Expansion of the range of the Red-necked Wallaby in SW Victoria

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The Red-necked Wallaby *Macropus rufogriseus* is generally seen in woodlands where there is shrub cover, or on the fringes of forests. The species was thought to be substantially affected by past rabbit poisoning practices in woodlands and bushland reserves. It also appeared to be less common in its former haunts in the years after the advent in the 1980s of the Black Wallaby *Wallabia bicolor*, which now occupies habitats from rocky ranges to wetland fringes or beach frontage. Visitors to Griffith Island at Port Fairy often see this species browsing on the introduced Shiny Leaf *Coprosma repens*, even wading in a pool to reach a favoured shrub.

The Black Wallaby was recognised for the first time in the Grampians in 1979 (Bird 1981). By 1987 it was seen in the Mt Napier State Park and at the Fulham Streamside Reserve on the Glenelg River near Balmoral. By 1992 it was a common sighting in and around Hamilton (Bird 1992) and that situation continues, the wallabies exploiting any areas that provide dense cover (*e.g*. sightings in February 2011 at Lake Linlithgow and on the disused Hamilton-Coleraine Rail Reserve at Bochara). This species was previously unknown in the region, unlike the Red-necked Wallaby which was often seen north of Hamilton (*e.g.* Grampians, Dundas Range, Fulham Streamside Reserve, Beear and Rocklands State Forests); west of Hamilton (*e.g.* Dergholm State Park, Hotspur State Forest, Weecurra State Forest); and south of Hamilton (*e.g*. Cobboboonee National Park, Lower Glenelg National Park, Pallisters Reserve near Orford, Homerton State Forest south of Mt Eccles National Park. Kay Aldridge from Heywood suggests that the Red-necked Wallaby is now common in the Cobboboonee forest, Homerton and Mt Clay, along with the Black Wallaby, but tends to be encountered in small family groups rather than singly, as is usual for the Black Wallaby.

The first indication of a change in the range of the Red-necked Wallaby was the sighting of several animals on the summit of Mt Rouse, the scoria cone at Penshurst, on 17 March 2007. This was most unexpected as the habitat seems to be atypical and the species was previously unknown there. The nearest bushland source is the Grampians, 25 km to the north. Unlike the Black Wallaby or Eastern Grey Kangaroo *Macropus giganteus*, both of which were also seen at Mt Rouse, the Red-necked Wallaby is not generally known to travel across open country far from shelter. How did they get to Mt Rouse?

The Red-necked Wallaby is recorded as a sub-fossil in bone deposits found in the Byaduk Caves (Wakefield 1964). The species was not recorded in surveys conducted from 1974-1995 in the contiguous volcanic landscape of Mt Napier State Park (Bird 1997), or on subsequent visits to the park up to 2010. It was a surprise therefore, on 16 January 2011, to see three animals in the State Park, when driving along the Cole Track. One adult remained on the track for a minute or two, no more than 15 m distant from our vehicle but, at different sites, the others moved speedily into the dense Austral Bracken *Pteridium esculentum* in this open Manna Gum *Eucalyptus viminalis* forest. Where did this new arrival come from?

One possibility is that the wallabies may have come from distant sites to Wildlife Shelters in the area. There are two shelters currently operating. Pam Turner (Wildwood Wildlife Shelter) on the Dunkeld-Moyston Rd has had a marked increase in numbers of orphaned Red-necked Wallabies at her shelter (8 in the last 12 months), but fewer Black Wallabies. The wallabies are ultimately released in the Grampians by transporting them there or by 'soft release', where the animals eventually leave the premises when they choose to do so. Blue Gum plantations provide cover and presumably most animals re-enter the Grampians National Park or bushland adjacent to the park. It seems unlikely that the Mt Rouse animals were derived from that source, which is 35 km distant across open country.

Robyn Richardson runs a wildlife shelter at North Byaduk and uses a similar 'soft release' policy. Again, many more Red-necked Wallabies have been cared for in recent years, with a lesser number of Black Wallabies. The Red-necked Wallabies are mostly derived from the Heywood, Mt Eccles and Homerton

area. In this case the released wallabies could easily find their way to the stoney rise areas of the Harmans Valley and Mt Napier State Park, only 3 km distant.

A second possibility is that the Red-necked Wallabies from forests 25 km west of Mt Napier or from Mt Eccles to the south (I saw the species there on 21 May 2011) are using the cover of Blue Gum *Eucalyptus globulus* plantations, established in SW Victoria from 1997 (Bird 2004) to migrate to new habitats, including Mt Napier. From 1997-2003, 100,000 ha of Blue Gums were planted on farms (Bird 2004), with a concentration in the higher rainfall areas such as Byaduk, Macarthur, Branxholme and Digby. By 2007 that total increased by about 30%, after which the major prospectus companies failed and the industry faltered. The planting provided corridors and 'stepping stones' that wildlife might use to migrate across a previously cleared landscape. Whether that could be the case for the Red-necked Wallaby population at Mt Rouse, 20 km east of Mt Napier, is doubtful, since there are fewer plantations near and a much greater discontinuity of cover on the cleared farmland.

It seems probable that Red-necked Wallabies have been deliberately released at Mt Rouse, where there is sufficient cover from planted trees, shrubs, garden weeds and remnant Tussock Grass *Poa labillardierei* to sustain the small population. Whatever the cause, it will be interesting to see what areas they will colonise in future years, or if they can retain a presence in the 'newer volcanics' landscape of the Mt Napier State Park.

The Red-necked Wallaby may be distinguished from the Black Wallaby by the prominent rufous tinge to fur on the shoulders, neck and rump, and the whitish-grey tail, chest and belly (as shown in photos below).

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