

## **The hidden value of Rummerys Hill**

If you drive 20 kilometres north from Glen Innes on the Emmaville Road you'll reach Rummerys Hill, named after the family that settled there in the 1800s. At 1096 metres elevation, it's a bit of a landmark – a sudden 100 metre climb and descent that no doubt stuck in the minds of travellers in the days of horse and cart. Today the name Rummerys Hill refers more broadly to the whole of the wooded ridge cut by Emmaville Road.

Heading north, the sealed road leaves cleared farm land on reasonably fertile basalt soils and rises onto this ridge of low-nutrient soils covered by native woodland. After six kilometres the road has crossed the Hill and descends to more cleared farmland, beside the Severn River.

The first road cutting on Rummerys Hill shows it has a shallow soil, covering a fractured bed rock of rhyolite (a volcanic rock similar to granite but with a much finer grain). Like most Australian soils, this soil is very old, so major plant nutrients like phosphorus and potassium were washed out of it long ago. This is fine by the native trees, shrubs and grasses. They thrive here. They don't need more nutrients. Eucalyptus trees will even suffer die-back if given too much phosphorus in the form of superphosphate fertiliser. But the Hill's soils are not good for introduced pasture plants like clover and cocksfoot, so authorities call them infertile soils.

These days, agricultural development of Rummerys Hill by clearing and pasture improvement will cost more than it returns and is not recommended by soil conservation or agriculture authorities. Because the flatter lands either side of Rummerys Hill have deeper soils, they were cleared years ago to be fertilised, farmed and grazed. On rocky Rummerys Hill, clearing trees is mostly confined to tracks or around buildings for fire protection. So the Hill remains mostly-uncleared woodland, surrounded by cleared farm land.

As you drive over Rummerys Hill you probably won't see that eastern parts of it were mined for tin and sapphires or that most of it has been affected by timber-cutting, grazing and wildfires. Still, these past uses and occasional fires have not reduced the outstanding hidden value of this area today – for regional wildlife conservation.

Today the area along Rummerys Hill is divided into many small landholdings. The owners of these hobby farms and 'lifestyle blocks' enjoy the scenery but often don't realise how important their patch is to the wildlife of a much bigger region of northern New South Wales.

On a satellite image ([see linked image](#)), Rummerys Hill really stands out as part of a long belt of mostly-uncleared land that runs North-West to South-East through mostly-cleared farming land. State environment authorities have identified this belt of woodland as a key habitat for wildlife conservation in New South Wales. This woodland belt averages about four kilometres wide and is 100 kilometres long, forming a wildlife corridor that has two important values for wildlife.

Firstly, it is used for safe travel by birds and other wildlife moving - short or long distances - between the North-West plains and the coastal ranges. Every autumn, thousands of birds - including honeyeaters, robins, silvereyes, parrots, cuckoos and currawongs - will leave the cooling tablelands and slopes. They head north, east or west to over-winter in warmer areas, before returning in spring to breed. Each year these birds will travel a thousand kilometres in daily stages, relying on this woodland corridor as a safe refuge from birds of prey, for feeding stops and for overnight roosts.

Secondly this wildlife corridor is an important refuge - in the middle of cleared farming land - for the stay-at-home wildlife, such as echidnas, possums and koalas. The corridor's four kilometre width of woodland means koalas can easily move the short distances between food trees and still find enough food to survive life-threatening events like drought and wildfire.

So, as you drive over rugged Rummerys Hill, spare a thought for the many wild creatures that depend on it as a home and vital resting place in their migrations across the Northern Tablelands. If you own land on the Hill, consider joining the Rummerys Hill Landcare Group where you can learn more about the area's plants, animals and how to best manage for production, drought and fire.

**Text** by Peter King, September 2010. All opinions, suggestions and errors are those of the author. They don't necessarily reflect the advice of GLENRAC or the Rummerys Hill Landcare Group. Comments on this article are welcome at [pt.king@bigpond.com](mailto:pt.king@bigpond.com)

**Satellite mapping** courtesy of NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water