

Warrumbungle Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby Release – Update 1

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Welcome to the first update of Australia's largest ever release of captive bred brush-tailed rock wallabies!

On 7 April 2009, 23 brush-tailed rock wallabies were released into the wild on a mountain summit in the Warrumbungle National Park. This large scale release unites WWF-Australia, the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) and Waterfall Springs Wildlife Sanctuary in a common goal – to pull this species, which is listed as endangered in NSW, back from the brink of extinction.



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The captive bred animals were sourced six years ago by Waterfall Springs from Kawau Island in New Zealand where they were considered a pest. They had originally derived from a population in the lower Blue Mountains and translocated to New Zealand in the 1870s. From the captive population, managed by Celia Thomson, 23 animals (6 male, 17 female plus a bonus 8 pouched young) were prepared for transportation to the release site in the Warrumbungles. After two nights of trapping and conducting vet assessments, each animal was put into an Australia Post sack to keep them calm throughout the journey. Half of the wallabies were driven to the Warrumbungle base camp whilst the rest were flown by helicopter direct to the release site...rock wallaby air mail! All arrived safely and without drama.

A team comprising WWF, DECC, and National Parks and Wildlife Services staff trekked the two hours up steep, loose-ground terrain from base camp to meet the flying rock wallabies at the summit. With the help of the local Timor Road Landcare Group and WWF's Samantha Vine, those wallabies that had arrived by car were loaded onto the helicopter at base camp. The animals were then airlifted to the summit to hang out with the rest of the wallabies ...and that meant literally hanging in their sacks on trees for an hour or two, with the occasional spritz of cooling water. This ensured they were as relaxed as possible in preparation for release, with the sack perhaps simulating a safe pouch environment.



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A couple of hours before sunset, the first of the rock wallabies were set free. Each wallaby had their individual moment in the sun in being captured on film, as one by one they were released. A few of the wallabies hastily jumped out of their cloth sacks and bolted into the bush. However, most were initially reluctant to leave the comfort of their sack, before slowly looking to find the nearest rock on which to perch (thus, living up to their name!) and checking out their new world. I was lucky enough to release two of the wallabies and can say it was a very special moment.

For the first two weeks after release, Todd Soderquist and Deb Ashworth from DECC will be on the mountain top everyday to monitor the animals' movements using light radio-tracking collars, which have a link designed to break after 18-24 months, ear-tags and 18 infra red cameras. Todd happily reports that all 23 released rock wallabies are safe and sound. Most remain close to their release sites whilst two have gone exploring on the other side of the mountain but still in good rock wallaby habitat. Monitoring for location and movement will continue five days a week during the next ten weeks and less intensively for nine months thereafter. During the less-intensive phase, volunteers will be needed to help team members track rock wallabies from both the base and top of the mountain.

ABC TV news captured some of the action having flown reporter Geoff Sims to cover the story. It was played later that week on ABC TV evening news (it is still on the ABC website for those willing to search for it). Network Ten News ran a story on Good Friday using the footage documentary cameraman Peter Clarke had taken. There was also coverage on ABC radio and 2UE, having interviewed both Todd and myself. In the print media, the Daily Telegraph ran a story, as well as the local papers such as the Central Coast Express Advocate and Northern Daily Leader. Thanks must go to Helen Pitman (WWF), Susie Summers (DECC), and Karen O'Mara (Waterfall Springs) for driving brush-tailed rock wallaby conservation into the media arena.

This project, appropriately named 'Pulling rock wallabies from an extinction vortex,' was made possible due to funding by an Australian Government Caring for our Country grant.