



A Wildlife Warrior

G'day **Mates!** My name is Hannah Stewart, and I am twelve. My parents call me their "Wildlife Warrior." I want to be a veterinarian when I grow up. Our class teacher tells me I am already a vet, and all I have to do to become qualified is continue listening, watching, and learning about what I love doing most.

I live with my attorney mum and architect dad in Leura, a small Australian town in New South Wales, tucked into the wild and beautiful Blue Mountains, about one hundred kilometres west of Sydney.

And yes, the mountains really are blue!

I am happy to live in Australia because our teachers tell us we have more unusual animals here than anywhere else in the world. From what I've seen, I believe it!

Everybody has heard of our most famous residents, the kangaroos, koalas, Tasmanian devils, and the unusual-looking platypuses. However, other fascinating creatures make their home here, and some have been here for millions of years, long before people arrived. When I watch them, I sometimes feel like a visitor to their world.

Animals with quirky names like pademelons, quokkas, ringtail possums, greater bilbies, sugar gliders, echidnas, wombats, dingoes, and flying foxes inhabit Australia. Many bird species, such as emus, swift parrots, pink and grey galahs, the irresistible kookaburras, and black cockatoos, loudly call Australia home.

Most people have to visit a zoo to see these animals, but we are lucky in Australia to have them living in our backyards, school playgrounds, and nearby bushland, close to where we work and play. They are generous and allow us to live in their world.

I have loved animals since I saw a koala clamber onto her mum's back while she climbed a tree. I was four and disappointed I could never have a cat or dog because my dad had severe allergies to them.

Then, on a summer day in March when I was eight years old, I had an experience that changed my life. I chose to become a vet so I would know how to help sick animals.

I was playing outside in the yard when Dad came home carrying a tiny kangaroo joey wrapped in a blanket. Excitedly, I peered at the furry bundle in his arms, and he told us he found her in her mum's pouch after she had been killed by a car. Mum heard us talking inside the house and came outside to see the excitement.

"Look at the baby kangaroo Dad brought me, Mum," I squealed.

"Yes, I see," she replied slowly, her eyes filled with concern or alarm.

"Can we keep her?" I asked innocently, looking anxiously between Mum and Dad, using my best 'get my own way' voice and look. "Kangaroos are not pets; they need to live in the wild," Dad told me gently but firmly.

"But she's too little and won't survive by herself. Let's keep her," I pleaded.

My father looked helplessly at Mum, who used the tactic all parents resort to when they need to say 'no' but don't know how.

"We'll see. In the meantime..." Mum added smoothly, changing the subject, "she must be hungry. Why don't we go inside and give her some warm milk."

Although Mum still sounded uncertain about the arrangement, she was practical and organised. "She'll need a name if we are going to keep her," she said, holding the door open.

"Because we found her in summertime, I think 'Summer' is the perfect name," Mum continued as we followed her inside.

I found a baby bottle I used for my dolls when I was younger and filled it with milk from our fridge. With Mum helping me to support the baby in my arms, I tried to feed Summer, but she wouldn't take the bottle.

“Maybe she prefers it warm,” Mum reminded me, placing the bottle in the microwave for a few seconds before we tried again. It took nearly an hour, but Summer eventually drank most of the milk from the bottle we offered her and drifted off to sleep in my arms.

Dad found a pile of old towels, stacked them in a corner, and made a bed for her. Summer cried for her mother when she woke up. I desperately wanted to play with her, but Dad gently reminded me she needed rest. When I picked her up after dinner for another bottle, the towels were brown and wet from diarrhea.

“Eweee, that is disgusting,” I exclaimed, unfortunately holding my nose with freshly wet fingers. Dad came over to see the cause of my small meltdown and laughed when he saw the mess I’d got myself into. “Taking care of animals needs plenty of work, and it’s not always fun,” he said kindly. He went into the kitchen, returning with paper towels and Wet Wipes, and handed them to me, saying it was my responsibility to clean her rear end and anywhere else that was messy.

We cared for Summer for the next three days, but my initial excitement about having a pet kangaroo soon faded. Summer was distressed from the moment we brought her home. She cried when she wasn’t sleeping, and her tiny body trembled anytime I tried to play with her. Despite our efforts to feed her milk, she hardly drank it. Each time she took a few sips, it upset her tummy, and she had diarrhea again. Having a pet kangaroo wasn’t as much fun as I thought it would be.

After lunch on the third day, Dad contacted a local wildlife rescue organisation he found online. He told them we were caring for a kangaroo joey and were concerned she wasn't doing well. He asked for their advice. The woman who answered the phone was friendly and promised a volunteer from their organisation would come to our house to examine Summer.

An hour later, Michelle from the local wildlife rescue arrived at our front door to check on Summer. Mum took Michelle into our living room, where Summer sat looking frightened and lonely. She explained how Dad found Summer in her mum’s pouch after she had been struck

by a car three days earlier and had brought her home to care for her. We tried to feed her cow's milk, but she didn't like it and became sick so we called for help.

Michelle examined Summer carefully. She looked at her ears and eyes, gently touched them, and tried to smooth her fur. I stood nervously behind Dad, peering out from behind him as Michelle assessed the sick Joey. Although she didn't say much during the examination, I could tell she was worried from her deep breaths and heavy sighs.

Finally, Michelle turned to us and explained, "I'm sorry to tell you that Summer is sick, and I need to take her with me so I can give her the medical care she needs." I began to sob, and Mum sat down on the couch to comfort me.

Michelle used a compassionate and professional voice to explain that kangaroos are wild animals and require special care, different from cats and dogs. Only people with specialised training are qualified to assist these animals.

"I know you were trying to help Summer, and that is wonderful, but unfortunately, some of that help did more harm than good.

"For example, kangaroos require a special formula because they are allergic to cow's milk. This is why Summer's stomach is upset; it couldn't digest the milk properly." Michelle explained that we were lucky because sometimes cow's milk can be so harmful to kangaroos it can kill them.

We learned the milk we fed to Summer wasn't our only mistake. Kangaroo joeys need the warmth and safety of their mother's pouch. Instead of leaving blankets on the floor, we should have used them to create a pretend pouch and hung them by the fireplace.

Michelle taught us that kangaroo joeys are naturally anxious animals and quickly become frightened as part of their defence mechanism in the bush. I didn't know this, but kangaroos are afraid of

human sounds they don't hear in the wild, so things like the radio, TV, microwave, music, and even our voices can frighten them.

She mentioned that Summer's separation from her mum also created a lot of stress for her. "If you were taken somewhere unfamiliar, away from your family, given food that made you sick, and heard unfamiliar sounds, wouldn't you feel frightened?" Michelle asked, glancing at the blaring television.

I bit my lip and nodded, ashamed of my behaviour but Michelle reassured me,. "You haven't done anything others haven't. People think they are doing the right thing and only want to help these animals, but they need specialised care. When someone finds an animal in need, the first thing to do is contact a trained wildlife rescuer like me, preferably within twenty-four hours. This allows trained professionals to provide the necessary care, increasing the animal's survival chances. This is a legal requirement in Australia now, but most people don't know that."

As Michelle stood with Summer in her arms, through my tears, I explained, "I am so sorry. I only wanted to help; I didn't know I was hurting her."

Michelle smiled and hugged me. "I know that, and you are extremely kind. Here's the new plan," she said, becoming businesslike. "Summer will stay with me to recover until she is strong enough to survive in the wild on her own. I only live thirty minutes from here, so you can visit her anytime. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes, I would like that very much," I said, turning to my parents, who both nodded in support.

Since that afternoon, my parents have taken me to visit Michelle and her animal sanctuary every Saturday. Michelle and her husband, Greg, run a 7,500-acre sanctuary caring for injured and orphaned animals, including possums, koalas, wombats, flying foxes, lizards, birds, turtles, and sometimes snakes.

When I visit Michelle and Greg's sanctuary, I help with all the different jobs related to wildlife care, even the messy ones. I try to do a bit of everything except when it comes to snakes. I am still scared of them. Michelle tells me that snakes can be dangerous, but they are more afraid of humans than we are of them. I'm still not sure about that.

Michelle promises to teach me how to be safe around snakes when I'm ready. She emphasises that even though they may look scary, they play an essential part in the environment by eating insects, mice, and other animals that can harm plants and other wildlife. "When humans aren't around, there is a perfect balance in nature," she added, seeing I still looked doubtful.

Sometimes, I help Michelle sterilise bottles to feed the joeys. When I'm lucky, I get to bottle-feed them myself. Other times, I help Michelle or Greg by giving medication to sick animals or chopping fruit for the flying foxes. We also go "leaf browsing," searching the bush for special gum leaves to feed the koalas, who are extremely fussy about what they eat. We go on rescue missions when someone from the public calls and reports that they have found an injured animal that needs help. When that happens, we climb into their truck and drive to where the animal is. When we find the injured animal, we decide if it can be saved or needs euthanasia.

I used to cry every time we had to euthanise an animal, but Michelle told me that euthanasia was often the kindest and most humane thing to do. It was putting the animal out of its enduring pain and suffering.

It is sad, but I understand why we must do it. If the injured animal can be saved with love and medical care, we carefully secure it and take it back to the sanctuary. One time, when we rescued an abandoned baby possum, it had died by the time we got home and could get it settled. Sadly, that happens often, but when I get discouraged, Michelle reminds me about all the other animals we can and do save.

Each visit is different and enjoyable because I rarely do the same thing twice. However, one constant task is helping to clean up after the

animals. One of the first things Michelle taught me was how to properly toilet the kangaroo joeys and how their mothers do it when the joeys are living in their pouches. This is important to prevent urinary tract infections. Since Joey's muscles aren't strong enough, mums stimulate their joeys to urinate and defecate by licking them after each feeding. In the absence of their mothers, humans must perform this task after each feed.

To stimulate the joey, gently but firmly rub the genital area with a tissue or toilet paper until the joey stops defecating and urinating. Wild animals produce a significant amount of waste that needs to be managed. Many animals also have enclosures that must be cleaned and raked several times daily.

While Michelle and Greg often ask me to help with the messy jobs, they encourage me to take part in fun activities, like feeding and playing with the animals. Whenever they have a wombat Joey in care, I take it outside, run around in circles, and watch it do zoomies. This is a lot of fun for me and is an important task to help the wombat get the exercise it needs to grow. And naturally, they love it too!

One day after I had volunteered with Michelle and Greg's for six months, and Michelle told me, "Today is the big day." I needed to help her clean the pen they'd built in their backyard because we were moving Summer and the other fourteen kangaroo joeys they had raised as the next step in preparing them for life in the wild.

Michelle explained that while the joeys still needed bottles for the next few months, she or Greg would frequently bring bottles to a feeding station. Here, the joeys could drink whenever they wanted to. This method was an essential step in reducing their contact with humans. By being outside, the joeys would learn to eat dirt, grass, and other natural foods, which helped them eventually become independent from the bottles. When that happened, we'd know they were weaned and could get all the nourishment they needed from being outdoors. After that, we'll open the gate, and the kangaroos will be free to come and go as they please.

"Many kangaroos are shy and will stay close for a while," Michelle told me. "Others hop away, and we never see them again. We never know what happens to them with those, but we hope for the best." Michelle handed me a rake to clean the dust and leaves from the ground.

"That is so sad," I said as I began to rake the area. "And joyful. *Bittersweet* is how I describe it," Michelle told me. "Kangaroos are wild animals and belong outdoors in the bush, not in our homes or backyards. The goal of caregivers is to raise and care for them so they can live as independent kangaroos in the wild. You'd be surprised how many return occasionally to hop in, say hello, grab a snack, and hop out again. One of the most rewarding aspects of rescuing animals is when mothers return with their Joeys, they want to show you."

Still sensing my sadness, she added, "Don't worry, we have a few more months before Summer is ready for that step." I returned to Michelle and Greg's ranch for the next five months, and life continued as usual. Then, one day, Michelle opened her door to let me in. "Today's the day," she told me. Even though the comment was vague, I knew what she meant. Today would be when we'd open the gate and give Summer and other joeys a chance to experience life in the wild.

Michelle hugged me as my eyes began to water. "You knew this day would come. This is a joyous occasion and means we've done our job well. Summer and the others are wild animals and belong in the bush with other kangaroos, not with humans. Thanks to our efforts, Summer can live a happy, free life in the wild, like all kangaroos should."

Michelle and Greg guided me through their house into the backyard and the pen where Summer and other mob members were resting. Greg looked over at the gate and then at me, indicating I should be the one to open it.

"I can't do it," I cried.

"Yes, you can. It is important for both you and Summer that you do this," Greg told me, placing his arm around my shoulder and gently

guiding me until I was in front of the latch. My hands trembled as I opened the gate, and Greg nudged me out of the way as we watched the Joeys respond to this unexpected event.

We watched for several minutes. A couple of joeys hopped off quickly, and others stayed where they were but looked on curiously. Much to my sadness, Summer followed them after watching the more adventurous joeys hop away. Greg, Michelle, and I watched from the gate for a few minutes, and then Michelle turned and said, "Great job, well done! We have other animals we must attend to now." And that was that.

Whenever I came to Michelle and Greg's for the next two years, I asked if they had seen Summer. They shook their heads, and tired of the disappointment, I finally stopped asking. Then, one day, Michelle told me she had something to show me, a video she had captured on her phone. Summer had come to see her the day before with a surprise package. A joey in her pouch. Unfortunately, Summer hopped back into the bush before I arrived, but thanks to Michelle's quick thinking, I saw Summer again. She was happy and not only thriving in the wild but a new mother as well.

I enjoy spending time with Michelle, Greg, and the animals. I've learned that caring for wildlife requires a lot of quality time. Sometimes, I can't play with friends or visit my grandparents because I'm busy caring for the animals. I understand that not everyone shares my love for them or has the time to commit to their care as Michelle and Greg.

Sadly, because of many reasons like climate change, loss of habitat, conflict and competition between wild and domestic animals, and humans' misunderstanding of wildlife, many of Australia's most loved animals are at risk of extinction.

We are fortunate to live in a place with an abundance of beautiful and unique animals, and it is our responsibility to protect them. From my volunteer work with Greg and Michelle, I learned that caring for animals requires commitment and dedication. I understand that not everyone can be as involved in wildlife conservation as I am, but there

are simple and effective ways we, as children and adults, can help protect all our precious animals.

Adults often remind us that we are the future. What better way to ensure a bright future than by protecting our wildlife?

Over the years, I have learned a lot from my experiences with Greg and Michelle. I want to share some of my experiences dealing with our wildlife's biggest and most urgent problems and the easy things we can do today to help everyone protect our animals.