

ASH WEDNESDAY

Factsheet

The Ash Wednesday fires consisted of some of the most devastating bushfires Australia has ever experienced, sweeping through parts of Victoria and South Australia.

Weather conditions leading up to the Ash Wednesday fires

Between April 1982 and January 1983, Victoria experienced severe drought conditions and little rainfall, resulting in its driest period on record. A combination of dry grasslands and forests, very hot temperatures, low humidity and high wind gusts presented Victoria with a high bushfire risk. The temperature was 43 degrees Celsius on Ash Wednesday.

Where did the Ash Wednesday bushfires start?

Around 180 bushfires broke out on 16 February 1983, known as Ash Wednesday. The largest bushfires started in Victoria at Cudjee and Branxholme (near Warrnambool), around Mount Macedon, in the Dandenong Ranges – Cockatoo, Upper Beaconsfield and Belgrave Heights, Monivae, Branxholme, Warburton and in the Otways. Fires also broke out in South Australia, where 159,000 hectares of land in the Adelaide Hills and in farming country in the south east of the state were burnt in the fires. The map of Victoria below shows where the major bushfires broke out on Ash Wednesday.

How did the Ash Wednesday bushfires start?

The bushfires started in a number of ways: through the clashing of electric power lines, tree branches connecting with power lines, fires being deliberately lit, and through unknown causes.

How much damage was caused in the fires?

The Victorian fires burnt an area twice the size of metropolitan Melbourne, around 200,000 hectares. A great number of people lost their homes, possessions, stores, equipment, machinery and stock in the fires.

How many lives were lost in the fires?

The Ash Wednesday fires claimed 75 lives in total, 47 in Victoria and 28 in South Australia. The largest number of lives lost was in the Upper Beaconsfield fire with 20 deaths. Hundreds of others were burnt or otherwise injured. Twelve volunteer firefighters in Victoria were killed in the fire at Beaconsfield.

How many homes were lost in the fires?

In Victoria, more than 2,000 houses were destroyed and several hundred more were lost in South Australia.

How long did it take to control the fires?

Most of the major Ash Wednesday fires were controlled on the day, some in two to eight hours, others in a couple of days. Accessibility to the fires played a large part in how quickly fires were brought under control. For example, fires in mountainous areas were often more difficult to put out due to difficulties in moving the fire vehicles in close enough to the fires. In some areas, there was no road access into the fires.

