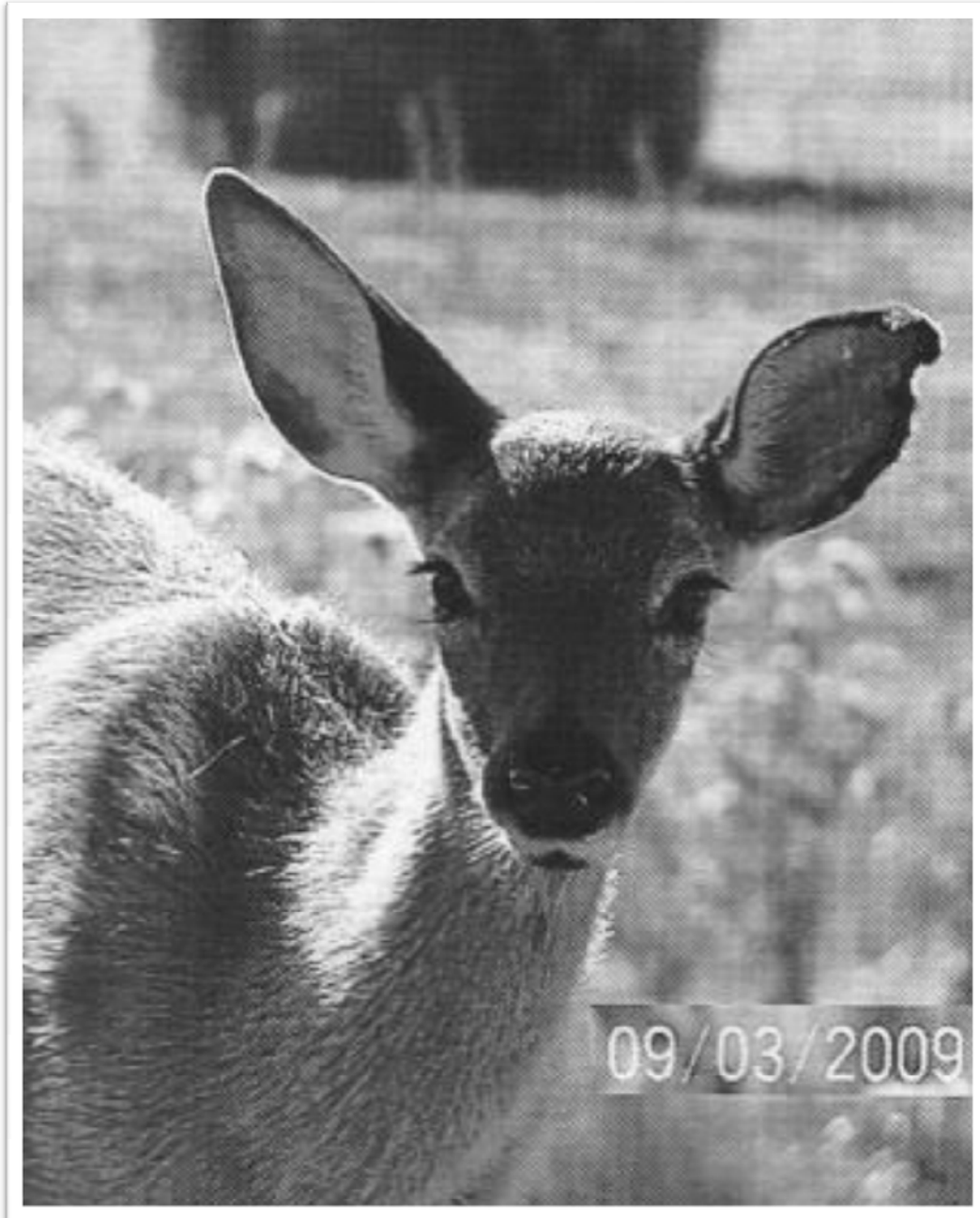




Autumn (June) 2009, 6 pages

## RAMBLING AROUND THE BURNT FARM

By Andy Cowan



*Hind with burnt ears*

Our thoughts go out to all those who lost family, friends, homes or property in the bushfires. For them, this event has totally changed their lives. Its impact will be enduring and far-reaching. For us, loss of fencing and pasture is merely a temporary inconvenience.

On Saturday February 7 amidst record temperatures and a prolonged heat-wave, several firestorms merged and raged across the state of Victoria, culminating in Australia's worst natural disaster in recorded history.

As many as 400 individual fires were recorded on 7<sup>th</sup> February by both the CFA and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. On that week-end in Victoria there were fires from Coleraine and Horsham, in the west, to Beechworth and Dargo, in the east and down to Wilson's Promontory in the south. By mid-morning on 7<sup>th</sup> February there were hot northerly winds in excess of 100 kilometres per hour, an all-time record of 46.4°C (115.5°F) in Melbourne, the hottest temperature ever recorded in an Australian capital city and humidity levels as low as 6%. Over 4,500km<sup>2</sup> (450,000 hectares, 1.1 million acres) were burnt.

The fires were catastrophic leaving behind 173 confirmed fatalities, hundreds injured, and over 7,000 homeless. Countless wildlife were also destroyed and several of these fires were still burning out of control over two weeks later in various areas of Victoria.

The following figures, released by the Murrindindi Shire Council, relate to our Shire – 106 people lost their lives; 1539 sq km or 40% of the total shire was burnt; 70 business' or shops were destroyed; 1225 houses burnt; 24 bridges lost or damaged and 3533 km fencing lost (Alexandra to Perth).

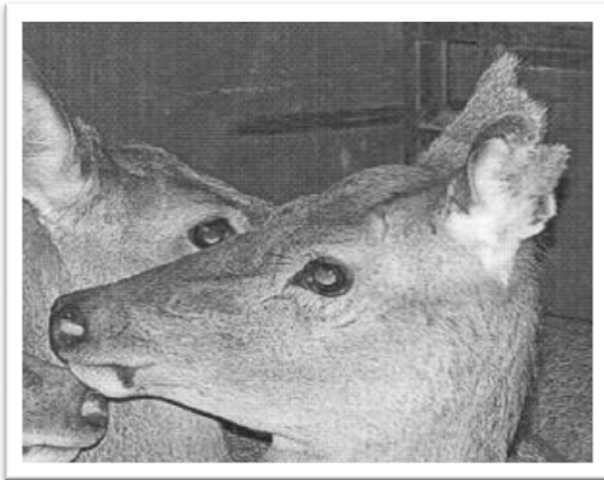
It was about 4pm on February 7<sup>th</sup> that I took my first photographs of the fires that would soon burn most of the pasture on our property north of Buxton. The fire that burnt out our area reportedly started about 2pm at the Murrindindi Mill. By 7.30pm, it had reached our driveway after travelling roughly 20km. In the meantime it had ravaged our neighbouring towns of Narbethong and Marysville. In about 5 hours it would destroy about 20,000 hectares.

In the days to follow, I was to realize how fortunate I was compared to many others. I would also reflect on how naïve and ill-prepared I was for such an event. We had been warned a week beforehand that the weather and fire conditions for that weekend could be perhaps the worst since 1939 and that any fires could be potentially devastating. I was guilty of assuming that it would not happen in our backyard, a heavily timbered mountain region with a high average rainfall. Most areas in Australia get burnt periodically, just as they have done over tens of thousands of years. Prior to 2009, the last major bushfire in this area was 1939.



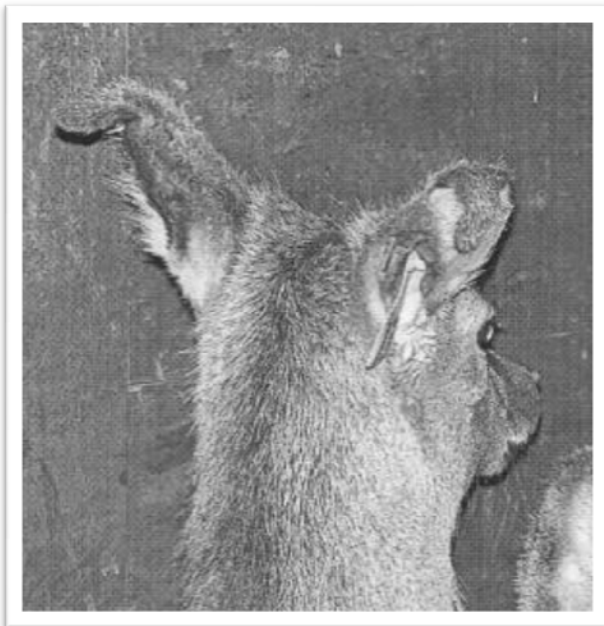
**2am Sunday 8 February 2009**

Maureen and I rent a house off the farm. While I was at the farm, she made the decision to pack the car and drove into Alexandra. After registering with the Red Cross, we spent the night with hundreds of other shell-shocked people at the Alexandra Community Centre. It was incredibly hot and smoky. Graders worked throughout the night to put in firebreaks around the Alexandra township. There were many unknowns. There were many rumours. Later the next morning we were to become aware of the immensity of the disaster. It was then that we went to stay with friends at Merton until the end of the week. By then, the fire which had threatened our rented property had been brought under control.



***Hinds with burnt ears***

For the following week there were police road blocks on the Maroondah Highway. On Monday, limited access was given to farmers from Taggerty (or further south) to return to their properties to attend to their animals. As soon as we could get through, my friend (fellow deer farmer Stan Brown) and I took rifles and ammunition to the farm. We did not know what to expect but were prepared to put injured animals out of their misery. At 10am on Monday, we were driving down the highway through the moonscape of burnt homes, fences, trees and pastures, fearing the worst. Miraculously the deeryards and machinery were virtually untouched. This was not through good management but rather good luck.



Many kilometers of fencing had been destroyed but most of the deer, although having access to the world at large, were around the shed area. Two mobs of deer were still in their original paddocks. Their fences were still standing even though some posts had been burnt. Three mobs were boxed up but still within the farm boundaries. One mob had disappeared altogether. At first glance, we could not see an injured animal on the property. Very much relieved, we put the rifles away and started rebuilding the laneway so that we could at least get sock into the yards for sorting.

The mob that had escaped (35 hinds and 32 fawns) had been "earmarked" for an AI program during the rut. I put a bale of hay in their now fenceless paddock and hoped. There was no other feed on that side of the river for ten kilometers. There was a chance that, if they were alive, they would not be far away.



I first sighted them on Wednesday and saw them again a number of times later in the week. They finally settled on the neighbour's irrigation block on the other side of the river. That area, untouched by the fire, was the only green bit of land to be seen. It was from this area that I was able to set up two traps into which I fed the deer pellets each day. Finally, a month later, I had caught them all.

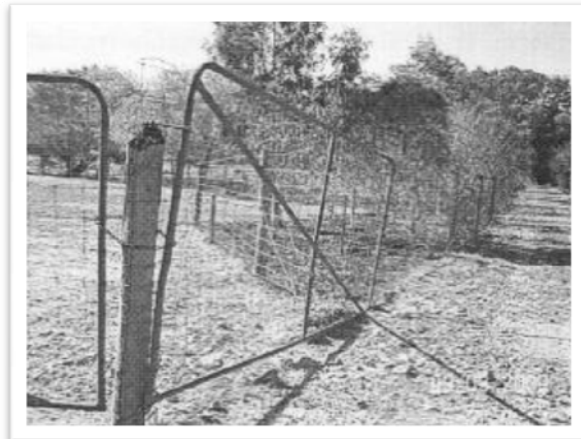
The picture on the magazine's cover (reproduced at the beginning of this article) shows one fire-affected  $\frac{3}{4}$  silka fawn. Although her ear is badly burnt she shows no sign of discomfort. In the same mob, one hind had her face singed. Many ears were partially burnt but all the animals seemed in good condition otherwise. For a week or so after the fire, many of them appeared "shocked". From my observation, they seemed to spend a lot of time recovering in long grass and unburned treed areas that were part of the irrigation block. When I was finally able to get them into the yards, they were unusually nervous. It was at this stage that I gave up the idea of the AI program.

For me, the biggest problem was feeding and watering the stock. All my grass and hay had been burnt. My trough system was empty because many of the poly-pipe fittings had melted and the water lost from storage. Thankfully, through the generosity of others, feed of varying types had been donated from across the nation. This was enough to keep the stock alive for a while but I immediately ordered a semi load of pellets. Understandably, not all trucks were automatically allowed into the area due to all the emergency vehicles cleaning up trees and roadsides in order to make things safe for public use. However, within a week, I was able to feed them a bit of protein. Feeding out quietened them down considerably. I had quickly worked out that hungry deer and inadequate fencing are not a good combination.

My next predicament was that I had to put more than 100 mature velvet stags in a ten acre paddock. "Not a wise move", you suggest. Unfortunately, I had no option. Normally I would put the velvet mob into a 100 acre hilly area over the autumn/winter period. Given that they were coming into the rut, feeling hungry and some were in need of final velvetting, I suspected that there would be some degree of social discomfort. In this confined space there was a lot of fighting and about ten of the stags actually escaped from the paddock. I spent many days setting traps for them. The most successful idea seemed to be feeding the stags into a paddock adjacent to a mob of young hinds that I was not mating because



***Partially burnt strainer assembly***



***Strainer assembly – problem gate***



***Laneway to yards***

I regarded them as being too small. When I caught the stags in that paddock, I then moved them to another paddock. This went on for about three weeks before I had caught 99% of them. I am still checking the fence-line regularly for deer sign.

I hope to complete the fencing on the land we own and lease by the end of the year. Everything we had insured was not touched by the fire and what we did not have insured, deer and fences, were the worst affected. This meant that I have had to feed out more. In the scheme of things, feeding out more is probably not as bad as it sounds. Although I am virtually not feeding the herd, I am giving the rest of the area a good break. The sub clover and capeweed are doing well and the sacrifice paddocks are being well fertilized – some benefit.

More often than not we are controlled by nature. 2006 was the peak of the drought for us here. At that time, we were forced to de-stock dramatically. Hence, at the moment, as fate would have it, we have less stock to look after than we would normally have had prior to the drought. We are now in a re-building phase of stock production.

My ongoing pre-occupation, now that the animals have settled down, is re-building fences. Within a week of the fire, our friend Barry McVilly had delivered 1,600 posts that would be required to replace those that had been burnt out. Not long after the delivery, a group of eight friends cut points on 1200 of the posts and had laid out about 200 of them in 6 hours. This highlights the importance of getting help and having a well organized assembly line. A side benefit to this day's work was the inspiration and comfort it gave me in the fact that we had made a real start.

I calculated that approximately 12 kilometres of fencing needed rebuilding. Of this, I would estimate only about 100m of wire needs to be replaced as there was not a lot of grass available to burn around and the fire had swept through the property at such a great speed. The wire that requires replacement is where the wire was wrapped around the strainer assemblies that burnt. Other sections of wire which were burnt quite badly were as a result of burning trees landing on them – especially along the state forest.

I have only completed three kilometres of fencing in four months. There were four reasons to account for my sluggish start. Firstly, I had to come to grips with the enormity of the situation and realise how many other people need so much more help than we do. When chatting to other local farmers, many commented that they did not know where to start. Apart from the enormity of human and personal loss some farmers also lost everything – houses, sheds,



***Strainer assembly gone missing. The fence is holding up the gate***



***Re-building fences***



***Re-growth on Willow – 1 month after fire***

tractors, tools, stock and fences – everything required to run a farm and make a living. In our situation, we were extremely lucky. I still had all the infrastructure except for the fencing. I knew that the stock had to be kept alive so that is where I started. No options – no procrastination.

Secondly, as we border a state forest which burnt at extraordinarily high temperatures, the fences were littered with fallen trees and other debris. To clear all the fence lines, without damaging the wire, was a slow process. Luckily, I have had various people helping out here but it all takes time. Also, a lot of the fences next to the state forest had tea-tree and blackberries growing close to or into the wire. We had to clear enough of this in order to put in a reasonably straight replacement fence. Added to this was the fact that the ground was very dry in the early stages so ramming in the posts was a difficult job. In the past, I have had the luxury of putting in posts in late winter or spring and have never needed to use my auger. In the situation where the ground is so dry, an auger is an absolute necessity.

The third complication was that the wire was still on the ground so I had the choice of driving the tractor over it (and getting caught up in it) or pulling it about 2-3 metres from the fence line where I had limited access to the fence. I chose the latter option.

The fourth reason for my slow process is “spot fires” ... not in the literal sense, thank goodness, but in the other sense of problems that just crop up or other things that have to be done anyway. Obviously, I am still feeding out, checking water, repairing troughs (deer still want to wallow), trapping escaped deer and checking for injured animals. I've also had to check electric fences more regularly. As antlers do not conduct electricity, two stags can fight through a fence and are able to tear an electric fence apart in seconds. I guess it is simply farming as usual but with more serious consequences if small mistakes are made.

I would never want to go through this experience again, but I have learnt from it. I have further expanded my understanding of deer. I am constantly amazed by their resilience and I would love to have known what they did to survive the fire. The fact that no deer died and that 95% of my deer had no physical evidence of trauma amazes me. What instincts do they have that protect them?



***This photo was taken of the hills south of Kinglake.  
Absolutely no ground cover, totally burnt trees.  
Hopefully a heavy rainfall will not cause landslides.***