WARRON

EASTERN BARRED BANDICOOT NEWSLETTER

PROGRAM UPDATE

THE WILD POPULATION

The 7-year long drought appears to have had a significant effect on bandicoot numbers in the wild at Hamilton. Bandicoots were reported early in 2003, sadly some residents have had no sightings recently, while others are not seeing bandicoots, but have seen sign in the past 12 months. Presumably breeding has been reduced in the low rainfall conditions. In the wild with a lack of cat control, it is likely that predation continues to have a major impact on an already low bandicoot population. We can only pray for rain and hope that the small pockets of bandicoots living in the wild in Hamilton, in spite of predator presence, continue to breed and maintain the wild population.

LANARK

The population of bandicoots at Lanark appears to have declined substantially in the past 12 months, perhaps particularly since spring. In the last two trappings in 2003 no bandicoots were caught at all, however signs of bandicoots were seen just before Christmas close to the house. About seven months ago a road-killed male was found c.1.5 km from the house, in a place where there have been a number of sightings over the years. The last animal caught was a large unchipped male, which had thus survived for a good time without being detected by the monitoring program.

A likely explanation for the decline in bandicoot numbers at Lanark is the combined effect of the ongoing period of dry years, in particular of dry winters and predation. Western Victoria again had below average winter rainfall in 2003. The long run of dry winters has meant little runoff and the large wetland adjacent to the release site at Lanark has remained dry for several years. This swamp when full provided a major barrier to foxes entering the main bandicoot habitat areas. The dry swamp now allows easy access by predators and also has the potential to provide good cover for foxes. Predator control efforts have been stepped up over the past year and the intensive fox control program at Lanark has been yielding results. Fox baiting is being carried out around the main habitat areas on the property, about 10 sites in total. Approximately one bait is being taken per fortnight. Gavin Lewis, the predator controller at the Hamilton Community Parklands is also conducting the regional baiting program around Lanark, which is funded by Integrated Tree Cropping Pty Ltd. Gavin baits on Lanark and all adjoining properties.

MOORAMONG:

Mooramong: Ian Waller, manager, reports that once again Mooramong has received below average rainfall, receiving a total of 500mm in 2003, compared to a long-term average of 600mm. The season was good but dried out unseasonably early. Bandicoots are currently frequently seen feeding around the homestead. Fox numbers are still low, but appear to have increased since Foxoff baits replaced liver baits. Foxoff is the preferred method of fox control (by the Department of Sustainability and Environment) because of the ease of safe handling. Mooramong is hoping to get permission to recommence using liver baits in the near future. In the meantime a short-term but large-scale fox baiting program coordinated by the Department of Primary Industry has commenced over a large area including Mooramong. Several trial sites for these regional fox control programs have been announced across the State.

Mooramong have recently appointed a part-time conservation officer, Frank Carland, who will have responsibility for work on the nature reserve including bandicoots, and fox control, Welcome to Frank. Lake Goldsmith

At Lake Goldsmith, Ron Hall, Parks Victoria, reports that no successful breeding has been found in the past 12 months. A female with pouch young was caught in September 02, but none of the young have been subsequently retrapped, suggesting that they did not survive to adulthood. Trapping in 2003 caught one marked male in March, none in June, and two marked females in December. The latter two females had not been caught in the previous 12 months, and neither showed evidence of breeding in the previous three months. No trapping was carried out in September.

Numbers appear to be slowly declining in the area that is regularly trapped at Lake Goldsmith, however, a bandicoot was seen in an area that is not trapped suggesting that bandicoots have colonised other parts of the park. Ron plans to do a more widespread trapping in March to see if he can locate other populations of bandicoots.

This year has seen another dry winter with little runoff and the lake held water for only a short period. The lake has until the last nine years, tended to have water year round, and provide a protective barrier limiting fox access onto the peninsula of land where the bandicoots were released. Without this, foxes can roam all across the reserve. An intensive fox baiting program is run year round at Lake Goldsmith. Foxoff and liver baits are laid four times a year for six weeks at a time. Liver baits have been found to be more successful than Foxoff and are routinely used. Parks Victoria staff also try and bait any known dens on land within 2km of the reserve, with the support of neighbouring farmers. PV staff also spotlight shoot the reserve regularly.

WOODLANDS

Bandicoot numbers at Woodlands have also dropped in the past 12 months, likely again, due to the prolonged dry. No bandicoots were caught in the December 03 trapping. Currently the old breeding pens at Woodlands are being upgraded to receive an overflow of captive-bred bandicoots from Melbourne Zoo awaiting release.

Approx five male and 10 female bandicoots ranging in age from 5 months to 2 years will be transferred to Woodlands in the next few months. Before leaving the zoo bandicoots will be placed on a live diet of insects such as crickets and mealworms to introduce them to searching for and finding their own food. Bandicoots will be released into two pens of approximately 1ha each. There the bandicoots will be closely monitored via regular cage trapping prior to their release into the wider bandicoot reserve at a later date pending environmental conditions suitable for release.



"A predator exclusion fence surrounds the bandicoot reserve at Woodlands Historic Park".



John Seebeck at the awarding of his Honorary Life Membership to the Australian Mammal Society, Alice Springs, April 2000. Photo credit – Australian Mammal Society

JOHN SEEBECK (1939 TO 2003)

John Seebeck was the wildlife biologist behind the Eastern Barred Bandicoot Recovery Program, and was a significant driving force in the project to rescue the species from extinction. After a long illness, John died last year and a function was held at Woodlands Historic Park on the 28th of September to celebrate his life, in particular his contribution to wildlife conservation in the state of Victoria, where he worked all his life. The following tributes to John were written by members of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot Recovery Program, and others who have been involved over the years. Some of these tributes are extracts from speeches made at the Woodlands ceremony and some were written especially for this edition of 'Warron'. The final tribute is written by Bob Warneke, who worked in the wildlife area of the state government along with John for many years.

Although John did not want a funeral, I was very pleased when Helen called me and told me his family had suggested we hold a celebration of his life here at Woodlands Historic Park. I have a strong personal attachment to this place. It is where I began my career with the Department, but it was also where I first met John Seebeck 15 years ago.

I don't clearly remember the details of my first meeting with John, perhaps it is because it now seems like I have known him all my life. But from my earliest involvement with John, I came to view him as someone who could be relied upon completely for advice and guidance in all things 'bandicoot', from the practical to the political. And there were many times when I needed his support.

The Eastern Barred Bandicoot recovery program was very dear to John's heart and Woodlands, or Gellibrand Hill as it was called then, was one of his favourite places. It is here that the first large-scale captive breeding and reintroduction programs were carried out. Work commenced in 1989 and the project was so successful that by 1993 the Woodlands population had reached an estimated minimum of 500 individuals.

Another bandicoot site that John was heavily involved with and took great pride in, is Mooramong. Mooramong is a National Trust property near Skipton in western Victoria. It was established as a reintroduction site at the end of 1992 and it was the site of the first true wild release, as there were no predator fences. Mooramong is another bandicoot success story as it has sustained a population of bandicoots for over 8 years without supplementation, enduring a 6 year drought and the constant threat of predation.

John's enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to the EBB program over many, many years played a very large part in its successes. So much so that it could be said that he was largely responsible for ensuring that the species has moved from the very brink of extinction to the relatively secure state it exists in today. No mean feat, given the difficulties we have experienced. John's support and commitment to the program will be irreplaceable.

Despite the huge involvement with bandicoots, it wasn't just bandicoots that John will be remembered for by field staff. From the smallest to the largest mammal species, John was 'our expert'. John was one of those unique senior staff who always made time for regional staff and tried to maintain a close involvement in programs at the ground level. He loved to get out into the field when he could and we loved having him there.

John will always be remembered by those of us working in the field, with respect and great affection. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for all his expertise and support, and he will be sorely missed.

On behalf of all involved in the Eastern Barred Bandicoot program, I would like to extend our deepest sympathy and condolences to John's family.

Thank You

Mandy Watson

Convenor

Eastern Barred Bandicoot Recovery Team

"John Seebeck was a popular, well-known identity both in the Community and the Department. John's passion and extensive knowledge of Eastern Barred Bandicoots was legendary and it was through this that I came to know him. John's guidance and advice helped us establish one of the most viable wild populations of EBB in the State at the National Trust Property of Mooramong. John was there when the first EBB were released into the pens at Mooramong. It was not unusual for him to be found wandering with the radio tracking aerial or sitting up in the radio receiving Teepee of an evening. His dedication and enthusiasm to the program rubbed off onto us all and Mooramong still remains the most viable wild population in Victoria. It is because of John's dedication that I still remain so passionate about the EBB program.

John was always there if you needed advice or to discuss any issues and in the early days he always attended recovery team meetings where his opinion was held in high regard. John's invaluable knowledge of rare and endangered species will be sorely missed and all the hard work he contributed and his obvious love of the job will be long remembered by all. I will miss seeing him and his Beret's, and it is especially this time of the year that we notice him gone, when his famous hand-made Christmas cards would arrive.

Thanks for the memories John.

Jim O'Brien

Wildlife Officer,

Department of Sustainability and Environment,

Ballarat

I can not recall the exact time I met John, but I was certainly aware of him and his work early in my University days studying biology. This would have been in the early 1980s. When I was studying and an active member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria, John's work was a prominent feature of my reading. He either wrote the paper or his work was referred to by others. Here he was out in the field, trapping and studying mammals. As a young zoologist I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

It was some 10 years latter that I actually met John for the first time. It would have been around 1988 or 89. I was working for the Melbourne Zoo and it was at the time that the zoo was getting involved with Eastern Barred Bandicoots. My job was to collate and compile a studbook for the captive management of bandicoots. To do this I needed data on bandicoots held in the pens at Woodlands. John held this information. I recall setting up a meeting with him at the ARI and off I went to meet the man whose papers I had read.

I recall a small room at ARI full of filling cabinets, boxes of scientific papers, a book case, map of Victoria, personal items, skulls, a conservation poster, some photos or prints

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of mammals. It was jam-packed, not much room, just enough for one visitor chair. I sat down and we began to char.

John was always approachable, easy to talk to and always had time for me (and I for him). This was one of his most endearing qualities, he had time for young scientists and students. He was a true mentor to me and I am sure to many others that came before and after me. His other quality that I admired, were his editing and correction skills. Hardly a paper or report that I prepared did not come back with a red pen through it. I very much appreciated this from John, as it strengthened the paper or report I was writing. He was meticulous in this area and paid particular attention to fact. I recall on several occasions at meetings that if other colleagues or I only had half the facts, he would interject and correct us. We all learnt from his wealth of knowledge and his extensive experience.

In these days of corporatisation (whatever that means), John was a breath of fresh air. He remained down to earth, humble and humanitarian. He focused on what he held dear, saving species from extinction and encouraging others to seek and conserve the wondrous and inspirational world of nature. Nature is not a corporate entity, does not conform to a strategic plan. He loved nature and wildlife, but hated the bureaucratic jungle that we all have to deal with. John always had time for friends and colleagues. He has a high sense of duty and ethical standards and respect for others and their views. John was respected and liked by many.

I knew John for a relatively short period if time. It saddens me deeply that we will not meet again to discuss bandicoots, New Holland Mice, conservation and our families. John was always interested in how I was getting on, asked about my wife, Judith and our building project. As I mentioned in my short tribute to John in the paper, he is a friend and mentor and his legacy will live on in his work and the people he encouraged and taught.

Vale John H Seebeck my friend and mentor.

Peter and Judith Myroniuk

Melbourne Zoo

28 September 2003

In June 1988 John Seebeck and I took off on a several-day trip around western Victoria, searching for an endangered species project that would be of mutual interest to several cooperating organisations, Australian and American, and deciding of course on the Eastern Barred Bandicoot. I have great memories of that trip. John and I shared backgrounds in mammalogy and ecology, so he was the perfect travelling companion to introduce me to Victoria's animals, landscapes, and history. We met with numerous colleagues and friends of his, and it was clear how much regard they had for John's knowledge and commitment. Over some fine Australian wines, we discussed the conservation challenges facing Victoria's endangered species.

Over the next few years, John and I worked together in the field, in planning meetings, and in the offices of many groups in what became a successful, multi-year, international effort involving scores of people, from the Minister of the Environment to secondary school students. But in my mind, it all began with that trip with John Seebeck. For my wife, Denise, and me, uppermost in our memories of Australia will always be John's warmth and friendship and the laughter, adventures, good times, and wonderful dinners we shared with him and Helen. You will be dearly missed, John.

Tim Clark and Denise Casey

Jackson, Wyoming USA

My recollection of first meeting John Seebeck was at a most unlikely place, the Korweinguboora football ground north of Ballan. In December 1974 a group of us had gathered at the football ground surrounded by the Wombat Forest, to search for Greater Gliders as part of a mammal survey course run by the then Environment Studies Association of Victoria. John was a contributor to a number of their courses as indeed he was in so many activities that gave the participants an understanding of and enthusiasm for, marsupial and mammal ecology. I met him again in early 1975 at Mt Baw Baw on an ESAV alpine ecology course and again I was impressed by his knowledge, great interest in ecology and his dry humour.

Soon after, I was appointed as a Technical Officer (later called a Land Management officer) to the Crown Land Management Division in the Department of Crown Lands and Survey based at Hamilton where I started work in May 1975. Those of you who remember this period may recall that this was the year of the RED scheme, a federal government program to promote employment in the recession affected rural economy. Local government responded with alacrity and devised many amazing ways of spending these funds. In Hamilton plans were put in place to build an artificial lake by damming the Grange Burn utilising RED scheme funding and to revegetate sections of the Grange Burn. The Grange Burn and its surroundings had many introduced species including willows and the Council contracted an organisation specialising in tree growing to prepare a report. Being a newcomer to Hamilton I knew very little about this area

but the local Inspector of Land settlement (as the position was then called) Mr Barry Wright took me under his wing and quickly made me aware of Hamilton's Eastern Barred Bandicoot and its significance. With his local knowledge of the animal's habitat and a few nocturnal excursions with a torch near the Police paddocks and Victoria Park which adjoin the Grange Burn I had my first glimpses of EBBs and came to recognise their characteristic conical "digs".

I then set about finding out what I could about the Eastern Barred Bandicoot. After reading "Mammals of Western Victoria" by Norman Wakefield (1971) I documented my concerns on the Lands Department file about the effects these developments beside the Grange Burn may potentially have on the future of the EBB. My file note concluded thus:

"The information required to make a long term management decision which will ensure the survival of this species on the mainland simply does not exist. If we do accept Wakefield's comments as reasonable (in the absence of other data on which to make a decision) the levelling of grassed areas, removal of weeds and the large scale planting of trees and shrubs may be disastrous for the barred bandicoot."

Talking to Joe Morris the local Fisheries and Wildlife Officer at Hamilton, John Seebeck's name was mentioned to me as a scientist who might be able to provide some of the answers to these management issues. For me this was the beginning of a long association with John and with the Eastern Barred Bandicoot Recovery Project. John started his preliminary studies on the distribution and reproduction of Perameles gunnii in Victoria in 1972. Although some work had been done on the ecology and reproduction of this species in Tasmania, there was an absence of knowledge on the mainland subspecies. John provided the crucial leadership and direction for a research effort which culminated in a series of important publications on the species and the development of the first management plan for the conservation of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot in Victoria. Peter Brown commenced work in 1980 on a research project on the ecology of P. gunnii at Hamilton with John as his supervisor and this project later evolved into the management and recovery program which still continues

John, Barry and I met with the Hamilton City council and their consultant from Natural Resources Conservation League at Victoria Park beside the Grange Burn. John's arguments were persuasive in convincing the council that the needs of the EBB should be recognised and accommodated in managing the Grange Burn revegetation works. This was the first of many bandicoot management issues at Hamilton that John applied his considerable knowledge and dedication to trying to solve over a period of nearly thirty years.

Andy Arnold

Flora and Fauna Branch

Department of Sustainability and Environment

It is my privilege and pleasure to speak about John today (28 September 2003), for he was my good friend, an enthusiastic collaborator and esteemed colleague for 43 years. I am deeply saddened by his passing but I rejoice in my personal memories and in his productive life, which enriched my own. I am quite certain John affected and enlarged the lives of the many who came to know him through the primary streams of his life – family, friends and his professional engagement with the natural world. I can think of no more satisfying combination.



John Seebeck in the field in the early 1960s. photo credit – DSE

There would be very few here today who would know much about John's beginnings in wildlife research ... so I'll enlarge a little on those earlier years.

John's and my careers as mammalogists began at the turn of the 1950s in the old Fisheries and Game Department, at 605 Flinders Street Extension, in a grey, rather unprepossessing and perhaps slightly grim three-story building, next door to the much more cheerful-looking Coroners Court and Morgue, and opposite the Spencer Street railway yards. The yards are still there but the rest has long gone for Melbourne's greater good. If you had ascended the stairs to the second floor and turned left and left again you would find your nose against the door of the Wildlife Laboratory - the absolute hub of the Wildlife Section; it spanned much of the front of the building. Opposite that door the hallway was constricted by our small narrow built-in storeroom and immediately to the right against the wall was our free-standing skin cupboard which contained an eclectic collection of seized (illegally taken) skins of this and that and furry objects including a handbag made of koala skin and a rug made of 80 eastern quoll skins. That was our reference collection. Continuing down the corridor and around several corners you would find the open door of a room occupied by Keith and myself, desk and bookshelves each and some filing cabinets on which lay a set of Gould's Mammals of Australia, in original leather binding.1 Our door was the last stop before the toilets and we had many callers.

John Seebeck, totally naïve and unsuspecting, as I certainly was 12 months before, joined the Wildlife Section in early 1960 as the third Technical Assistant Grade 1 attached to the Forest Damage Project, and from that moment, I assure you, his downfall was certain. He and I pretty well cut our mammalogical teeth on the ubiquitous bush rat, then known as Rattus assimilis, which we unrelentingly pursued in the pine forests of Gippsland where they had drawn attention to themselves by indulging in the laudable behaviour of ring-barking young radiata pines. We trapped them in spades, dissected them to learn the internal intimacies of their sex lives and diet, tagged and re-trapped them to follow their perambulations in search of sex and food, and bred them in captivity to determine the breeding cycle, measure growth and development, and to plot tooth wear as a guide to ageing the wild caught series. Just as any self-respecting biologist would have done.

In the year that John joined the Department I had had Fauna Survey accepted as a formal project, in recognition of the value of systematically processing and recording the steady stream of injured and deceased specimens that were sent to the Wildlife Laboratory from all over Victoria, and to provide an excuse to sneak off to do a little bit of survey trapping here and there. At the beginning of the 1960s it was painfully obvious that we knew virtually nothing about our mammal fauna — except that possums and kangaroos were common, widespread and a nuisance, and that we had to move surplus koalas around every year or so. It was in that fledgling Fauna Survey activity that John got his 'nose' for his subsequent career and his special commitment to rare and endangered species, although I have to record that his experience with 16 rotting pilot whales in Waterloo Bay, on the eastern side of Wilson's Promontory, kept that nose pointed rather firmly landward, towards the sweeter smelling quadrupeds.

John's most important step, his real turning point, was taken in 1962. Possibly to escape yet more Rattus assimilis he sought my advice about returning to Melbourne University to resume a science degree. I encouraged him to apply for a studentship, then available to public servants with the necessary background, that would allow him study leave on full salary. The one catch was that recipients, on graduation, were then bound to the Public Service for several years, but of course John had no intention of going elsewhere!

John was granted the studentship, completed the course in 1965 and duly graduated in 1966 with honours. He was subsequently promoted to Research Officer, Class C, becoming the third Research Officer in the Wildlife Research Section, where his activities remained more or less focussed on fauna survey. Officially his first individual project, if I remember correctly, was on the Long-nosed Potoroo, Potorous tridactylus. This species had been rediscovered in Victoria only a few years before - and I recall that it was one of the exciting moments of our fledgling Fauna Survey Project. Inevitably I suppose, John's enthusiasm and appetite had been whetted by the sheer range and novelty of the situation that opened up before him - so many new discoveries (the Mountain Pygmy Possum was another), so many challenging problems. John spread himself beyond the Department, becoming very closely associated and involved with the recently formed Mammal Survey Group within the Field Naturalists Club.

My career path diverged from John's when I became more involved with marine mammals from about 1965 on, but we came together again in 1977 when my seal project was closed down, terminated and positively extinguished by the Director (or so he thought) and a Forest Habitat Unit was

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established in the Section. This project was the brainchild of our Section Manager, Keith Dempster. Keith, John and I developed an ambitious project to study forest wildlife, focusing on ecological interrelationships at various trophic levels. At the time this was an entirely new approach. Our aim was to concentrate on just a few selected species in particular categories. With a liberal budget we set up a self-contained field station at Cambarville in the eastern highlands, consisting of four custommade translocatable units - a laboratory, a kitchendining unit, an ablution/toilet block, and a bunkhouse, with our own reticulated water and a diesel generator for power. We began what we anticipated would be a series of long-term investigations in conjunction with university researchers. Alas no, unfortunately we were somewhat ahead of our time. Once again senior management changed priorities and after just a few years the Cambarville project was closed down. I subsequently ended up in management and John continued doing what he liked best.

There are so many facets to John's long career as a biologist that I can only offer a few reflections here. There was, perhaps, one very special highlight and John and an Eastern Barred Bandicoot (date and photographer unknown). that was his discovery and naming of the Longfooted Potoroo, Potorous longipes, the latter in conjunction with Peter Johnston.3 The existence of this rare and cryptic species was a complete surprise and John was acutely aware that happenstance had a great deal to do with is discovery, and that forestry practices could so easily have led to its extinction, unrecorded.

John's career was marked by the wide variety of his subject species and his long and tenacious commitment to their conservation, in its widest sense. He worked productively, for instance, on the New Holland Mouse, the Broadtoothed Rat, both species of potoroos, the Eastern Barred Bandicoot ... and on the other side of the coin, the problem of domestic/feral cat predation on wildlife. His longest and most sustained involvement was with the potoroos and the Eastern Barred Bandicoot, which virtually dated from his very beginning as a field researcher right through to his untimely death. I cannot think of another mammalogist in Australia who has had such a continuous and fruitful role in the conservation of rare and endangered species, through his involvement in every facet - field research, conservation planning, management (including captive management of the Eastern Barred Bandicoot and its successful reintroduction to the wild), public relations and



education. I greatly admired him and his achievements, and I am grateful that he was my colleague and friend.

I am also grateful that John's special contribution to Australian mammalogy was so appropriately recognised by the Australian Mammal Society, of which he was a dedicated and long-serving member. Last year the Society's elected him as it's inaugural Fellow, a distinction that took him completely by surprise ... he was absolutely gob-smacked! He was rather awed by the honour, and I know that he was more chuffed than he could possibly express.

Bloody Seebeck! Boy, could he be obstreperous and cantankerous ... but he was also direct, guileless and honest. John was not blessed with robust health, but he was vigorous and uncomplaining, restless and inquiring ... he sought widely for his reference points and was dogged in pursuit of his goals. I knew this well enough, but I was still amazed by his determination and perseverance in recent years as his constitution began to fail. Fortunately John's humorous side was much given to thoughtful whimsy (he was forever sending me his latest selection of Leunig cartoons) and he thoroughly enjoyed the limerick competitions at the

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Australian Mammal Society's annual dinners, such a highlight of the Annual General Meetings. Those Leunig cartoons were an essential part of our correspondence since my emigration to north-west Tasmania in 1994, and were among the eclectic little collections that arrived in a large white envelope every month or so of news-clippings, photocopied abstracts of scientific papers he knew would be of interest – sometimes the whole paper, grey literature, tidbits from the Department of Changing Names, obituaries of people that we once knew ... and always with a scrawled and sometimes pungent note. He provided me with many chuckles and a great deal of food for thought.

John, as we know, was also gregarious and thoroughly enjoyed a party. He would have so relished this gathering and I am absolutely certain that this is how he would have wanted to be farewelled, by his family, friends and colleagues ... with glasses in their hands, reminiscing ... and in this place that is part of the on-going Eastern Barred Bandicoot Recovery Project – of which he was a founding father. These things are the true memorials.

VALE, JOHN HILARY SEEBECK

Bob Warneke

Former Wildlife Biologist with Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, where John worked for much of his professional life.

- ¹ That and Wood Jones' Mammals of South Australia were our main identification guides.
- Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works.
- ³ J.H. Seebeck and P.G. Johnston. 1980. Potorous longipes (Marsupialia: Macropodidae); a New Species from Eastern Victoria. Australian Journal of Zoology 28: 119-134.









