

I do not remember seeing any possums when I was little, but older people told me that there used to be lots of them in our area. I asked, "What happened to them?" I was told the story of how, when cars started travelling along the main road at night, the possums would run toward the ~~the~~ headlights then, stunned by their brightness, sat frozen in ~~the~~ the car's path as it came towards them. Eventually they all disappeared. I thought that was sad.

~~Time~~ Time moves on, more land was cleared to run sheep, and wildlife retreated to out-of-the-way, less productive pieces of the bush. Canberra grew rapidly and our small country communities seemed to shrink and lose their importance in its shadow. Not only our way of life was changing but also the weather. In early 2003 as the drought which would become known as the "Millenium Drought" was tightening its grip on us, Canberra burned. The temperature reached ~~forty~~ forty degrees Celsius. I had never known such high temperatures around here. The air was thick with smoke from more fires to the west of us, and creeks that were always regarded as permanent started to dry up.

I was running sheep on a piece of cleared land along the side of the Munday Range ^{at} this time, with their only water being the spring-fed creeks. For the first time ever I couldn't find any water so the sheep had to be moved out. This was marginal sheep country so, when I closed the gate after the sheep had been mustered, I knew in my heart there was a possibility that they may never be put back in there again. As the dry years hung on this proved to be the case.

But the land didn't stay empty for long. Swamp Wallabies and Red-Knecked Wallabies started to make it their home, filling the void left by diminishing numbers of the Common Wallaroos. Despite the tough years these new residents seemed to thrive on the lower layer of vegetation, the rocky outcrops and the thin ribbons of green along the watercourses. Optimistic attempts at pasture improvement in ~~the~~ past years had left small pockets of choice grass behind, just for a treat.

At the same time the main road between Gunning and Canberra was moving toward becoming a major thoroughfare. The new bridge over the Yass River at Gundaroo was a game-changer. What no-one had anticipated was the volume of trucks which would start to use the road at night. After the daily commute was finished the trucks started to roll through after dark, and the wallabies were caught in the crossfire. Unlike kangaroos, with their heightened sense of danger, these gentle, trusting, creatures seemed unperturbed by the bright lights of the fast-moving trucks. While feeding along the roadside at night they were prepared to live or die by the roll of the dice. As I saw the body-count on the side of the road increase I remembered the possums and thought "Here we go again".

It didn't take many years for the wallabies to all but disappear from the land either side of the main road, but well away from the influence of the road I could still see them. That piece of ground that I had moved the sheep out of some years ago, now retired from agricultural pursuits, supported a small, stable, population of them. With diminishing numbers elsewhere I could see that they needed a safe place to breed and to rear their young, and this piece of land was the perfect fit. It had large expanses of green timber on three sides, was well away from the main road, and any animals living there had minimal contact with humans. Best of all there was little to no work to do to make it into a place of sanctuary. I guess some things were just meant to be.

Over the ensuing years my encounters with the wallabies increased but it was clear that their numbers were, for various reasons, fairly modest. There were rocky outcrops with sheltered overhangs for a bleak day, and rock platforms for stretching out and basking on a sunny day, and there were large flat-topped boulders to hop on and off again, just because they can.

The "Red-necks" live in family groups but are more skittish and wary of humans. If you are lucky you may come across a group feeding or lazing in a sunny spot. In the spring, with their new coats, the sunlight reflects off their ginger shoulders and down their backs. The "Swampies" are more solitary and also more inquisitive. They will watch you as you watch them, and when they've had enough of that they will lazily hop away. With their dark fur, light tan chest, and tan and white face markings they are well camouflaged and can suddenly disappear from view in the undergrowth with very little effort.

Whenever I go into that country I look forward to seeing a wallaby or two, but it doesn't always happen. I will never forget the day when, with the wind in my favour, I chanced upon a nursery of Swamp Wallaby mothers feeding out in the open. Feeling safe, they had set their joeys aside, but my presence elicited a shriek of panic. Joeys ~~were~~ were hastily bundled into pouches and they headed for cover. The mothers bobbed and weaved, almost toppling over, as their boisterous joeys, with legs and tails hanging out, attempted to turn in the pouch and pull them in as mum was on the move. You had to smile, not just at the comedy of the scene before you, but also because maybe, just maybe, the dream from years ago of creating a safe place for the wallabies to rear their young might become a reality.

I have called this special piece of land "Wallaby Playgrounds."

This is my story of rejuvenation and hope.

This is my story of trying to make some amends for the mistakes of the past.