

Hi all

Recovering the goanna project from the fire

By late April, Naas Valley goannas have probably stopped eating and most have moved to winter burrows, or soon will. Once they do that, they are largely uncatchable, and if we have not removed their expensive GPS packs before that, we are liable to lose the GPS permanently, or at least for the subsequent goanna season. In our first two post-fire visits, the project team had remarkable success in catching most of our tracked goannas and removing GPS packs, but of course there are the last few more difficult animals, so the project is now still recovering from effects of the Orroral Bush Fire and being out of the park for the peak time in the goanna year.

Another GPS pack recovered: H returns to the project

Recently Enzo made a breakthrough by radio tracking two of the four missing goannas. First he found the partial carcass of Goanna 321, still with its VHF radio that was attached just over a year ago before 321 wandered off to places unknown. Possibly the death of 321 was fire related but the evidence is unclear. Enzo also found the radio beacon from Goanna H, which had fallen out of a hole worn in his saddlebag harness, due to abrasion on rocks. That finding told us H was in the area and prompted renewed efforts to find the goanna himself. H has been in the project since our first goanna season so we know the burrows that he has used in April, just before he moved to his winter burrow. There are photos below which tell the story, but in short, we tracked H to one of his known burrows, which we excavated to catch him. We replaced his GPS pack with a VHF radio (which he will carry for the winter period), repaired his burrow, and returned him to it. Two other goannas with GPS packs remain missing. Two more whose GPS packs were replaced with radios on previous visits are mentioned below.

Burrows

In some parts of Australia, goannas are mostly captured by digging. Rosenberg's Goanna burrows are thought to be simple structures up to 1m long. In Namadgi we have been slow to dig goanna burrows, but it is becoming clear that Rosenberg's Goannas at Naas Valley are using very different burrows from any we have seen described in the scientific literature. Naas goannas are using much longer burrows in spite of the tough digging conditions and two of the six burrows we have excavated have proved to be complex branching structures, like rabbit warrens except with only one entrance.

We extracted Goanna H from a section of burrow 4.2 m in from the entrance, after we had blocked the burrow on both sides of him. The full length of the burrow was at least 4.8 m but we did not follow it to its end. We dug a series of pits to intercept the burrow, using a fibrescope at each pit to check the direction of the next burrow section and to see how close we were getting to the goanna. Doing the excavation as a series of pits made it easier to repair the burrow later, by placing rocks in the bottom of each pit to roof over the tunnel. Near the entrance where we had dug the soil completely away, we used plastic pipe sawn in half to recreate the structure. Most of the burrow was at depths from 0.6 m to 1.3 m below the surface and a lot of it was beneath a boulder too large for us to move. This burrow had a single entrance, never came close to the surface, and looped back under itself. In places, it passed through very resistant material but it often followed veins of soft material, e.g. beside roots.

14 and 18

Meanwhile Goannas 14 and 18 were also radio tracked. 18 is still in the high cold upper valley, so we expect him to leave at any moment. 14 has started progressing north so we are interested whether his winter quarters will be near where they were last year, 6 km from his summer abode. Hopefully we will find out in a month, as the park is closed to us during the next three weeks for the annual pig baiting program.

Some things on the side

Also meanwhile, Isobel collected plant specimens for the national herbarium, and various weeds were dug out, or cut and dabbed. And while looking for H, the remains of a hut were found, including fragments of a heating stove, bottles with dates of manufacture, poles that have survived the bushfires, and other traces. We presume it to be Tom Rowley's Hut although the GPS position is different to the official record, even after a correction is made for the AMG to MGA conversion. (It appears the hut location was wrongly marked on early 1:25,000 maps.) The key details have been confirmed by Matthew Higgins, who wrote the survey report on that site, and many others in this valley, partly based on a visit in 1990 with Bill Cotter, Jack Cotter and Ranger Graeme Hirth. However the corrugated fibro wall cladding noted in Matthew's report was not apparent. It would have been bonded asbestos, eroding in the rain and releasing fibres, so I'm glad it has been removed.

Don Fletcher.

The place we refer to as 'The Carpark'. C19 distancing requires extra cars.



We often do small side jobs, like clearing trees off the road or weeding, tasks for which we always have tools. Here Kevin and Isobel are killing weeds. Because this catchment was settled by stockmen until late last century, garden plants like these, and also woody weeds, keep appearing, and will probably need removal for another decade or so, before their stocks of roots and propagules are exhausted. Several species are moving down the streams.



Digging digging! Goanna H was eventually captured still wearing his GPS pack, by blocking him into the length of burrow between these two pits. Photo by John Brickhill.



According to the scientific literature, Rosenberg's Goanna burrows are up to a metre long. But H was eventually captured at the point marked X, 4.2 m into an unbranched tunnel that is at least 4.8 m long. From its entrance, originally near my feet, the burrow passed under the boulder then doubled back to pass beneath its entrance. Photo by John Brickhill.



We repaired the damage to the burrow and backfilled the site ready to release Goanna H back into his burrow. Photo: John Brickhill.



When their heads are covered inside the holding bag, most Naas Valley Rosenberg's Goannas need little or no other restraint. In response to previous handling, here H is still puffed up and arching his back (which is a threat response) but with his head covered, he will soon relax. Kerry Moir photo.



Enzo's son Gabriel (5) was so keen to get 'hands on' with Goanna H while the measurements were underway, we compromised by keeping his fingers to the tail end, so they would remain outside the goanna. John on the right, is holding the important bits. Photo by Kerry Moir.



Goanna H entering the repaired burrow we had captured him from. He also has an undisturbed burrow about 10 m away. Kerry Moir photo.

