

Joan Southgate Travel Award Report

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As a South African, Australia has always seemed terribly far away. As an ecologist, its wildlife has always been deeply intriguing – monotremes and marsupials have always been high on my species list. When I heard about the Joan Southgate Travel Award, I jumped at the opportunity. This generous funding is a reciprocal award between the Southern African Wildlife Management Association (SAWMA) and AWMS. Anyone who is a member of either society and is a student or an early career researcher or practitioner can apply. In 2023, I wrote a proposal together with Benjamin Allen from the University of Southern Queensland and was elated when we were successful! Ben immediately set to organising all sorts of adventures for my time there. My current postdoctoral position does not involve much time away from a desk, so I was very excited for all the fieldwork awaiting me.

The trip started off with a few days of “wombatting” in South Australia from February – March 2024. I was grateful to be able to join an amazing, dedicated team who have been studying a population of southern hairy-nosed wombats for more than three decades. I arrived in Adelaide, where I was generously hosted by Stacey Dix, a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide. We met up with another PhD student, Shannon Kleemann, and their supervisor David Taggart in Swan Reach, which is situated on the wide, meandering Murray River. The landscape was open, dry shrubland with stunning sunset views, and I was struck by how similar it was to the semi-arid Karoo region in South Africa. In the following days, we became essentially nocturnal. As nightfall approached, every change in temperature and humidity was carefully noted, as this affects whether wombats leave their burrows. We had a fair amount of success capturing these surprisingly speedy animals, although nothing compared to years past – apparently their numbers have been

declining in the area. I learnt a lot about threats to the population and their basic biology – even seeing some joeys and mothers. It was very rewarding to contribute in a small way to ongoing work on their ecology and conservation.

Next, I was off to Queensland, where I was hosted by Ben and his family near Toowoomba. The Allens were extremely kind to me, and I am so grateful for the way they included me in their daily lives so graciously. At the University of Southern Queensland, I met some great researchers in Ben's lab in the UniSQ Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Systems, including Chloe Miller, JP Emery, and Damber Bista. For most of the rest of March, I spent a lot of my time in Darling Downs, staying in the exciting town of Inglewood. I assisted Chloe and Ben with camera trapping surveys of the state forests in the area and with trapping and collaring dingoes and invasive red foxes. I also got to do a few reptile surveys and was enthusiastic to learn about the diverse herpetofauna in the area. A highlight was seeing a common death adder while driving at night. These intricately marked snakes are one of the most venomous globally and are listed as vulnerable in Queensland, particularly due to habitat loss caused by grazing. While the fieldwork was quite tough, it was blissful driving along spotting kangaroos and wallabies hopping through the forests in the early morning light, and even seeing some patches of old growth brigalow trees. I enjoyed observing wildlife of all kinds – from a dazzling array of parrots and huge raptors, learning about many new eucalypts and acacias (and enjoying seeing them where they belong, as many are highly invasive in South Africa), seeing colourful butterflies, marching ants, patterned snakes and spotted geckoes. Everything was very new but also so much of what I saw felt familiar. I think this is the power of travel and the real strength of this award – finding resemblances with that which is known and making connections to that which is novel.

In April, Ben also hauled me along on a trip up to Townsville and then inland to the bustling town of Prairie in the Flinders Shire. The drive up the coast was a great way to see more of the state and I enjoyed learning a little about each town we passed through and watching the vegetation shift as we travelled north. We spent a couple of days bringing in cameras

and acoustic monitors that had been out for the last few years on various private farms in the outback for Gary Young's Masters project. The target species was the endemic squatter pigeon, although the amount of audiovisual data collected on all sorts of species was massive! For the rest of the month, I split my time between fieldwork in the state forests between Millmerran and Inglewood, and staying with my third host, Rosemary Booth. We visited the research centre at Spicers Hidden Vale near Grandchester, where she works as a wildlife vet and runs an *ex situ* conservation breeding programme for rat-kangaroos. The multi-use, private reserve is owned by the Turner Family and is a refuge for many wild species, including glossy black-cockatoos, square-tailed kites and koalas. While I was there, I met some wonderful researchers working on interesting projects around the property and in the research facility, which houses and breeds rufous bettongs and long-nosed potoroos. With Rosie, I attended a fascinating event at UniSQ on koala conservation called "KoalaFest" and got involved in the Hidden Vale koala research project, which has collected six years' worth of movement data for over 40 animals. As a spatial ecologist, this was an exciting dataset which I was thrilled to dive into, where I focused on assessing the impacts of disease and translocation on koala movement and behaviour.

In October, back in southern Africa, I presented some of the initial findings on the koala movement analysis at the SAWMA symposium in Windhoek, Namibia. The work was well-received, and I got a lot of questions after the talk and across the conference. The next steps are to write up for publication. Ben was also able to attend the SAWMA symposium, and it was great catching up with him there and again in Cape Town a few days later. The connections I made with researchers and conservationists on my trip were incredible, and it has made the distant continent seem much less far away. All in, I spent two fantastic, rewarding months exploring Australia, and there is still so much to see and learn! I left already scheming for ways to go back, and I would highly recommend this travel award to anyone who is eligible.

