 Dr Anne Fowler (’BSc(Vet)(Hons) ’92 BVSc ’93)

All things wild and wonderful

Australian wildlife is the focus of the University’s new specialist vet hospital and research centre. **Diana Simmonds** reports from Camden, NSW

It seems almost too perfect that a vet named Fowler turns out to be passionate about birds. Happily, however, Dr Anne Fowler of University of Sydney’s new Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre at Camden, is a passionate avian expert who specialises in Australian wildlife health and research.

“My mum says I used to splint and fix legs on broken china horses,” she says of her childhood at Berowra, on Sydney’s north-western fringe. “We had chooks, mice, rabbits, finches and budgies – the usual. I think that’s where the pattern of caring for animals came from, though. We were taught always to look after a living thing before our own needs. I think that’s very important for kids – you learn empathy that way.”

It’s a stretch to keep up with Fowler who is articulate, passionate and wide-ranging in her interests.

“She talks 19 to the dozen, can you keep up?” asks Associate Professor Dr David Phalen, director of the Centre and a laidback Texan. He is a noted authority on avian health and research but says of his home state: “You know till recently you could keep big cats as pets? The only requirement was a tattoo and lots of money; and 30 per cent of big cat owners had been attacked by their animals. Texas is a strange place.”

Unlike the Wildlife Health and Conservation Centre – a purpose-built hospital and research facility for native animals – which is not at all strange, unless caring for injured and sick wildlife is thought to be so.

“We have to look at it in a practical way,” says Fowler. “Sometimes you have to ask yourself: is it justified to spend this much time and money on an animal that might not make it in the wild anyway and, statistically, probably would not and should not.”

As she puts this question she is opening the door to one of the “wards”. There are three: for wildlife, mammals, reptiles and birds. They have been designed for versatility: sliding partitions turn a large cage into a cosier space and vice versa; hygiene is ensured through hose-down, scrubbable, stainless steel construction.

Fowler carefully slides the bolt to the largest avian pen. A russet-gold eye peers out. It belongs to a young *Haliaeetus leucogaster* – White-bellied Sea Eagle. She is magnificent if bedraggled with her broken wing taped and wired.

“Should she be alive?” Fowler asks. “Her rehabilitation is expensive but against that is what we can learn about them. She was brought in from Warragamba. She had been shot. She’s not that old – you can see her plumage isn’t totally white. She’s doing well now we’ve managed to work out how to fix her wing. She should fly again and be set free.”

Aside from critical research projects into problems such as the facial tumours afflicting Tasmanian Devils, part of the Centre’s work is practical experiments into treatments for injuries and illnesses that don’t feature heavily in the conventional curriculum.

“We needed to find a way to fix pins to her wing bones,” says Fowler. “Finally we went to Bunnings and bought a pack of 10c cable ties – they work beautifully.”

Another unlikely but significant breakthrough is to be seen in the next ward which is part shallow pond. In it are several small turtles with broken – but mending – shells.

“People try to fix their shells but there’s been nothing that really works well,” Fowler explains. “For instance, you mustn’t use Araldite – which is quite common – because the way that works is to heat up and it burns them. It also makes a rigid join and the shell can’t grow. The animal will never heal.”

Fowler happened to mention broken turtle shell to her then boyfriend – a dentist – and he offered a possible solution.

“It was glass ionomer cement. They use it for fissure fractures in kids because it allows the tooth to develop, it’s also good for infections and growth because it contains antibacterials and fluoride

and it's impervious to water. We tried it and it's fantastic. What most people don't realise is that turtles have to be in water to eat and drink, so you can't treat them with water soluble material."

In another small compartment – carefully warmed to an approximation of a Blue-Tongue Lizard-friendly environment – is Bubble. She is so called because following a dog attack she was brought in with her intestines bubbling through a wound in her side (gallows humour is a speciality of all branches of medicine).

"Bubble is doing very well," says Fowler cuddling the reptile and showing off the almost invisible scar on her flank. "She and the turtles are over-wintering with us and we'll let them go when it's warmer." (My visit to the Centre was in early spring.) "What we learn from observing them is helpful for developing treatment protocols for wildlife. Burnt koalas, for instance, need specific regimes and we are in a position to work out how best to do it. We're not here to take away from vets in the community but more to add to their knowledge. For instance, three or four possums died in one place recently – why? We can offer more diagnostic testing than a vet practice."

Part of the Centre's work is going out to the community of wildlife carers and rescuers to pass on specialist knowledge gained on the wards.

"Once clients have been given the right information they'll do a fantastic job," says Fowler. "Education is a big part of what we do. When someone brings in a spotted marsh frog that's come second to a whipper-snipper, we know we can probably do something to fix its legs. It might only weigh six grams and you could ask – why bother? - but the more we know, the better it is for the rarer varieties."

There's also the external rotation of vet students who will be coming to the Centre on a regular basis: it's extramural, but they choose to come, says Fowler.

The statistics of veterinary learning demonstrate clearly why the Centre is such an important addition to vet science education: "Horses account for 25 per cent of practical undergraduate time although they make up one per cent of the pet community. There are 10 million dogs and five million pet cats in Australia but this is changing as more people live in apartments and small spaces. There are 20 million pet birds now, so it's important that new graduates not only have good general skills but are aware of this shift. The licensing laws have changed too when it comes to unusual and exotic pets."

A young White-bellied Sea Eagle: shot but rescued and recovering

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("Exotic" includes rats and rabbits, Fowler points out, and these are very popular among apartment dwellers.) However, one of the main problems facing the Centre is not weird and wonderful creatures, but the day-to-day maintenance and running of the place.

"Nobody seems willing to fund something as mundane as day-to-day expenses," says Fowler. "And while it's wonderful that $5million has been spent on building and equipping the place, there is actually no funding to treat wildlife. And it's that which is of immediate value to vets and the public. The more we can learn and pass on, the better."

Higher up the research chain from frog and eagle splints is experiments in digital radiography ("it's environmentally friendly, there's no chemical waste and no additional costs"), ultrasound ("it has so many applications that we're only just beginning to explore") and long-term observation and research into unusual species. ("There is no information on Australian lizards; how do you know how they are if you don't know what normal is?") And so on.

"An endowment would be good," says Fowler. "The ultimate goal is to train students to be able to treat exotics and wildlife and to go out to the community to do workshops for wildlife carers and vets. But to do that, we do need to be able to keep the Centre running day-to-day."

The Avian Reptile & Exotic Pet Hospital, Wildlife Health & Conservation Centre is at Camden, NSW. Call (02) 9351 1798 or email: vetsci.areph@usyd.edu.au ■