

Blackbraes trip report.. Sept 22nd – Sept 26th inclusive, 2009.

On the Queen's birthday weekend in June this year Duncan Ray, an energetic resident of Atherton, visited Blackbraes NP with some friends. While there he saw at least three gliding possums hanging dead on the barbed wire boundary fence. Knowing I was interested in possums and gliders Duncan emailed news of this sighting, which is how Juliana and I became involved in an effort to reduce the problem. The thought of ignoring the plight of any animal snagged on a barbed wire fence, struggling there for a day or two before it died in a welter of pain, thirst, heat and fear was more than either Juliana or I could allow ourselves.

We planned to gather a group of volunteers to visit Blackbraes, about 80 km south from Lynd Junction, to do what we could to modify the fence and so reduce the chances of gliders becoming impaled. We chose a week in the September school holidays for the effort, as Juliana would then have time off from her work (cleaner for Mt Molloy State School), other persons involved with schools or universities might have time off, and it would give me enough lead time to seek volunteers and plan our effort.

Initially I suggested that a curtain of bird wire about two metres wide fastened from top to bottom strand of the fence would be a good technique because it would stop a glider somersaulting and spinning around the barb if it did hit the fence. Anyone who has rescued animals off a fence will know that most of the injury occurs because the victim circles repeatedly around the snag, trying to free itself but aggravating the injury at every pass. My idea for a curtain of bird wire would give the glider a chance to clamber off the fence and complete its journey to a suitable tree on foot. However, one grazier with property neighbouring Blackbraes refused permission to use this method on his section of the boundary fence; he also refused permission to replace the top barbed strand with plain wire. Fortunately, this grazier suggested putting white poly pipe on the barbed strand at sites where gliders were being caught. White poly is too expensive and too hard to split and apply to the fence, but we already knew that there was a device available to split low density black poly – 25 mm internal diameter -- which can then be used to sheath the barbed strand with an “applicator” designed for the job.

I made telephone calls and email contacts with various QPWS staff, foremost of whom were Townsville based Resource Ranger, Eleanor Collins and Hughenden based Ranger-in-Charge, Grant Anchen. Both these rangers and all other QPWS staff I made contact with regarding the glider mortality problem were consistently helpful throughout, and it is a pleasure for me to record my thanks in this report.

Eleanor Collins gained consent to change the top barbed strand to plain wire from one of the graziers in a key section of the glider strike problem, and she was granted QPWS funds sufficient to cover the cost of one kilometer of plain wire; she was also able to fund payment for 300 metres of low density polythene. Most important, Eleanor and a Hughenden-based ranger, Kent Cotton, not only changed a kilometer of top strand to plain wire but they made time to tour almost the whole 120 kms of Blackbraes boundary fence. This enabled them to identify the two sections of fence where most strikes were

occurring, as judged by remains of gliders found on the fence. Glider remains sometimes comprised an almost complete dessicated carcass, more often just a small fragment of dried skin and fur stuck hard around a barb. Most glider remains were found along the southwest boundary of the Park adjoining Chudleigh park and Cheviot Hills, with the remainder found on the northwest boundary, adjoining Glenmore and Werrington. Eleanor flagged every site at which a glider was found, and provided Dr John Winter, one of the volunteer team, with a GPS waypoint for each site. In all, Eleanor's work located 32 glider remains on the boundary fence, all of them judged to be Greater Gliders of the North Queensland race, *Petauroides volans minor*.

Meanwhile I was busy trying to assemble volunteers, materials and tools necessary for the project. Juliana and I are the grateful recipients of a grant of \$500.00 from the Thorsborne Trust (most people involved with conservation in North Queensland will know of Margaret Thorsborne, a stalwart and successful conservationist who for many years was partnered by her late husband Arthur Thorsborne, in whose honour the Thorsborne Trust was set up to assist conservation projects.) and a grant of \$300.00 from the Tree Kangaroo and Mammal Group.

The Tree Kangaroo and Mammal Group put out an email to all members and a newsletter item which carried a description of the Blackbraes glider problem and a request for volunteers to assist in modifying the fence; Cairns Coev Group also did this, courtesy of Stella Martin and Denis Walls, and WPSQ (Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland) also put out an item in their e-bulletin. The TKMG email gained us several excellent volunteers through the good work of one of their Innisfail-based members, Ian Penberthy. Dr John Winter and Helen Myles also joined the effort, as did a few more friends and relatives.

Low density polythene was purchased, a splitter and applicator was purchased from Jenny Maclean, famous organiser of the Bat Hospital in Atherton, and a second set of these implements was obtained on loan from Jenny. Initially I had envisaged having five two-person teams to take on different sections of the fence, so we needed a further three applicators. One of our volunteers, Gordon Dilger of Innisfail is a skilled metal worker who was able to make up two more applicators, copied from one I sent him. Gordon and his wife Joan also set about splitting 50 metres of poly pipe with the splitter I sent down. At the same time I had an additional applicator made by a fitter and turner acquaintance in Mt Molloy, and Juliana and I along with two other friends, split and recoiled 300 metres of poly pipe. We found splitting to be very easy, but recoiling tedious -- all our coils ending up rather clumsy and kinky. On the weekend of 12-13 Sept. Juliana and I took a quick trip to Blackbraes carrying 300 metres of the split poly -- light but bulky -- in our ute. The trip also served as a guide to how long the journey could be expected to take (seven hours from Mt Molloy, including stops for smoko and lunch, if you drive in my old codger style).

All up, 14 of us gathered in Blackbraes on the 22nd about 2.00 pm where we met the very cordial and helpful Grant Anchen at the homestead. After a half hour or so of

conversation with Grant we headed for the southwest section of the boundary fence, guided by Konrad and Carol Russell -- two of our volunteers who had arrived the previous day and had already done some exploration.

On Tuesday night John Winter counted 37 (I think) Greater Gliders in a two kilometer traverse through Lemon-scented Gum and Ironbark habitat by spotlighting from the roof of a vehicle traveling east along the fence, in company with several enthusiastic companions.

Wednesday morning we sorted ourselves into four teams and headed off along the fence. Our objective was to sheath four metres of every top strand on which Eleanor had flagged glider remains; the four metre length to be centred at the point where each glider had been found. On the second strand we sheathed a two metre length of fence, immediately below the point where the glider had been snagged. We were to discover that gliders had also been snagged while aiming to land on some of the trees that had been incorporated into the fence for use as a fencepost. At such locations we sheathed two metres of both top and second strand on each side of the trunk of the tree.

Wednesday afternoon we made the acquaintance of Ranger Wayne Tippett who had kindly ferried out a large tank of water for our use, and who also provided useful local knowledge.

By Wednesday evening we had sheathed all but one of the sites found and flagged by Eleanor Collins, with the last remaining site in the southwest sector found and sheathed by John and Helen next morning. .

Wednesday night some of us accompanied John west along the fence, when again a large number of Greater Gliders and one small *Petaurus* glider, probably *P. breviceps* were seen.

Thursday was a non-work day on which some of us took a walk along the edge of the escarpment before packing up and moving to the northern portion of the park, where we set up camp close to Brumby Dam. Australian Grebes, Common Bronzewing Pigeons, three brumbies and -- after dark numerous Rufous Bettongs were seen. John Winter saw two Common Brushtail Possums near our camp.

Friday we split into three teams and finished all the northern portion with John Winter's team having the longest day, and suffering a ruined tyre on John & Helen's 4WD. Gordon and Joan Dilger along with Laurie Deacon did some steep climbing along parts of the fence line where they found a couple of glider strike sites additional to those flagged by Eleanor.

In all our team of volunteers applied poly pipe sheathing to not less than 40 sites where glider remains or glider fur was found on the fence.

Friday night several of us rode on John's 4WD to see what animals could be discovered with a spotlight. In a five kilometre traverse good numbers of Greater Gliders and numerous Common Brushtail Possums were seen, plus a couple of Boobook Owls and a few small macropods which all of us hoped would be Spectacled Hare-wallabies but they did not allow us a close view. A Grey Kangaroo and two rabbits were also seen.

Saturday we drove home via the Oasis near Lynd Junction, where Apostle Birds, syn. Happy Jacks are always an enjoyably comic sight.

Some of the observations made in regard to Glider strike on the barbed wire fences include:

Based on finding the skeleton of a small joey within the carcass of one snagged glider, at least some of the animals were of adult age, ie they were not all youngsters - perhaps with minimal gliding ability, dispersing from a parental home range.

At least one strike had occurred in very poor forest with numerous dead trees and much coppicing after a serious fire, in an area where the general height of trees was under 10 metres. This animal may have been a dispersing youngster traveling through marginal habitat or unusable habitat.

Many strikes had occurred despite large take-off and suitably large landing trees not more than 30 metres apart. Observers were repeatedly surprised at the apparently steep trajectory the animal had taken on a short glide when it could have been expected to stay well above fence height. ,

Many strikes had occurred where a tree had been incorporated into the fence for use as a fencepost. The gliders had been snagged as a result of making for the tree unaware of the fence hazard. Again, there seemed to be examples of where the glider had lost a surprising amount of height during a quite short horizontal distance traversed, where tall trees should have provided the animal with a take-off point quite high enough to stay above fence height.

A letter has been prepared for the Minister for Sustainability and Climate Change making the following suggestions:

In the case of Blackbraes National Park, **provide funding to allow a ranger to live at the park (a homestead and workshop etc. stands available) for at least nine months of every year**, with the option to pull out during the wet season. A resident ranger will be able to conduct boundary fence inspections and repairs, firebreak maintenance, weed control, fauna surveys and seasonal observations, road and track maintenance, and estimate / anticipate environmental care and rehabilitation requirements.

Insistence that **every fence within or bounding every National Park in Queensland must use plain wire in the top* strand.** Sufficient funding for materials and necessary

staff time to be made available to all Park management units to allow this change to be made. All adjacent property owners to be advised of the need for the change.

Insistence that **ALL strands on each side of any tree that has been used as a post in the length of a fence be converted to plain wire for not less than THREE METRES on either side of the tree** wherever gliding animals are known to occur (as per Museum records, Wildnet records, and local knowledge.) (Gliders may approach a tree from any angle, therefore they may strike the fence quite some distance from the pre-selected tree.)

Require that all leasehold properties / crown land in Queensland change to plain wire or electrified wire in the top strand of any fence at an early date. All gliders – including the endangered North Queensland race of Yellow-bellied Glider, *Petaurus australis* - and a great variety of flying creatures - bats, owls and numerous other species of birds are known to strike barbed wire fences, usually with fatal results. Not only does the animal die, but the death is particularly awful. An agreed and monitored deadline for changing the top strand to be a condition for all tenure continuance.

A plea and incentives for all users of barbed wire fencing to use plain wire for the top strand for the reason given above. Explaining the problem through media advertisements and articles as well as avenues such as AgForce newsletters to members should help promote the need for this change.

Funding to enable all relevant QPWS staff to patrol the entire length of any barbed wire fence along the boundary of any park at least three times each year to assess the existence and extent of any problem due to barbed wire, until such time that at least the top strand is changed to plain wire when maintenance patrols will continue to keep the fence in good repair and keep stock out

Approval and funding for polythene-sheathing of any section of barbed wire found to be impaling gliding possums as an early and interim solution until a more permanent solution is implemented. Tools for accomplishing this (lengthwise splitting of the polythene and applying it along the barbed strand) are known, and were successfully used by volunteers at Blackbraes. A website showing the tools and describing their use is at <http://www.wildlifefriendlyfencing.com/polypipe.htm>. This writer can assist with availability.

Press your colleagues in government to **enable passage of legislation / regulations to provide a government subsidy for graziers, fencing contractors and / or manufacturers of plain wire such that all users of barbed wire will be encouraged to change to plain wire at least on the top strand**, and use plain wire in all top strands when renewing any fence or building any new fence. .

In view of the high number of fence fatalities even where trees of good height and girth were spaced within 30 – 40 metres of each other , one speculation which occurs to this writer is that the (isolated western) Blackbraes population of Greater Gliders **may have disproportionately smaller gliding flaps than animals along the eastern forests** of the *Petauroides volans minor* race.

An interesting project for Tree Kangaroo and Mammal Group members, Glider Network members and other interested naturalists could be a visit to Blackbraes NP in suitable weather (?August 2010) **in order to observe and measure actual glides, take off heights and landing heights by the gliders.**

All spotlighting would require using lights masked with red cellophane or red plastic caps, careful marking of take off and landing trees by night, followed by necessary measurements on the following day.

With appropriate permits from QPWS / DERM it might be possible to capture a few gliders in order to record body weight, tail length, snout-vent length, limb length and width of patagium at elbows and ankles.

Comparison with coastal animals in suitable terrain would be necessary. Museum records of coastal animals of the *minor* race might provide useful data.

Rupert Russell, speculator!

This report deals chiefly with the problem of gliders being snagged on barbed wire fences. It should be noted that there were many places at which a tuft of feathers were seen on the fence, indicating bird strike, with unknown outcome for the bird. In addition, one small insectivorous bat and several Little Red Fruit bats were seen to have died on the fence. We also found one live Little Red which we took off the fence and were able to take care of till Saturday evening when “Werrington”, as we named this sweet-natured little bat, was delivered into the care of the invaluable Jenny Maclean’s Bat Hospital in Atherton.

This report makes no mention of the spectacular stature and girth of the numerous Lemon-scented Gums in Blackbraes NP, and the attractive colours and delightfully erratic shapes of Blue Ironbarks and various Yellow Bloodwoods frequently seen.

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