

MAMMAL SURVEY GROUP OF VICTORIA INC.

SURVEY CAMP REPORT

LOCATION/NAME: *Organ Pipes National Park* DATE: 15/05/2010

WEATHER: Fine with no wind and mild temperatures well into the evening.

DESCRIPTION OF FOREST SURVEYED: Include brief physical and botanical description, Modifying factors (fire, logging, grazing) geology if known, and any significant faunal or floristic observations.

The site surveyed was Organ Pipes National Park located off the Calder Freeway, Keilor North opposite Calder Park (Melway Map 3 C-D 3 and C-D 4).

Since the park was declared in 1972, a great deal of work has been done to restore the indigenous vegetation to the area, and more recently to introduce Sugar Gliders in 1989. Work by volunteers, most notably The Friends of Organ Pipes has played a major part in the restoration of the park, and establishment of vegetation much of which was planted out about 30 years ago.

Organ Pipes National Park, best known for its set of basalt columns collectively called the 'Organ Pipes' covers 121 ha of gorge country cutting through the basalt plains along Jacksons Creek in the Maribyrnong valley. Within the park there are three landform zones – plains, escarpment and riparian. It is on the lower escarpment and riparian zone in Jacksons Creek valley where Sugar Gliders were introduced and have been recorded until 1995. The lower section of the escarpment supports woodland consisting of Yellow Gum and Yellow Box which form a canopy over wattles and other shrubs. In the riparian zone along the river flats and banks of Jacksons Creek the dominant trees are River Red Gum, Manna Gum and Blackwood.

In 1989, 13 Sugar Gliders were released into the Organ Pipes National Park followed by a further 24 animals in 1990, a total of 37 released over the two year period. As there were no natural tree hollows due to most trees being no more than 30 years old, 24 nesting boxes were installed over a 10 ha area along Jacksons Creek prior to the release. In June 1993, 43 Sugar Gliders were trapped and in May 1995 were trapped and released with 'electronic chips' to find out more about the animals movements. Some were found to be nesting in boxes specifically designed and put out for bats. Since that time there has been no further trapping to confirm whether Sugar Gliders were still thriving or indeed surviving in the park.

The Friends of Organ Pipes have put in a request for MSGV to undertake a mammal survey in the park to find out whether the Sugar Gliders *Petaurus breviceps* are still present. The survey method used was spotlighting in the early evening over the entire area of River Red Gum and Manna Gum woodland along Jacksons Creek within the boundaries of Organ Pipes NP. Over a total of 7 spot hours using 3 spotlights no Sugar Gliders were recorded. Other mammal species however were recorded during our spotlighting survey; fifteen Common Brushtail Possums, six Common Ringtail Possums, one Black Wallaby and four Eastern Grey Kangaroos. The kangaroos are part of an estimated population of over 100 animals in the Jacksons Creek valley.

In the late afternoon three Black Wallabies were seen browsing on shrubs. They are part of an estimated population of 18 animals in the national park.

We believe there are three possible reasons for the decline or complete disappearance of Sugar Gliders from Organ Pipes National Park. They are:

- Black Wattles *Acacia mearnsii* which were abundant in the park at the time of Sugar Glider release have matured and almost completely died out due to senescence and pressure from the prolonged drought over the last 12 to 13 years. The gum produced by Black wattle and other wattle species is an important food source for Sugar Gliders that is available throughout the year.
- The eucalypts alone would not be able to consistently provide in all seasons enough blossoms or support enough insects for Sugar Gliders to survive on. This especially applies in periods of drought when blossoming is less prolific and frequent, and in winter when very few insects are about. At the time of the survey only two Yellow Gums were found to be in flower.
- Most of the nest boxes were found to be in a very poor state of repair with lids and panels missing. One nest box with a missing lid was found to be housing a Brushtail Possum which managed to squeeze its self in. As almost all the existing eucalypts in OPNP are not mature enough to provide suitable nesting hollows there is little in the way of natural shelter required for Sugar Gliders to be able to survive and breed. Brushtail Possums, which were abundant, would compete for any available hollows that may naturally occur in some of the old original red gums that existed prior to the park being proclaimed.

With so little food and shelter available it appears that Sugar Gliders would have an uphill battle to survive in the Organ Pipes National Park. An influx of macropods, Swamp Wallabies and Eastern Grey Kangaroos, plus rabbits as well as the abnormally dry conditions has severely impeded regeneration of food trees necessary to sustain a population of Sugar Gliders.

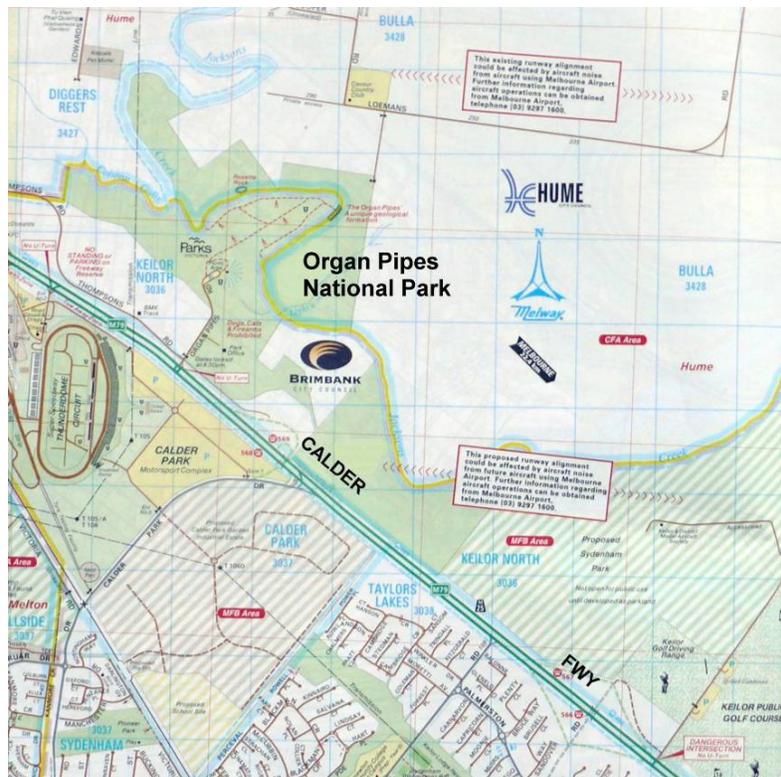
CAMP COMMANDANT: Andrew McCutcheon

HOST: Robert Irvine

PERSONNEL

Jill & Allen Poynton
John and Dianne Olden
Ann Williamson
Tim, Morwenna, Inga and Josh Griffiths-Hunt

LOCATION MAP: Melway Map 3



SPOTLIGHTING MAP:

