

Supportive care for birds

Adaptations to fire

Many bird species are capable of flying either a great distance away from the fire or to a nearby refuge.

Their small size and greater requirement to exchange oxygen to breathe and fly means that they are at high risk of death from smoke inhalation.

Treatment of burns in birds

There are some points to note about burns in birds:

- firstly, as their skin lacks collagen and a thick subcutaneous layer, burns are very easily missed in the initial stages as blisters are not seen. Products such as Flamazine, Melolin and Vetrap can be used to cover burns in birds.
- oil-based products such as Paraffin gauze can be used on legs, but must be covered to prevent the bird covering itself in the oil when preening. The oil leads to damage to the feathers and a loss of waterproofing and damage to the aerofoil.
- thermal damage to feathers is also likely. These feathers may not moult until the next season and may require plucking, performed under anaesthesia, to stimulate new feather growth.

Medications

- Birds do not make mammalian-like pus. All burns should be treated as though they are infected and antibiotics prescribed for 7–14 days.
- Pain relief with meloxicam, butorphanol and/or tramadol.

Housing for burnt birds

- Intensive care: warmth (22–28°C) is required, but remember that the bird may be unable or unwilling to move. So monitor the temperature of the heat provided and watch the bird's behaviour:
 - A bird that is panting with its wings held away from its body is too warm
 - A bird that is huddled and lethargic is cold.
- Birds will be confined to the floor of the cage and unable to perch. This results in foot bandages, feathers and vents becoming easily contaminated with faeces, which are not ideal from a hygiene standpoint. Thus regular cage cleaning is necessary at least twice daily.
- The bird may be supported by propping it in a 'doughnut' shaped rolled towel if it cannot stand.
- Provide food and water on the floor of the cage for easy access. Assisted or crop feeding may be needed.
- Intermediate care: once the burns have healed, the bird can be moved to an unheated enclosure for a further 1–2 weeks while feathers regrow.
- Pre-release: an aviary of 2m long is a minimum size for a bird up to 300g to regain fitness. This will take 2–4 weeks. An effort to feed part of the diet as natural food should be made.



Left: Burnt tail feathers in an electrocuted magpie. Photo courtesy of Anne Fowler

Right: Thermal burn on the foot of a pelican. Photo courtesy of Anne Fowler

Diets for burnt birds

Any bird could be potentially found in a fire. It is beyond the scope of this manual to describe the diets of the 800 bird species in Australia, however, diets should be high in protein for healing.

Suitable foods include:

- A hand-rearing mix (Vetafarm, Passwells, and Roudybush) can be given to parrot species by crop needle. Food for growing parrots will be higher in energy, protein and vitamins, thus matching the increased nutritional needs.
- Hills a/d can be syringe fed or force fed to other species, such as Magpies, Kookaburras, and water birds.
- Whole food items (mice, rats, etc.) should also be offered to carnivorous species.

The normal diet of birds can also be offered. However, the bird will require twice maintenance, i.e. at least 20% of bodyweight in food daily. Assisted feeding to deliver this amount may be required. Feed items can be injected with a slurry of Wombaroo[®] Insectivore to increase the protein and energy of the item.

Criteria for release

- Bird is able to fly: 10 laps of 2–4m aviary with recovery time from open to closed mouth breathing under 30 seconds.
- Bird is able to gain lift: can fly up 2m within 2m.
- All wounds have healed and feathers have regrown.