

CHANGES IN MOUNTAIN AREAS

Keith Rogers

Having, as a cattleman, had a close acquaintance with the tableland and valleys surrounding the Black Mountain settlement over the past 70 years, it is interesting to note what changes may have occurred to the environment over that period and before.

Black Mountain was first permanently settled by the O'Rourke family about 1838, and it was John O'Rourke, of the next generation, whom we knew as children in the early 1900s. From him, we heard accounts of earlier days; of their usually quiet friendly contacts with the aborigines; and we also gained a slight idea of the condition of the bush before white people had made much impact with their introduced plants and animals.

From the O'Rourke story and that of various other "old hands" it is evident that a large part of both tableland and valley was quite open forest, with much less undergrowth than one sees today, and that condition persisted until well on into last century.

The area under consideration is roughly the territory that lies between the Snowy River on the east, and Dividing Range on the west and extending from the State border on the north-east to the vicinity of Gelantipy in the south. Naturally, similar conditions also applied to other areas outside these limits.

Most of the tableland in this region lies at an altitude ranging from under 3000 feet in the settled country, to over 4500 feet on the higher parts to the west, while some peaks reach from over 5000 feet elevation, to 6000 feet on the Cobberas mountains.

The deep valleys of the Snowy and Suggan Buggan Rivers, on the other hand, are as low as 600 feet at McKillop's Bridge, and 1200 feet at Suggan Buggan. The Buchan River, to the west is also in a deep valley, with very steep sides.

With this sort of terrain, there is naturally a considerable variation in rainfall. At Black Mountain, the yearly average is 28 inches, and around Gelantipy 32 inches, while along the Divide it would be more. By contrast, the precipitation in Suggan Buggan is in the low 20s and usually the

drier appearance of the ground is accentuated by the granitic soil, and the much hotter summers.

Undoubtedly, man's greatest impact on the flora of the whole region under discussion has been the introduction of the rabbit. The rabbit plague alone did more damage to the country than the total of all activities of the white man, and the other animals for which he is responsible. This applied not only to the fenced areas, but to the surrounding bush as well.

The near total destruction of the sweeter herbage in many parts of the Snowy and Suggan Buggan valleys was entirely due to the depredations of this pest. There, the open forest of White Box (*Eucalyptus albens*) on the richer soils of the wide gullies and gentler slopes once sheltered a good sward of excellent grasses, which the rabbits eventually killed out. Such places became nothing but beds of leaves and twigs under the trees, and remained in that condition for many years. Also, lack of grass cover started erosion in some of the steeper gullies in the loose granitic soils.

On the tableland, the effect of the rabbit plague was much less spectacular outside the paddocks, but there damage was widespread. As the rabbit tends to eat out the sweetest and most nutritious species, leaving the coarser grasses, the quality of the pasture deteriorated. This was particularly noticeable after bushfires, as rabbits often prevented the natural regrowth.

Only for the introduction of myxomatosis, which has now largely decimated the rabbit population in most areas, the bush would have continued to deteriorate. It is over the past few years that one has been able to notice a general improvement in the grass throughout the region, and more particularly in the lower areas. Today, the grass cover in the Snowy and Suggan Buggan valleys has completely recovered, even where it had been killed out for so long. Indeed, the story of the large herd of cattle that the O'Rourkes ran in Suggan Buggan a hundred years ago was hard for us to picture, until this transformation set in on that low rainfall country. Now it is easily understandable.

Unfortunately, the rabbit did further damage besides eating out the grass. Many bare places became a good seed bed for scrub of various species, such as Dogwood (*Cassinia longifolia*) and (*C. aculeata*) and Burgan (*Leptospermum phyllicoides*) and other species that rabbits do not touch. Still, we have a great deal to thank Dame McNamara and her co-workers for in making possible a reduction of a pest that was fast ruining our mountain country. The situation must still be watched, however.

Incidentally, while referring to the rabbit, when my father came to Black Mountain in 1902 that pest had only then become serious. As well as rabbits, there were also many hares, but they soon became sick, or starved out, and as children we would try to run and catch them as they could barely get out of our way. Apparently they could not live with the rabbits.

It is generally realised that a serious upset to the native fauna has been caused by the introduction of the fox and feral cat. Not only has bird population been affected, partly through their depredations, but so have some of the smaller marsupials, such as Rat Kangaroos and Bandicoots. Around the turn of the century there was a huge mortality amongst some of the marsupials, including the koala, the possum, and probably rock wallaby, apparently from disease brought by man, as well as by ruthless hunting. However, of late years the possum has entirely replenished its numbers. We even have a possum family that lives in a space that once housed a hot water tank behind our kitchen stove. The koala has long been extinct in the district, and likewise the native cat, although a tiger cat is seen from time to time.

It is a different story with the kangaroos, which have always been plentiful throughout the region, whether on the high tablelands or down in the valleys. Also plentiful are both the red necked wallaby and the black wallaby, but unfortunately the attractive brush tailed rock wallaby appears to be barely holding its own, and then only in very inaccessible places. As children we used to see them on almost any rock outcrop, and they must have been in great numbers. Another member of the wallaby tribe, the paddy-melon, has entirely disappeared. Wombats are of course, as numerous as ever they were.

As already mentioned, bird life does appear to have suffered to some extent over the years, particularly the smaller birds around the settled areas. One feels that the fox, and to a lesser extent

the cat, must be a major cause of this. Foxes hunt everywhere, even in the roughest country, as evidenced by their tracks. Indeed, they are more numerous in the bush than many people realise. Of course, the destruction of habitat through land clearing is another important factor that upsets bird life, but that may not apply so much in a district such as this, where the proportion of land is small in comparison with the vast extent of the surrounding bush.

A bird that was once common here, but disappeared many years ago, is the Stone Curlew. One used to hear their mournful call frequently on moonlight nights, often in conjunction with the startled cries of the Spurwing Plovers. An entirely different bird which left the district many years ago, is that often common honeyeater, the Noisy Miner. On the other hand, there has been a gain of one very noticeable bird, and that is the Galah. Two or three of these came to stay only a few years ago, and then there were seven for another couple of years. Now, they live and breed here, and a flock of thirty or forty is usually around each house in the vicinity, although they are never, as yet, seen in the large numbers that frequent the inland plains. As a matter of interest, I did record one lone Galah here on October 12, 1929, and a few odd strays in later years, but they never stayed long.

With plant life, the greatest change over the years is probably the extent to which some of the bush has gone to scrub, particularly the rougher parts. However, quite an extent of open forest still remains in most areas. There is a reason for the scrubby areas, and probably an important cause has been the practice in former years of burning the bush in the heat of summer. Usually, the rougher and steeper the locality, the fiercer the fire. Then, the rabbit was there to eat out the young grass as it came up and so the normal balance was upset and scrub sprang up instead of grass.

The practice of summer burning has long ceased, and rightly so, but there is still a place for spring or autumn fuel reduction firing, which tends to reduce the scrub, and is a necessary safety precaution.

Weeds are in many parts a further upset to the balance of the native flora and particularly along the streams. By far the most serious in this region is the blackberry, that has completely taken over much of the river system, and many streams at lower elevations are now almost inaccessible for

most of their course. Unless some biological control can be found, it is certain all the beautiful mountain streams will be entirely unapproachable in a few years.

The two larger animals that graze the bush today are, of course, cattle and the brumby, and both fortunately fit happily into the environment without being destructive. The brumby will often make use of the shallow water pans, which are so common on the high country flats, to use as rolling places when they dry out, but when the rains come these depressions are soon filled, and they have never really altered in extent over the years. The brumby never causes erosion and is an animal that adds interest to the mountain areas.

Having worked cattle in the bush for a lifetime, one knows their habits and the country they graze over, and it is abundantly clear that they are in complete harmony with their surroundings. In the whole of this area I have never known cattle to be in any way detrimental to the bush, either on the summer pastures of the high country, or wintering down in the valleys. In fact, under proper management, cattle are an advantage, as they help to keep the grass from growing too rank without reducing the ground cover. In his own interest, the cattleman does not overstock his lease, and they are used for a portion of the year only.

To my knowledge, cattle have been wrongly blamed in the past for interfering with moss beds and puddling up creeks and eating out some areas. The fact of the matter is that it was the rabbit, coupled with severe summer burning of bygone years, that caused the damage.

Today the whole area, both high country and low, has completely recovered, and never have we seen it with a better grass cover. As to the native plant species, there has been no noticeable change in distribution through the years, apart from areas gone to scrub, as already mentioned. One has only to visit the snow plains in summer to appreciate the wealth of flowers and the perfect conditions in which they thrive, with the cattle keeping the rough grass in check.

An illustration of how plants are recovering after the rabbit damage can be seen in the pine country in Suggan Buggan, where young pine seedlings are in abundance, whereas before the rabbit numbers were reduced, the seedlings were eaten as they came up. No doubt the same must have been the case with countless other species

of plants everywhere, so that should be a good indication for further improvement in the future.

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that the bush, in this mountainous part of the State is, except for the blackberry disaster, in better shape than it was 20 years ago. This is notwithstanding the mistakes made in previous years, and the various changes that resulted.

May the whole of this area of bush continue to be wisely used, and cared for, by those who know it and love it, and may the charm and beauty of our mountains never be spoilt.

Keith Churchill Rogers (1896-1978) was a mountain cattleman and naturalist from Wulgulmerang. This article appeared first in *The Clematis* Vol 15 (1976), the Journal of the Bairnsdale Field Naturalists Club. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Mrs Beryl Rogers.

