time koalas migrated north from the Brisbane Ranges towards Lal Lal and Ballarat, with tagged Koalas found as far away as Creswick. Koala numbers grew during that time, indicating conducive conditions for their abundance. One property owner located in the now Woowookarung Regional Park, reported hearing or seeing Koalas every day. One department officer described being sent to collect “crates of Koalas” for release into the nearby Enfield Forest in the 1990’s.

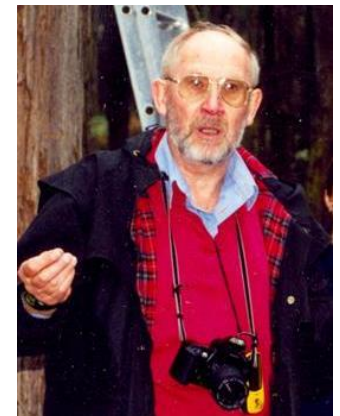


The First Ballarat focussed Koala study began in 1985 when Grant Hull a 3rd year student at Ballarat College of Advanced Education undertook a telemetry project titled “*The utilization of residential areas by the koala, phascolarctos cinereus goldfuss, in Ballarat, Victoria / Grant Hull.*”

Grant’s work involved applying radio collars to a “dozen” Koalas in the Mt Clear to Mt Pleasant urban area and tracking them over time. The inspiration for this project came from Monash University studies, utilising a similar approach elsewhere. The Koalas were tagged on both ears, which enabled identification from a distance by the tag colours.

In 1986 the then Ballarat College of Advanced Education employed wildlife lecturer Pat Prevett. As part of his work Pat instigated a program of research around Koalas. This work was sponsored by the Australian Koala Foundation and the research ultimately led to the development of the Ballarat Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management.

Photograph right: Pat Prevett in the field during the 1990’s

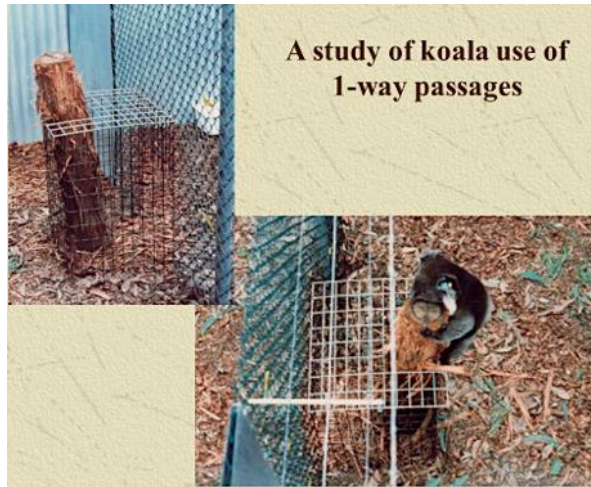


Under Prevett's tutelage, students undertook Koala study projects ranging from tracking Koalas with radio collars, determining Koala movements around the Woodmans Hill area, to identifying the biodiversity values in remnant vegetation areas across the north east side of Ballarat.

Other students investigated the success rate of Koalas relocated from French island into Koala habitat areas around Ballarat in the early 2000's.

The Western Highway Ballarat in the late 1980's was a site of numerous road related Koala deaths on the dual lane highway at Woodmans Hill.

The Ballarat Western Highway Bypass project created another opportunity for Prevett's students to study wildlife and Koala movements, such as testing different types of highway roadside fencing, including one-way passages to determine how to keep Koalas off the Bypass. A specialised testing laboratory was prepared at the Mt Helen Campus.

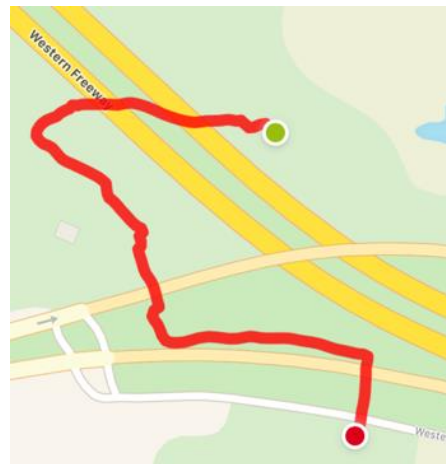


A range of Koala protection measures, including a Koala tunnel under the Highway at Woodmans Hill and extensive fencing along the freeways was proposed in "Plans for the development of the Western Highway Ballarat Bypass" in a report to VICROADS, Ballarat Bypass Project by P.T. Prevett, N.W. Hives and G.E. Cerini. Those measures were eventually implemented.



Koala tunnel image 2022.

There is no evidence of the tunnel ever being used by wildlife let alone Koalas.



Koala tunnel location

Koalas in urban areas was a problem, created by the attractiveness of *Eucalyptus nicholii*, and *Eucalyptus aromaphloia* in municipal street and garden plantings. Koalas came into urban areas because of their liking for these two species of trees.

The spread of Koalas around Ballarat was described by Prevett in a 1991 report to the City of Ballarat about Koala numbers within the corridor as: "*Phascolarctus Cinereus*, the koala is well known in the study area, and has been the subject of intensive study by Prevett (1987, 1989). It seems likely that Koala numbers are increasing at the present time in the region and spreading into the study area, possible from populations located between Lal Lal and the Brisbane Ranges".

Prevett's vegetation map provided the first outline of the Canadian Corridor. Labels such as wildlife corridor and bio link were later applied in the City of Ballarat (CoB) Strategic Plan of 2014.

Ballarat's Canadian Corridor in the 1990's was well populated by Koalas. A Sunday drive to Mt Buninyong, you could pleasantly find up to half a dozen Koalas along the way. Corridor residents could occasionally expect to see Koala as a matter of course.

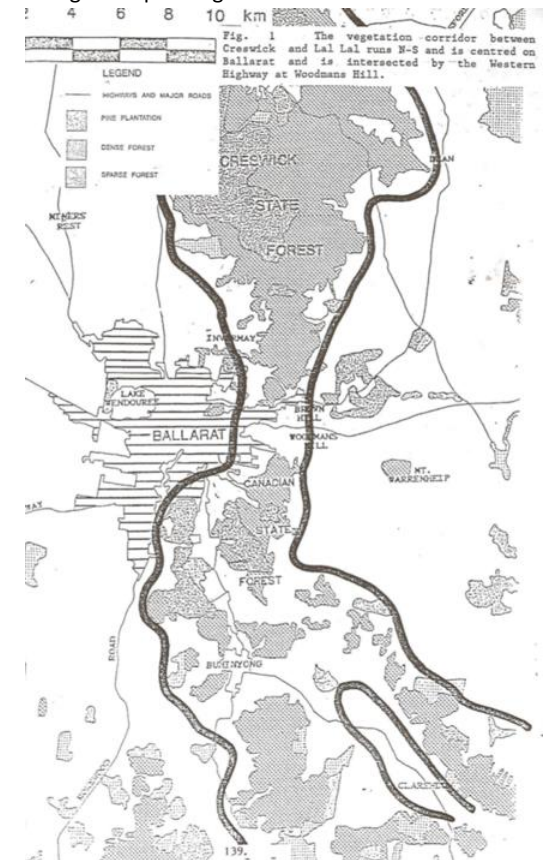
In 1994 the six local councils around Ballarat were amalgamated into a new City of Ballarat (CoB). The new council proved amenable to new environmental projects such as the Yarrowee River LINC project and a plan to protect Ballarat's Koalas

The Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) and the City of Ballarat came together in 2001:

"in mutual recognition of the need for practical environment conservation programs to protect and enhance some of Ballarat's key environmental assets, including the koala."

Rolf Schlagloth, a former student of Prevett, was appointed as a joint AKF and CoB liaison officer. For nine years he worked with the Council, agencies and the community to build a community consensus for Koala protection. Rolf was key person in the development and adoption of the CoB Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management in 2006:

"To provide for the long-term survival of koala populations within the City of Ballarat through the implementation of actions aimed at safeguarding the koala within its natural range within the City."



The Ballarat community and visiting tourists engaged in a broad range of Koala initiatives, planting Koala trees in many different sites, Koala sightings, and developing Koala songs, poems, artwork and research. Hundreds of volunteers participated across Ballarat during the 2000's decade.

Koala murals were created and exchanged between Ballarat and the Town of Inagawa, Japan. Students from local schools in Inagawa and Ballarat, inspired by local artist Steve Morvell created two ceramic Koala murals with Koala focussed classroom creations and drawings. Community functions complimented the murals creation. The City of Ballarat Koala mural now hangs in the Phoenix Building, whilst the Town of Inagawa's Koala mural is in its municipal Library.



Students at work on the mural.



Town of Inagawa mural



City of Ballarat mural

Midlands Highway Koala fatalities: The Midlands Highway through Mt Helen, Scotsburn and Clarendon became Koala hazard zones and death traps. In the early 2000's one Koala a week was being reported as struck by vehicles in the Mt Helen area.

This horrendous Koala mortality on the highway and other roads may be one reason for the decline in numbers of



The Ballarat Council Plan of 2006-09 states that "Ballarat will be a leader in its management of the natural environment". The AKF and the CoB combined in 2008 to undertake the first monitoring (mapping) program of Koalas in the Corridor to gain a snapshot of numbers and habitation areas.

The Koala and Koala Habitat Protection C137 planning clause in the Ballarat Planning Scheme was gazetted on 18 March 2010. Immediately two development proposals to remove Koala habitat were brought before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal for adjudication. In both cases the Koala and Koala Habitat Protection C137 measures were upheld and the habitat protected.

Koala education material 2011; The CoB in partnership with the community and the AKF worked together to produce a range of education materials to raise public awareness of Koalas. This included the award-winning "Your guide to living with koalas" brochure for residents living in Koala habitat areas. Collaboration with other nearby Councils created the "Koala Connect" educational resource materials for schools.

By 2012 the Canadian Forest blue gum plantations were failing due to drought. The plantation lease holder decided to hand the lease and land back to the Victorian Government. Blue gums are attractive to Koalas and it is not known what impact the clearance had on Koala numbers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Koalas became scarce after the plantation's removal. The 240 hectares of ex-plantation land is now slowly regenerating as emerging Koala habitat.



Above Image: Ex Plantation block Boundary Rd 2013

The Friends of Canadian Corridor was established in 2012 to "advocate for a Regional Park on the ex-plantation land and the adjacent Canadian Forest".

In the lead up to the 2014 State election an "Imagine a Multi-Use Forest Park" proposal was developed by the Friends and launched in the forest, requesting the establishment of a "Multi Use Forest Park".

Image right: 'The launch of the Forest Park proposal September 2014'



The Canadian Regional Park was established by the Victorian State Labor Government in 2016 and renamed “Woowookarung Regional Park” in 2017.

“Koalas: Where have they gone?” was a question raised at a Friends of Canadian Corridor meeting in 2018. The question arose from local bushwalkers, noting the absence of Koalas in the surrounding forests and parks. The meeting set up a “Koala Working Party” charged with:

- Are there any Koalas out there?
- Where are they?
- What can be done?

The first working party meeting set up the Citizen Science Koala sighting program. This is now entering its sixth year, 300 sightings, and has clearly settled one fact, there are Koalas in Ballarat, all through the Corridor in small numbers.

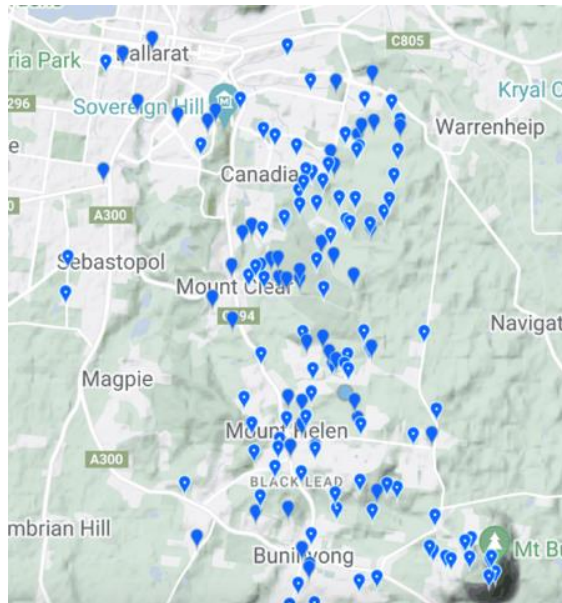


Image above: Spread of Koala sightings. Dots may represent multiple sightings.

The first “Koala Working Party” report was delivered to the City of Ballarat by the Friends in person at the June 2019 council meeting reporting that koalas were very thin on the ground, suggesting as few as a dozen Koalas. This number has been raised as more sightings occur. Nearly 300 koalas have now been recorded over 5 years.

Do Ballarat’s Koalas have a future forum? Hosted by the Friends as a way of promoting the Koala sighting program in July 2019, it featured Dave Mitchell from the AKF and Karen Pohlner from WALA wildlife rescue and was attended by 80 friends.

Image right: Courier front page special report

Midlands Highway upgrade: The FoCC worked with Regional Roads Victoria in 2019 to locate Koala and wildlife crossing points across the Midland Highway at Mt Buninyong. Two fauna crossings were installed over the Highway.



New Koala research by Louise Jory, a University of Melbourne student began in 2020. This Koala scat and tree location study involving sixty sites and nearly one hundred volunteers. Koala scat was found across the study area of Woowookarung Regional Park and Union Jack Reserve

The CSIRO National Koala Monitoring Program began a four-year Koala monitoring program in Ballarat and Moorabool Local Government Area’s in February 2023 with the aim of gathering Koala numbers and data from across the area.



Federation University student Siobhan Heenan is now collecting Koala scat from around the Ballarat region for the DNA testing to determine the genetic diversity of the Western Victoria’s Koalas. Federation University researchers have just started working with “Ballarat Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation” rescuers to use telemetry to follow rehabilitated Koalas upon release, to determine their movements and welfare, post recovery.

Koala Mural Exchange twentieth anniversary. This year the CoB renewed its sister city relationship with the Town of Inagawa. A magnificent Koala painting by local wildlife artist Steve Morvell was created for presentation to the Town of Inagawa by Mayor D Hudson during the official visit in early August

The donated painting was handed over to Mayor Hudson by FoCC Secretary Jeff Rootes in July 2023

The Future – The CoB Ballarat Biodiversity Strategy community consultations

The strategy will be launched on September 16th and will provide an open invitation for groups and residents to have input into the strategy. This is a great opportunity to seek enhanced Koala and Koala habitat protection measures in Ballarat.

The associated CoB Biodiversity, Values and Connections Study will collate what environmental assets the municipality has, and a key task is to identify where the Council and the community should focus attention to repair and instill resilience for koalas in the local environment.

The study will list, map and quantify what environmental assets there are in the municipality, and define and prove the viability of a larger **Across Borders BioLinks Study** that identifies priority landscape scale connections. The strategy will be undertaken in the 2023/2024 Financial Year.

This booklet was written and printed by the FoCC with valuable support from the City of Ballarat, the Regional Sustainability Alliance and many observant koala supporters: September 2023.

