

Helping Vets Help Wildlife: How Australian vets treating wildlife can contribute to the bigger picture

Across the country, private veterinary clinics quietly play a critical role in caring for ill and injured wildlife. From koalas with chlamydia, to lorikeets with paralysis and wombats with mange, more than half of the clinics surveyed in a recent project reported seeing wildlife cases every single day, with most encountering a wildlife case at least once a week. Yet most of these clinics receive little to no support for this vital work.

Recognising this gap and the untapped opportunity it presents, Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) undertook to explore how to better support and connect these veterinarians. The goal: to understand how to grow the National Wildlife Disease Surveillance System; a coordinated, impactful network that not only improves outcomes for individual animals but contributes to early warning for emerging diseases that could affect wildlife, livestock, ecosystems and people.

Why does this matter?

The health of wildlife, people and domestic animals are all interlinked – a concept known as ‘One Health’. Wildlife are often the “canaries in the coal mine” – the first indicators of emerging environmental threats, yet without accurate information from the front line of wildlife treatment, we risk missing the early warning signs. Enabling more veterinary clinics to report on what they’re seeing could dramatically improve our understanding of wildlife health, disease threats and environmental changes; all with flow-on effects to industries, communities and human health. For the vets themselves, being better connected and supported allows them to provide the best care for their wildlife patients, and an opportunity to contribute to a valuable national program that needs them.

Where are we now?

Australia has a National Wildlife Disease Surveillance System coordinated by WHA in partnership with a range of government and non-government agencies. The system is based on a network of over 45 wildlife disease surveillance partners including state and territory agriculture and environment agencies, wildlife hospitals, wildlife rehabilitators and others involved in wildlife health. These partners see over 65,000 wildlife cases each year, representing a very significant disease surveillance effort.

Within this wider system sits WHA’s ‘Sentinel Surveillance Program’, encompassing 28 veterinary clinics, zoo-based wildlife hospitals and universities that contribute data on wildlife health events to a national database. The 11 veterinary clinics in the program are referred to as ‘sentinel clinics’, which are those with a high wildlife caseload, or that expand the geographic and species coverage of the surveillance system.

WHA recognises the value of expanding the program to engage more with private veterinary clinics that handle wildlife cases, such as small animal or mixed practice clinics that see some wildlife cases alongside their domestic animal caseload. The aim is to build on the success of the existing Sentinel Surveillance Program, to continue growing the network of vet clinics across the country.

What we did - Surveying veterinary clinics

WHA partnered with consultant Sativus Pty Ltd in 2024 to engage directly with those at the frontline of wildlife treatment across Australia – veterinarians, veterinary nurses and clinic managers – to ask them how they might see their involvement in the wildlife surveillance network.

Through interactive focus groups, we gathered insights into the practical challenges of participating in wildlife disease surveillance, as well as the incentives that could drive engagement. These workshops informed the development of a national online survey, which resulted in 141 responses from veterinary professionals representing a range of clinic types, geographic locations and career stages. Outreach at national conferences also allowed us to connect with professionals who were not captured in the survey. WHA consulted with a range of other organisations including the Australian Veterinary Association, Animal Management in Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities, and Commonwealth, State and Territory Government agencies. A gap analysis identified existing wildlife veterinary networks, who we also engaged with.

What we found – What vet clinics need to support wildlife

Over half of the vet clinics in the survey see at least one wildlife case each day, and 85% see at least one case every week (Figure 1), indicating a significant potential of these clinics for informing our understanding of wildlife health.

Figure 1a. Frequency of wildlife seen at veterinary clinics

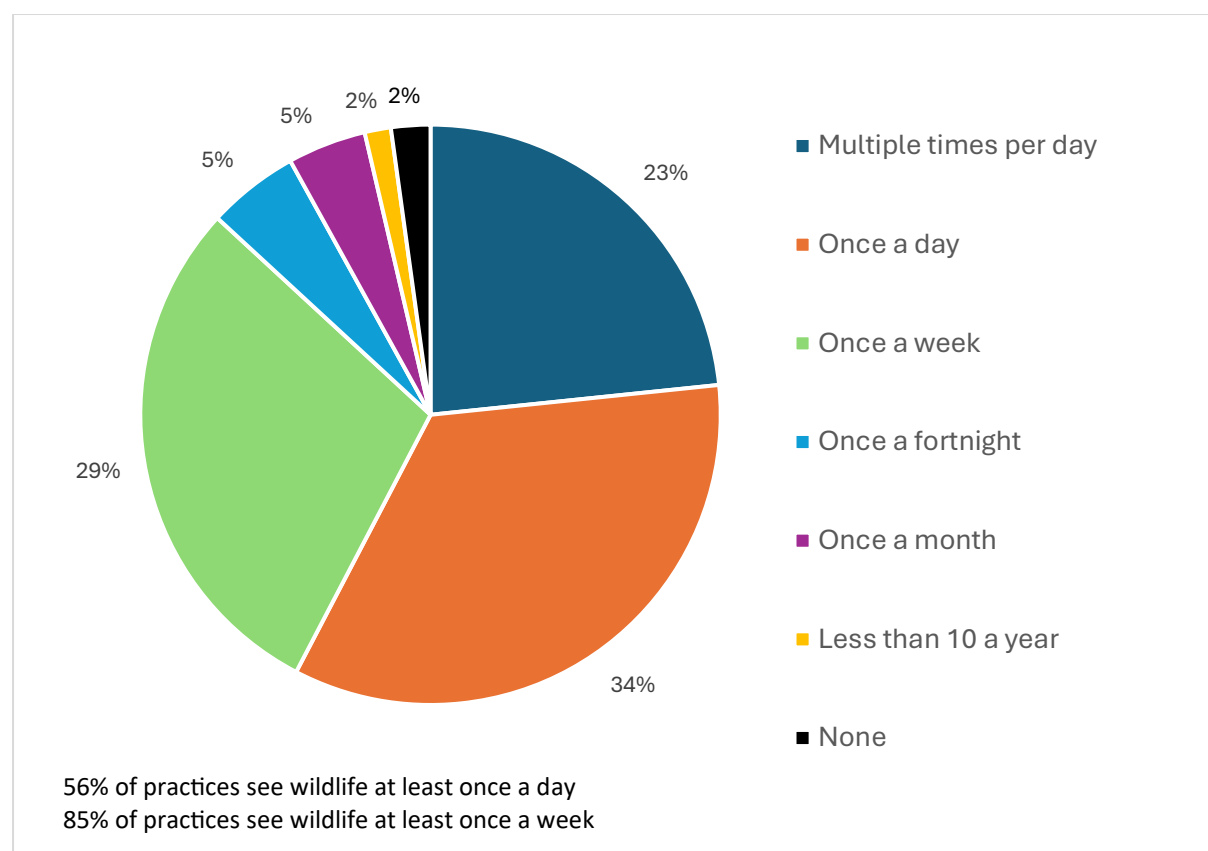
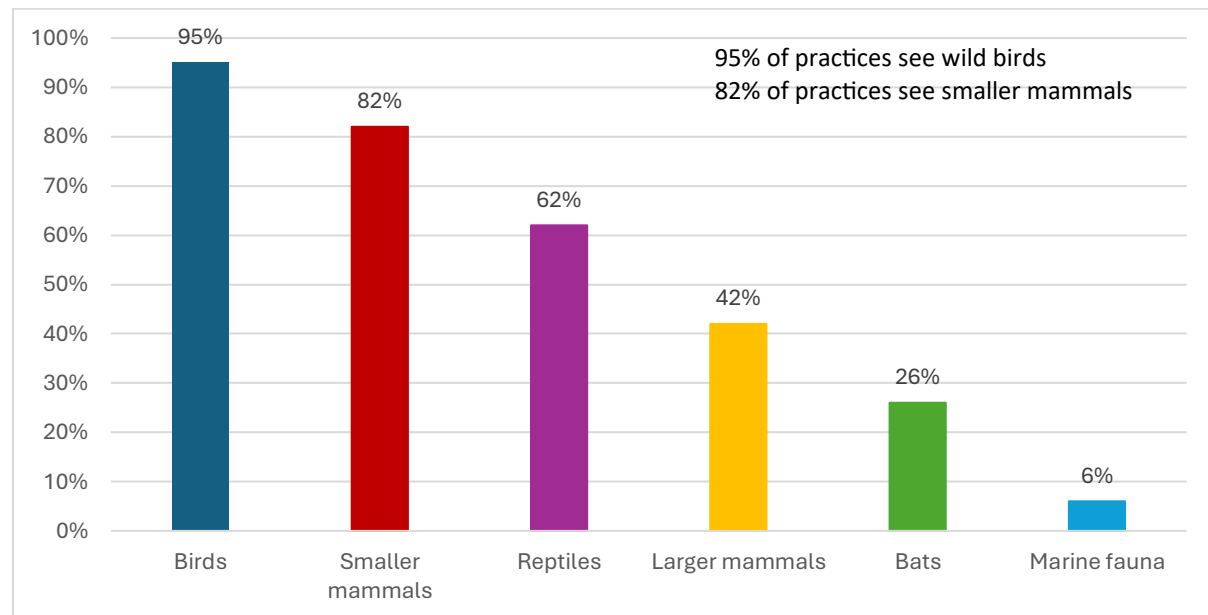


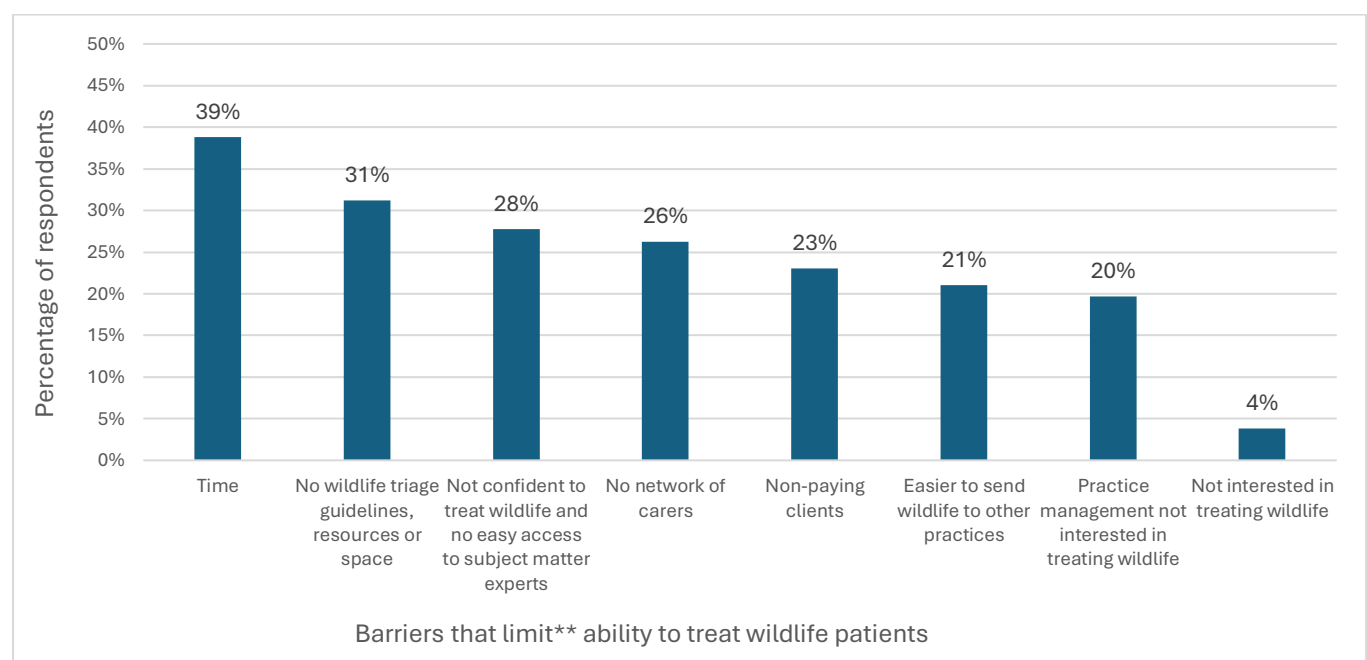
Figure 1b. Species of wildlife seen at veterinary clinics*



* Multiple selections allowed

The vets are interested in treating wildlife, and over 97% of survey respondents are interested in being involved in a surveillance program either now (>75%), or at a later date (>20%). Despite this interest, vets and clinics face a number of barriers in treating wildlife and engaging with a wildlife health surveillance network. The greatest barrier limiting the ability of vets to examine, treat and care for wildlife cases is a lack of time (Figure 2), with wildlife cases creating pressure on already busy clinics. Some vets also don't have access to experts to advise on more challenging cases, or connections with local wildlife rehabilitators who can care for animals through the recovery period. A lack of wildlife triage guidelines was also raised.

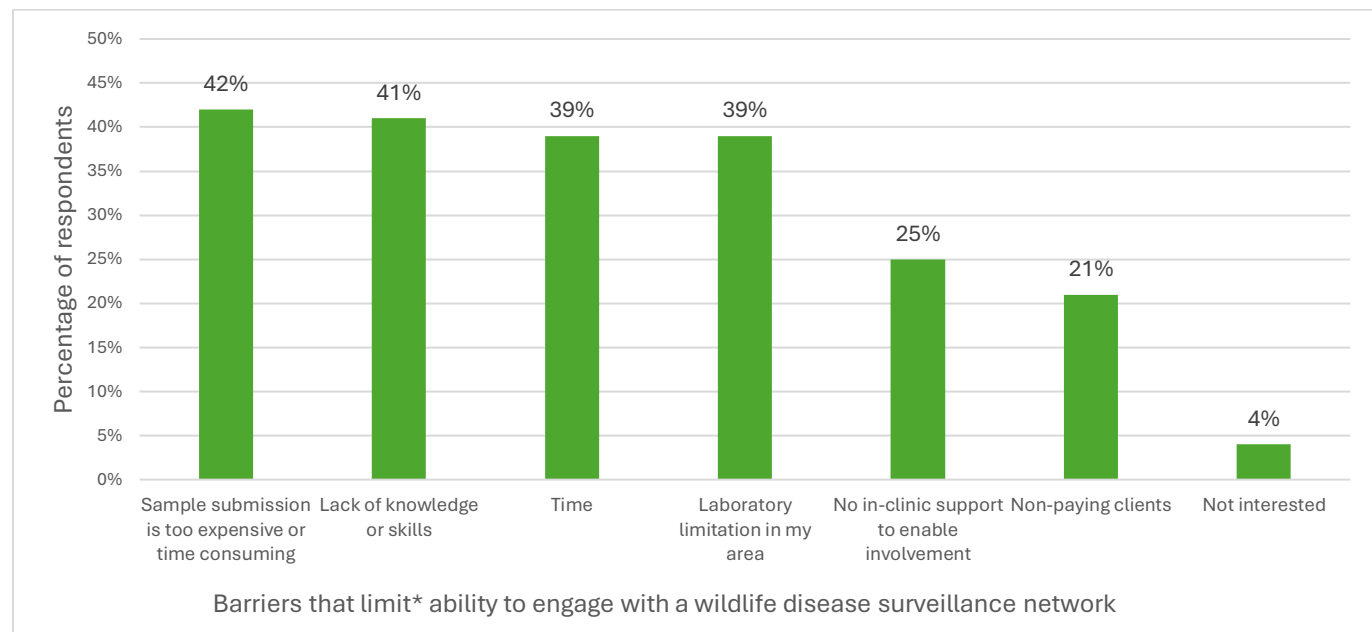
Figure 2. Barriers for veterinary clinics to treat wildlife cases



** Includes responses of 'limiting' and 'strongly limiting'; excludes responses of 'neutral'

Of note is that veterinary practices additionally face financial constraints when taking on wildlife cases where there is generally no financial reward, with passionate veterinarians often completing unpaid work after hours or between other patients. Another financial limitation is the lack of funding for diagnostic laboratory testing to investigate sick wildlife, which was identified as the greatest limitation for vets to engage with a wildlife disease surveillance network (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Barriers for veterinary clinics to engage with a wildlife disease surveillance network



* Includes responses of 'limiting' and 'strongly limiting'; excludes responses of 'neutral'

As well as identifying the barriers, we asked what could enable vets to be part of a national surveillance network. The primary motivators were access to real-time advice from wildlife specialists, as well as online resources and webinars, and training sessions. Other important incentives included financial support to cover the costs of diagnostic testing, and funding opportunities for wildlife treatment.

These findings support what we hear from the veterinary professionals in our network – that vets want to be involved in a disease surveillance program so they can make a difference on a larger scale, beyond the sphere of their clinic. However, to effectively integrate more veterinary practices into an expanded wildlife disease surveillance network, the identified barriers need to be addressed. Building partnerships with clinics, providing veterinarians with access to a network of experts to expand their wildlife knowledge and skills, and seeking funding opportunities could all help to reduce some of the logistical and financial challenges associated with treating wildlife and allow clinics to make a greater contribution towards wildlife disease surveillance.

What's next?

Wildlife health surveillance plays an essential role in detecting new and emerging diseases, investigating outbreaks and improving our understanding of wildlife diseases. This can ultimately help to protect not only our native wildlife, but also the environment and the health of people. By providing information to a national program, a veterinarian's day-to-day work helping wildlife can contribute towards better scientific knowledge, research and policy – and better 'One Health' outcomes. They become part of the bigger picture.

WHA recognises that vet clinics treating wildlife are at the forefront of disease surveillance. We heard what the vet clinics told us, and while WHA alone cannot address every challenge, we are committed to providing meaningful support to vet clinics in their vital work. Our goal is to help

sustain their critical contribution to wildlife health and surveillance across Australia – with the ultimate result of better outcomes for wildlife, for vet clinics, and for Australia as a whole.

Interested in wildlife health and want to learn more?

- To keep updated about WHA's plans for the network, contact: admin@wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au.
- Sign up to the WHA Community to receive the WHA newsletter: enter your email at the bottom of the [WHA homepage](#).
- Visit the [WHA website](#) for resources on wildlife health including disease fact sheets, biosecurity guidelines and incident information e.g. H5 bird flu.
- Are you interested in partnering with us to Help Vets Help Wildlife? To discuss partnership opportunities, please contact admin@wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au.

Article by:

Clare Death, Wildlife Health Australia

Keren Cox-Witton, Wildlife Health Australia

Bridie Schultz, Sativus

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