

Animal Deaths On Roads

June 2005

Examining road killed animals is not a pleasant thing to do. Yet that is what some of us found ourselves doing on a recent trip to Tasmania. Our interest was twofold:

1. The large number of individuals – dozens in only a few hundred kilometres travelled.
2. To identify the great variety of victims, the more interesting reason.

We found Wombats, Brush-tail Possums (much larger and darker than ours), Bennett's Wallabies (the Red-neck Wallaby of Victoria), Southern Brown Bandicoot (now rare on the mainland), Spot-tailed Quoll (endangered on the mainland), Pademelons, Bettongs and Eastern Quoll (the latter three regarded as extinct on the mainland).

It was, in a way, reassuring to find that so many kinds of mammal still manage to survive in Tasmania, but upsetting to see so many individuals meeting untimely deaths. We suppose that the near absence of the European Red Fox on the island is one of the reasons why so many of the small and medium sized native mammals can still be found there. There have been disturbing recent rumours of sightings of foxes in northern Tasmania. Foxes were imported to Tasmania in the early days of settlement but failed to establish; the recent imports find an environment better suited to them, with fewer Devils, no Thyalcines and more cleared land to range over.

Recently there was a segment on the ABC's "Bush Telegraph" program about road kills in north Queensland. Researchers found that on a one-kilometre stretch of road over 1000 animals were killed each year of the three-year study. The casualties included Cassowaries and endangered rainforest possums.

The authorities have experimented with rope bridges linking the canopies on both sides of a road or track. They have found that many of the canopy dwellers prefer this "highroad" to the riskier option of crossing at ground level.

Tunnels under the roads are also being tried. Preliminary indications show that they are being used by many different kinds of animals, including goannas and frogs. Victoria can claim an earlier success with this technique. Male Mountain Pygmy Possums spend winter in areas far from the females. When the breeding season starts they have to travel to meet their mates. Tunnels have been built under roads so that the possums can make this journey in relative safety. They have been called "tunnels of love".

In Canada, collisions between vehicles and large mammals such as elk and bears result in huge damage to all involved. Overpasses and tunnels have been constructed on some roads to help reduce this carnage. It seems that the mammals are happy to use these alternatives.

It is doubtful if these solutions would help in reducing the numbers of wallabies, kangaroos, possums and birds that get killed on Western Victorian roads every year. Perhaps more careful driving at slower speeds would help.

Perhaps "road kills" is the wrong term to use. It should be "vehicle kills".

Photo:

A Spot-tailed Quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*) vehicle-kill in Tasmania.

