Wallabies of SW Victoria

2006

There are two species of wallaby in our region – the Red-necked Wallaby (*Macropus rufogrisieus*) and the Black Wallaby (*Wallabia bicolor*), also known as Swamp Wallaby. Until very recently we had another, the Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby (*Petrogale penicillata*), but the last individual of the tiny population in the Victoria Range of the Grampians was last seen in 2003. Its decline was undoubtedly due to competition from feral goats, predation of their young by foxes and Wedge-tailed Eagles, past disturbance by people and possibly the effects of fire on their habitat.

The Black Wallaby is now common but, until recently, there was no record of it since European settlement. There is a sub-fossil record in caves and middens, and some evidence of it near the Lower Glenelg River around 1900, but the only known near occurrences in 1974 were parts of central Victoria, the Otway region and the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary at Naringal.

Don MacArthur from Mirranatwa caught a dark-coloured wallaby on his property in 1979 and, since it was obviously not a Red-necked Wallaby, gave it to the late Susan McInnes for care. However, the young animal died, apparently the result of eating poisoned carrots intended for rabbits. This was the first record in our region and we recorded it in *The Victorian Naturalist* in 1981. The species may have been present for some years but there had been no sightings by members of our club since its formation in 1958. By contrast, after 1980 we saw this species in a wide range of habitats from the mountain ranges, river frontages, roadsides, shelterbelts, town fringes and coastal areas. Visitors to Griffith Island at Port Fairy may see this interesting wallaby browsing the foliage of the pest plant Mirrorbush (*Coprosma repens*) or splashing through pools on the rocky seashore. We recorded the first sighting at Mt Eccles National Park in 1983 and at the Fulham Streamside Reserve in 1987. Laurie Kirkwood from north Byaduk gave us the first record in the Mt Napier State Park in 1987 and the wallabies appeared around - and in - Hamilton in 1990. Liz Fenton found them in a revegetation area near Yulecart in 1991. Notes on the expansion of the species range were published in *The Victorian Naturalist* in 1992. Black Wallaby road kills are now common in the countryside and the species is possibly more widespread and numerous than the Red-necked Wallaby in the Grampians, Rocklands and Black Range areas. The species was also reported from Yarriambiac Creek near Hopetoun in 1984, an odd low rainfall area occurrence.

The Black Wallaby is a robust and versatile creature, equally at home splashing through tidal mangroves in Queensland, exploiting dense streamside or forest vegetation, or rock-hopping in the Grampian ranges. Unlike the Red-necked wallaby, it is willing to forage far from woodland and forest cover, moving along roadways or other corridors that provide dense cover, to reach new areas. That must account for their appearance in our region, having travelled either from the Otway region or Central Highlands ranges. But what circumstances have given rise to this exceptional invasion? Will it compete with the Red-necked Wallaby and force that species out of its preferred woodland and forest fringe areas?

Black Wallabies are easily recognised by their long black tail, dark, thickset body and orange-tipped fur on the belly, chest, crown and ears. Older males have grizzled white/grey jowls and very stout bodies. In contrast, Red-necked Wallabies are grey and have a dainty appearance, with a reddish tinge on the neck, shoulders and rump. They have a distinctive greyish-white tail, chest and belly.

Both wallabies are susceptible to 1080 poison (sodium fluoroacetate – a chemical that blocks energy metabolism) - and this appears to have been responsible for the decline of the Red-necked Wallaby in the drier northern woodlands where rabbit poisoning was once conducted without effective regard to wildlife. Incidentally, similar species in Western Australia are immune to 1080 because this compound is found in the *Gastrolobium* genus (poison pea-flower bushes) unique to that region, and the wildlife has adapted to it over thousands of years. That makes it very easy to poison foxes, cats and rabbits in WA without killing wildlife. Unfortunately we do not have that freedom in Victoria.

Photographs

Black wallaby – an old male in the Rocklands area, showing its dark body and tail, orange-tipped fur on the ears and whitish jowls.

Red-necked wallaby – female with joey, showing grey tail and legs, with reddish neck and rump.