

# *against the odds*

WILDLIFE WARRIOR HAYLEY SHUTE, AKA THE 'KOALA WHISPERER', HAS DEDICATED HER LIFE TO WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND UNDERSTANDING ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR.

WORDS RACHEL WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT



Hayley shares a special bond with the cuddly little marsupials. **FACING PAGE** The vulnerable koalas require expert care and attention as they grow.



FIGURING OUT WHAT MAKES ANIMALS TICK has been a lifelong pursuit for Hayley Shute, life sciences manager and resident 'koala whisperer' at the Australian Reptile Park on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

"I was that kid who, instead of playing with dolls, would make houses and gardens for the snails and skinks in my backyard," she recalls. "I hand-raised a flying fox when I was 14; I got my mum to say she was the one doing it because you had to be 18 – there was no stopping me!"

As soon as she was old enough, Hayley enrolled for work experience at the Australian Reptile Park in Somersby. "After that, I started volunteering there and got casual work really quickly," she says. "When I went to university to study science, I kept working as a keeper at different wildlife parks and zoos."

A champion of the underdog through and through, Hayley says: "I'd always pick the budgie with two toes, or whatever, because I felt sorry for them, so I was never that interested in working with koalas because they're everyone's favourite."

Although initially resistant to their furry charms, Hayley's aptitude for hand-raising took over when there was a koala joey in need of nurturing. "I've always really loved, and been really good at, hand-raising animals," she says.

"So, when a koala needed care, I was like, 'Alright, I'll give it a go!' and I just

seemed to be able to do it. I've hand-raised 15 or so now. I can always just figure them out."

Relying heavily on her well-honed instincts, Hayley says she has learnt most of what she knows about caring for koalas on the job. "I've learnt so much from just doing it, but the challenge with koalas is that they're so unique," she explains. "They're related to wombats, but they live high up in trees, they eat toxic leaves, they don't drink much, they have a backwards-facing pouch and massive claws – they're an incredible species."

Hand-rearing a koala joey requires round-the-clock care for six to eight months. "It's a lot of pressure and a huge commitment of time and resources," says Hayley. "There's very little known about the pouch life of koalas. They drink milk and then they eat a thing called pap, which gives them all the good bacteria and gut flora needed to digest eucalyptus leaves, but there's so little known about the timeframes."

"My first koala, Archie, I got him to 300 grams and then he just refused his milk," recalls Hayley. "He was coming at me and nuzzling me, and I'm like, 'What do you want? I don't know what you want.'

"Then I realised he needed pap. So, I figured out, by calling a whole bunch of people and reading up, that you can harvest pap, so I did that, and you should've seen the look on his face when I gave it to him – it was like a two-year-old eating chocolate cake."

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Not content with one amazing job, Hayley is also a conservation manager at Aussie Ark in the Barrington Tops, the largest independently owned and operated conservation organisation in NSW. It also works closely with the Australian Reptile Park.

"I manage all the programs getting animals ready for release," says Hayley. "We've got a species recovery unit, which are managed enclosures where we do our breeding. The offspring from there go out into the sanctuary."

"Getting those animals ready for release means we have to put them in soft releases to condition them. After about two weeks we open the doors and they get used to going outside, but there's still food there, so they can come and go as they please."

"After another two weeks, the door is shut, but they're still getting fed outside. We continue to monitor them to make sure they're coming back less and less. So, it's really small steps to help them become wild and independent."

Hayley loves putting in the hard work to create a long-term future for Australia's threatened species, and says we can all do our part to ensure native animals survive for generations to come.

"There are conservation organisations out there who work really hard and have to raise funds for themselves," says Hayley. "At Aussie Ark, we're not government-funded, so we literally rely on donors and the incredible people out there who help us do these projects." *CS*  
For more information, visit [reptilepark.com.au](http://reptilepark.com.au) and [aussieark.org.au](http://aussieark.org.au)

FROM FAR LEFT Hayley has learnt how to read a koala's cues, so she knows what each one needs; cuddle time with Momo; it's vital to make the baby koalas feel safe and comfortable; Hayley's knack for animal interaction set her on a rewarding career path.

