The Horrors of Barbed Wire

This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php

In Australia, barbed wire is so ubiquitous that most people are hardly aware of its presence. It forms the boundaries of countless properties and is the accepted way of keeping sheep and cattle within those boundaries.

However, it is a major hazard to our wildlife, with thousands of native animals becoming entangled on its barbs each year. Many animals that become entangled die a slow and cruel death. Others must be euthanased after being rescued because their injuries are such that they cannot be saved. Some, fortunately, survive, but often require long periods of rehabilitation.

Which animals are at risk?

More than 70 species of wildlife have been recorded in Australia as having been caught on barbed wire. However, there are some species that are more susceptible than others. Nocturnal animals are more at risk and the animals most often caught on barbed wire in the Tweed are flying-foxes, gliders and owls, many species of which are endangered.

Often the animal will be caught on two or more bards and, in their efforts to escape, may wind themselves around the bards several times, increasing the damage. Worse, they may sustain fractures of their limbs, or, in desperation, will try to chew themselves free, resulting in perforations to their palates.

Most animals that get caught fail to see the fence, or are unable to clear it, especially in windy conditions. It may be that the fence is over a food tree or the gliding distance between trees is too great. In the case of fencing over waterways, birds may have an insufficient clearance for takeover and landing.

This Barking Owl, a threatened species, badly entangled in barbed wire. Photo: Jenny Maclean

Wildlife-friendly fencing

Often you will see barbed wire used where there is no intention of keeping in animals and plain wire would have sufficed. Even where it is used to keep in animals, it is less effective at keeping in animals than high-tensile plain wire or other options.

Wildlife rehabilitation groups such as TVWC urge property owners to carefully consider non-harmful fencing alternatives when replacing and repairing their current fences. Consider whether a fence is required at all, and remove any old fencing that has fallen into disrepair.

Although most property owners would be reluctant to change all of their barbed wire fencing to plain wire, there are some steps they can take to minimise the harm to our animals where fences are necessary:

- Identify the wildlife hotspots: along ridge lines, near feed trees, in wildlife corridors or over waterways.

A TVWC carer carefully removes a flying-fox from a barbed-wire fence, trying to minimise the damage to its wing membrane.

- Run a strand of white electric fence tape above the barbed wire. This flickers in the wind and is more visible than the grey wire.
- Replace the top strand of barbed wire with plain wire or cover it with split polypipe.
- Attach old CDs which swivel and reflect the light to make hotspot sections of fence more visible.

If you see an entangled animal

Report entangled animals to TVWC immediately. Do not try to rescue the animal as this may result in further injury to it.

The animal may also escape, only to die slowly from its injuries. Recently, a member of the public tried to free a sugar glider caught by is gliding membrane on the barbed wire. Cute as they look, sugar gliders pack quite a bite and, as thanks to its rescuer, bit them. The rescuer instinctively let go, and the glider raced up the tree, unable to be caught. Its membrane was torn, making it unable to glide from food tree to food tree. Its wounds most probably would become infected also. It was not likely to survive the ordeal without coming into care, having its wounds stitched, being put on a course of antibiotics, and allowing time for them to heal.

Often, as a result of their entanglement and the extent of the damage to their critical membrane, caused by barbed wire, Sugar Gliders often must be euthanased. Photo: Scott Fagg

It is particularly important that you do not try to handle flying-foxes. If scratched by one, you will need to undergo a series of injections. Also, their wing membranes are particularly vulnerable to the barbs and experienced bat rescuers are trained in minimising damage.

Ricki's Story

Ricki, a 450gm koala joey, was recently rescued from a barbed wire fence.

Riding on her mother's back, she had become entangled in the barbs as her mother went through the fence. She had been there several hours when found, dehydrated and with deep puncture wounds under one arm which became infected. She required several veterinary visits, antibiotics and close care. Fortunately, she is now doing well with a Tweed carer and will be returned to the wild when old enough, in about six months.

To find out more

Go to the website of the Wildlife Friendly Fencing Project, www.wildlifefriendlyfencing.com to find out more about the harmful effects of barbed wire and alternatives to it.