

I'm a River Paramedic!

New South Wales

I arrived at the Conservation Volunteers Australia office in Sydney along with 25 other international people to commence my 2 week volunteer program in New South Wales. After a full briefing and induction, CVA staff took me and four other volunteers to the railway station. We were armed with a map and directions and placed on a train to Cardiff (a suburb of Newcastle). We traveled two hours north and were met by Matt – he's CVA's Volunteer Engagement Officer in Newcastle. Matt completed our induction with a tour of the volunteer house where we'll be staying, and told us about our first project – it's called The River Paramedics.

We were intrigued as it sounded like we were going to become doctors! Matt explained that the River Paramedics projects are some of the most important conservation projects being undertaken in NSW, as part of a long-running program to restore the health of the Hunter River and its tributaries. We will be volunteering in the Muswellbrook Region, about 2 hours west of Newcastle. Matt said we would need to be up early on Monday morning with all our food and clothes packed for our five day project with our Team Leader Steve. The weekend is free time, and Matt tells us about some great places in and around Newcastle. Some of us decide that we will go to Blackbutt Nature Reserve which has native animal enclosures – it's a great chance to see wildlife up close, including koalas and wombats. On Sunday we explore Newcastle and then go to Nobby's Beach – Matt told us it is one of the best in Australia, and we agree!

The volunteer house is basic shared accommodation with everything we need. There are plenty of tourist brochures to browse through and plan activities for our free time, and Newcastle is only 15 minutes away by train. The local shopping centre in Cardiff has all the services we need such as a bank, library, shops and a great pub with live music.

We have a fantastic weekend, but we are ready for the next part of our adventure when Steve and Matt arrive early on Monday. They help us to pack the esky full of food, tidy up the house and load our gear into the trailer which we will tow behind the 'troopy' – this is one of CVA's 4 wheel drive vehicles. We wave goodbye to Matt and head off on our journey. On the way, Steve tells us he has been leading teams of River Paramedics for two years now. He explains that the tasks we will be undertaking, such as removing invasive weeds and replanting the area with native trees, are crucial to control erosion and improve the water quality.



Here we are in the back of the troopy!

Two hours later we arrive in Muswellbrook and drive to a dairy farm called Glen Eden to plant trees along the Hunter River. We meet Zoë, who tells us about the history of the project site and shows us the trees planted by other CVA teams. We are impressed that they are growing so well as Steve had told us about the severe drought that Australia has been experiencing. Zoë explains this is because the farmer has made the commitment to ensure the trees receive water regularly.

We are keen to start work but first, Steve gives us a very clear safety talk and shows us how to use the tools correctly to plant the trees. They are smaller than I expected – they are long stem

native tube stock that have been specially propagated for this project as they have long roots which will go deep into the water table. We will be using a water lance to 'drill' a hole into the soil and drop in the plant, just leaving a little of the plant above the soil. We have to wear 'wet weather' gear that Steve has brought along to keep us dry, but we soon find out how much fun we can have with the water lance!



All geared up to be River Paramedics!

We learn fast and by lunchtime we have some great teamwork happening and have planted 100 trees! We stop for lunch and sit under the trees and enjoy our lunch and then carry on until about 3.30pm. The farmer has offered to show us the cows being milked and we also played with the baby calves – they're beautiful!

Afterwards we pack up and head to our accommodation, in the cabins at Glenbawn Dam. Steve told us this morning that it is a fantastic place, and he was right – there are lots of kangaroos, cockatoos and beautiful scenery. It is great to see kangaroos in the wild - when we went to Blackbutt Reserve at the weekend, we enjoyed being able to hold koalas and see wallabies and kangaroos in their yards, and now we see them at home in the wild - fantastic! Following Steve's suggestion, we decide we will have a traditional Aussie BBQ for dinner down by the dam, and it is just glorious watching the sunset. All too soon we

are heading for bed, all this fresh air and exercise makes you very tired!



Up close and personal with the baby calves!

We continued our work at Glen Eden for the rest of the week and were thrilled to know we had planted 1,000 trees by Friday. Zoë is thrilled with our efforts and thanks us for what she calls a 'living legacy' of our visit to the Hunter Valley. It's a nice thought, and I imagine our trees will one day be home to all sorts of wildlife, as well as helping improve water quality and stop erosion.

We have had a great week, Steve has taken us for drives into National Parks, we've enjoyed strolling strolled around the dam and (sometimes!) just relaxing and gazing at the view. We have enjoyed talks from local aboriginal guides about the history of the area and met lots of local people who are very keen to know our stories and why we have come from all over the world to volunteer in Australia – they are impressed with what we've done, and we feel proud of our efforts!

Next week, Steve tells us we'll be doing a beach project called Bitou Busters - it's an invasive weed – bring it on! We may also be lucky enough to see the whales migrating north while we're on the beach – I'll be keeping a close lookout!

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