

Distances travelled by feral horses in 'outback' Australia

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Reasons for performing study: The distance travelled by Australian feral horses in an unrestricted environment has not previously been determined. It is important to investigate horse movement in wilderness environments to establish baseline data against which the movement of domestically managed horses and wild equidae can be compared.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to determine the travel dynamics of two groups of feral horses in unrestricted but different wilderness environments.

Methods: Twelve feral horses living in two wilderness environments (2,000 km² vs. 20,000 km²) in outback Australia were tracked for 6.5 consecutive days using custom designed, collar mounted global positioning systems (GPS). Collars were attached after darting and immobilising the horses. The collars were recovered after a minimum of 6.5 days by re-darting the horses. Average daily distance travelled was calculated. Range use and watering patterns of horses were analysed by viewing GPS tracks overlaid on satellite photographs of the study area.

Results: Average distance travelled was 15.9 ± 1.9 km/day (range 8.1-28.3 km/day). Horses were recorded up to 55 km from their watering points and some horses walked for 12 hours to water from feeding grounds. Mean watering frequency was 2.67 days (range 1 - 4 days). Central Australian horses watered less frequently and showed a different range use compared to horses from central Queensland. Central Australian horses walked for long distances in direct lines to patchy food sources whereas central Queensland horses were able to graze close to water sources and moved in a more or less circular pattern around the central water source.

Conclusions: The distances travelled by feral horses were far greater than those previously observed for managed domestic horses and other species of equidae. Feral horses are able to travel long distances and withstand long periods without water allowing them to survive in semi-arid conditions.

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