

Expansion of the range of the Black wallaby in western Victoria

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There is currently a curious expansion in the population of *Wallabia bicolor* (Swamp or Black Wallaby) in western Victoria – an extension that has taken this species across cleared farmland and even into the city of Hamilton.

The Black Wallaby occurs widely in eastern Victoria. In western Victoria it occurs in the Brisbane Ranges, is common in the Otways, and occurs further west at Naringal in the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. The species may also occur in the Lower Glenelg National Park, although Menkhorst and Beardsell (1982) consider reported sightings there as "doubtful". The Black Wallaby was first reported in the Grampians in 1979 (Bird 1981), although it was probably seen earlier by others but not recognised as significant. It is not known whether the wallaby had retained a presence there over a long period, or was a recent migrant, possibly from the south coast. Tom Morgan of Ararat has seen the wallaby at Mount Langighiran, and a road-kill near Trawalla in Jan 1992, suggesting an alternative route through the central highlands.

I have given below a recent listing of sightings of this species near Hamilton in western Victoria, an area in which this wallaby has not before been seen.

In April 1983 I observed and photographed a large old male Black Wallaby at Lake Surprise (Mt. Eccles State Park), shortly after sunrise. The animal was eating the leaves of *Rubus parvifolius* (Small-leaf bramble) and moved away into the forest when it saw me. Allan Gould (for many years the ranger at the park) had not seen the species before and it was not listed for that area by Menkhorst and Beardsell (1982).

In October 1987 I surprised a small Black Wallaby at the 860 ha Fulham Streamside reserve on the Glenelg River north of Balmoral. The animal was sheltering in dense bracken along the river bank at the eastern end of the reserve. After breaking from cover beneath the small cliff on which I stood, it disappeared further downstream amongst tussocks and trees.

The species was also seen in the Mt. Napier State Park in January 1987. Mr Laurie Kirkwood, a farmer to the west of the forest, observed one animal when travelling along a track in the middle of the forest. The wallaby was seen at close quarters and was not a Red-necked wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*), which occur in the Grampians to the north and Heywood forest to the south. Mr Simon Gubbins of "Murroa", which adjoins the park on the north, reported in 1991 that his dogs killed a small dark wallaby that wandered into the homestead area, close to the forest.

Others to report "dark" wallabies on their farms include Ms. Elizabeth Fenton from "Larapinta" at Yulecart, on the Muddy Creek 10 kms west of Hamilton. One animal was first seen in a revegetation area on the farm early in 1991. Others were first seen in 1989 on bushland blocks off Chatsworth Rd, 5 km east of Hamilton and they occasionally re-appear. Tree and shrubs there are *A. mearnsii* (Black wattle), *Bursaria spinosa* (Sweet bursaria), *A. paradoxa* (Hedge wattle) and *E. ovata* (Swamp gum).

During the months of Jan-March 1992 dark wallabies have been seen at several locations in or near Hamilton. One was seen at the Hamilton Community Parklands near North Boundary Rd, and in a garden along that road. They also appear to visit properties along Hensley Park Rd, and frequent a pine plantation nearby. Barry Wright of Hamilton has also seen Black Wallabies at several locations in Hamilton, including the Grange Burn near Mt Napier Rd, and Strachan St. Rural fire brigades, when conducting burning-off operations, flushed a wallaby from the verge of the Glenelg Highway, a few kilometres east of Hamilton. Another was seen by Don Jowett of Hamilton early on 25 Feb 1992, some 35 kms east of Hamilton on the Chatsworth Rd, near the intersection with the Dunkeld-Caramut Rd. This wallaby was feeding on new growth adjacent to tall unburnt phalaris near the fence. At least one Black Wallaby has been seen at different times at the Pastoral Research Institute, 10 km south of Hamilton. The wallaby rests in the shelterbelts and drinks from the stock watering troughs.

During the same period three wallabies have been killed on roads near Hamilton; on Coleraine Rd near Nth Boundary Rd entry, the Hamilton Highway near Tarrington, and the Henty Highway between Violet Creek and Muddy Creek. The latter wallaby was struck on 7 Feb 1992 and reported to me by Ms. Kaye Aldridge of Hamilton. I collected and photographed the animal – a young male of about ten kg. I was also reminded that a dark wallaby had been found in a garden in Hamilton in early 1990, and subsequently lodged with Red-necked wallabies at the Hamilton Botanic gardens. That animal is a Black wallaby, and on 1 March 1992 was still in the wallaby enclosure.

Mrs Susan McInnes, a resident near the Bullawyn Rd, in the Victoria Valley of the Grampians area, believes that Black Wallabies are now as common in the Grampians as the Red-necked Wallaby and may be encountered throughout the length of the Grampians. I have seen one Black Wallaby on Mt. Abrupt and another in the Flat Rock-Hollow Mountain area.

What a change in just over ten years – where did the wallabies come from? Susan McInnes reports seeing one moving along a side road off the Victoria Point Rd, which perhaps indicates that the origin of the population around Hamilton is the Grampians. Kangaroos appear to travel distances such as this – 25 kms or more – without much difficulty. Wallabies could certainly do so in stages, probably sheltering during the day in long grass on the roadside, but what has prompted the wallabies to spread from their more usual habitat? Despite their current wide distribution in the Grampians there does not seem to be an enormous population there, and therefore presumably no imperative to seek new territory.

REFERENCES

Bird, P.R. (1981) "A new macropod species of the Grampians". *Victorian Nat.* 98, 67-68.

Menkhorst, P.W. and Beardsell, C.M. (1982). "Mammals of south-western Victoria from the Little Desert to the coast". *Proc. R. Soc. Vict.* 94, 221-247.

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The photos below show a Red-necked Wallaby (and joey) in the Grampians and a Black Wallaby (and joey's tail) at the Byaduk Caves.

