

A Cage for Freedom: A Lifeline for Ballarat's Native Animals

By Darren Hibberd

A community project built on learning, building, and mateship

The idea began at a BirdLife meeting, during a casual discussion about the challenges of releasing rehabilitated wildlife. Melissa, from Ballarat Wildlife Rehabilitation & Conservation (BWRAC), mentioned they needed a caged trailer to safely return animals to the wild. She laughed and said, "Looks like I'll have to learn to weld."

As a member of the Wendouree Men's Shed, I suggested something simple but powerful:

"Why don't we make this a community project?
The Men's Shed and BWRAC — both volunteer-run — working together."

That moment set everything in motion.

From Sawdust to Sparks

In the Wendouree Men's Shed, the familiar scent of sawdust usually hangs in the air. It's a place known for timber projects, careful joinery, and the steady rhythm of hand tools shaping wood. The Shed has always been a place of connection — where skills are shared, stories are swapped, and community grows one project at a time.

But this project was different.

For many of the men, it was the first time they had ever worked with steel. Suddenly the workshop echoed with new sounds — the sharp hiss of welding, the ring of steel being cut, and the hum of grinders shaping metal. There was excitement, nerves, and a lot of curiosity.

Melissa and I worked together on the planning and design, figuring out what the animals needed and what the Shed could build. Once the plans were ready, the boys rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Learning Steel, One Spark at a Time

This wasn't just another project.

It was a chance to help the region's wildlife return safely to the bush.

Over the next weeks, the Shed buzzed with activity:

steel was cut and welded

mesh panels were shaped and smoothed

a custom latch system was designed to open silently

a removable roof panel was added

and the entire structure was mounted onto a sturdy trailer

Every weld, every bolt, every measurement was done with purpose.

This wasn't just a cage.
It was a second chance.

And it wasn't just a build.
It was a group of volunteers discovering new skills, supporting each other, and creating something meaningful for the community.

A Trailer Built for Freedom

When the trailer begins its work, it will travel across the region — from wetlands to woodlands, from paddocks to forest edges. And every time that door opens, another life will step back into freedom.

This project is more than steel and mesh.
It's a symbol of what happens when community groups combine their strengths.
When practical skills meet compassion.
When people who care about their town — and its wildlife — work together.