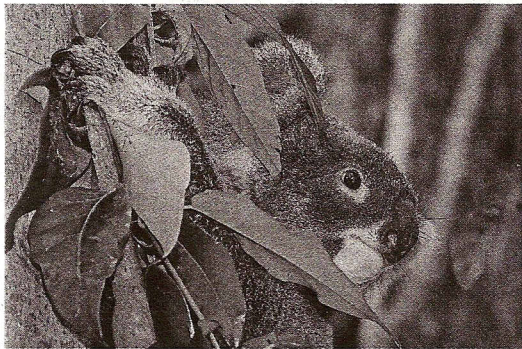


Back where she belongs



IN THE WILD: Lesley the koala back in her element at Noosa Springs.
PHOTOS: GEOFF POTTER/SCN25021KOALAF



OFF YOU GO: Murray Chambers releases Lesley the koala.

Lesley the koala ready to meet up with Prince Val

By PETER GARDINER

SHE was fashionably 30 minutes late and then when she arrived last Friday looking gorgeous for a life-changing date with her destiny, Lesley could not make up her mind.

Was Prince Valiant waiting for her? No, but possibly Lesley was picking up his scent by the tentative way she sniffed the gum tree and resisted the urge to bound up it.

In the end she clawed halfway up, decided to slip back down and then finally hauled herself up into the bough in readiness for a feed to go with her new-found freedom after 10 months cooped up at the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital.

Lesley can be forgiven for being a little tentative upon her release in front a media pack at Noosa Springs Resort, and to her credit she did not wee on anyone.

When you are a Noosa koala, beating the odds is a day-to-day battle for survival, but five-year-old Lesley is one of the true survivors, having been found close to death on Leslie Drive at Noosa Head after being hit by a car and dragged along the road.

Her poor joey never made it and hospital vet Robyn Stenner said for the first three weeks or so, her loss of skin was so great that it was touch-and-go.

Much of her local koala gene pool is relying on Lesley and the chances of that genetic diversity deepening a little further.

According to the experts like Koala Diaries' Carolyn Beaton, the numbers are not stacking up optimistically – the latest release was an invaluable shot at sustaining a national treasure in what remains of the wild.

"Within the (Noosa National) Park we still believe there are 11 from Noosa Heads to Peregrian," Carolyn said.

"In the greater Noosa area we have estimated about 30 – we had several hundred in 2000."

One of Lesley's real chances of hooking up with the right fella, may rest with Prince Valiant, a male koala released on the same tree just before Christmas.

"I was walking through the park the other day and I heard a koala, so I was hoping it was

him," Carolyn said. Whether the two might make it together could be academic, after Carolyn's bid for local council and Federal funding for a koala tracking program in Noosa National Park was rejected.

Carolyn said the program was back to square one, but she has an affinity with Lesley, having helped locals track her movements to post them on Koala Diaries just prior to the terrible car strike.

Carolyn said one of the last posts read: "It was about 10pm and we had just crossed the Weyba Bridge heading towards the Leslie Drive roundabout when the mother and baby on back waddled across the street and went under the guard rail and into the bush on the river side of the street...we stopped in the middle of the road as did the car opposite and hit the hazard lights to warn the

other traffic behind us....everyone stopped and mother and baby crossed safely and went on their way....both looked to be in good health...huge thrill".

Carolyn said the news of Lesley's accident had a ripple effect through the community.

"Our band of koala campaigners was devastated. We were willing her to make a recovery and are absolutely over the moon that she has come this far."

This natural resort area was chosen as it satisfied the criteria of releasing Lesley within 5km of where she was found, but was her best chance of avoiding more deadly traffic. As Carolyn watched the team release Lesley, her spirits were buoyed.

"It's moments like these that make it all worthwhile," Carolyn said.

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