

A Natural Recovery Project Partnership - Kosciuszko Huts Association and NPWS Southern Ranges

By Rosie McVeigh, Ranger – Conservation Fire Recovery

An Idea is born...

National Parks staff were contacted by a dedicated and enthusiastic team of volunteers from Sydney after they had heard about the devastating effects of the bushfires in Kosciuszko. The group, spearheaded by Robyn and Rick Counsell, wanted to contribute to the recovery of the park following the 2020 bushfires and developed the idea of building micro-bat habitat boxes. Bats have been busy developing a pretty bad name for themselves lately, but they remain a critical part of healthy, functioning ecosystems – small ‘micro’ bats control insect populations and large ‘macro’ bats pollinate and spread seed of native vegetation. With over 70 species of bats in Australia, over half are considered threatened species and many use trees for roosting so they are highly vulnerable to fire.

Micro-Bat Habitat Boxes for Species Recovery

The volunteers in Sydney are avid cross-country skiers and are involved in the restoration and maintenance of a number of huts throughout Kosciuszko. After seeing the devastation and magnitude of the fires, and the effect on the native wildlife, they decided to put their carpentry skills to good use, building 248 habitat boxes to donate to the Park’s recovery efforts. The team relied on the donation of all materials from a number of local businesses, sourcing all resources using their own time, money, and enthusiastic attitudes! The boxes were assembled by around 20 volunteers over three days, with the advice and help of Tanya Leary (Parks Programs) and Gary McDougal (NPWS carpenter extraordinaire). The result? Almost 250 high quality habitat boxes ready to be shipped to Jindabyne and Tumut.



KHA volunteers Damian, Zyra, Dave, Martin, Rick, and Heidi hard at work assembling and prepping materials for the boxes



The Dream Team! The dedicated and hard working team responsible for the production of the 248 Micro-bat habitat Boxes



Volunteers Paul, Martin, Steffi, Zyra, Steve, and Damien hard at work on the production line



The finished product! Brand-new mobile homes, ready to be shipped off for installation in Northern Kosciuszko National Park

Funding Opportunities and Survey Work

The on-ground delivery of the project was launched with the assistance of funding raised by Polish Fire fighters and managed by the Foundation of National Parks and Wildlife. Martin Schultz completed an initial survey across burnt areas that showed, as expected, many tree-dwelling bat species, including the threatened Eastern False Pipistrelle *Falsistrellus tasmaniensis*, had been heavily impacted. The survey also recorded a new cave dwelling species for the National Park - the Eastern Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus megaphyllus*.



The vulnerable Eastern False Pipistrelle (left) and The Eastern Horseshoe Bat (right) – a previously unrecorded species in the area was detected during the current post-fire survey (Photos: Martin Schulz)



Aboriginal Discovery Ranger Shane Herrington and NPWS Field Officer Joel Fordham installing the boxes in severely fire affected areas of the National Park

Using the survey information, the 248 bat boxes were successfully installed by NPWS staff in some of the most severely affected areas of northern Kosciuszko, such as Tumut Ponds, Talbingo, and Happy Jacks. A follow-up bat survey is scheduled for summer 2020/21 which will build on our knowledge of micro-bat natural recovery and help determine the effectiveness of artificial roosts in the sub-alpine environment.

In 2021 we're again enlisting the help of the volunteer group to produce an additional 180 habitat boxes to be installed prior to winter snowfall. The NPWS team are hoping that by increasing the number of boxes per site, we will increase the chances of them becoming a viable option for at-risk species.

It's an exciting project, made possible by this group of volunteers, that will improve our understanding of microbat species recovery after such devastating natural events.

Stay tuned for some (hopefully) exciting results - 'Same bat time, same bat channel'!