

Can rock wallabies disperse across farmland?

CONSERVATION genetics has also been used to determine the source of a new population of rock wallabies in the wheatbelt. Fox control has allowed rock wallaby populations to build up at several rock outcrops near Mt Caroline, between Kellerberrin and Yoting. Recently a new population was discovered at Gardners, 8 km north.

To find out where that population came from, genetic samples were taken from animals in all the known locations, and then compared. It seems that the Gardners population had come from Mt Caroline East, and moreover, that the founding member was a single female carrying a pouch young and a quiescent embryo! She would have had to travel through an extensively-cleared rural landscape in order to reach her new refuge. One wonders how many other travellers set out, but get taken by foxes before they reach somewhere safe?

For the full story, read: Eldridge MDB, Kinnear JE, & Onus ML. 2001. "Source population of dispersing rock-wallabies (*Petrogale lateralis*) identified by assignment tests on multilocus genotypic data" *Molecular Ecology* 10, 2867-2876

An exciting new find!

Peter Orell, Western Shield Zoologist, recently (April 2003) found fresh rock-wallaby scats at Kokerbin Rock, south of the cluster of known sites referred to above. The animals were driven to extinction on Kokerbin around 1963. It looks as though some at least of these medium-sized marsupials are capable of moving through an agricultural landscape, as long as there are reasonable habitat islands for them to shelter in along the way.

But widespread feral predator control would really help!