

# Australian Threatened Species

## Greater Bilby *Macrotis lagotis*

Aboriginal names: Ninu (Pitjantjatjara), Walpajiri (Warpiri), Ahert (Arrernte), Mankarr (Manjilyjarra)

### CONSERVATION STATUS

**COMMONWEALTH: Vulnerable**

(Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999)

**NORTHERN TERRITORY: Endangered**

(Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2000)

**WESTERN AUSTRALIA: Vulnerable** (Wildlife Conservation Act 1950)

**QUEENSLAND: Endangered** (Nature Conservation Act 1992)

**SOUTH AUSTRALIA: Endangered** (National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972)

The Greater Bilby is an iconic threatened marsupial that used to live in much of mainland Australia. These days it is restricted to drier desert areas in the Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA) and to a small corner of southwestern Queensland.

### WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Bilbies are about the size of a small cat and have soft, blue-grey fur with white underparts and a distinctive white-tipped tail. They have long, highly sensitive ears and a pointed snout.

### WHERE DOES IT LIVE?

Most bilbies live in sandy desert areas in spinifex (*Triodia species*) grasslands. They dig large burrows up to 2 metres deep in sandplain country, where they live either singly or in pairs. They also seem to prefer freshly burnt country where there are more plentiful supplies of preferred foods.

### WHAT DOES IT EAT?

Bilbies do most of their foraging at night. They like to eat a mix of plant food (bulbs and seeds) and insects (termites, witchetty grubs and spiders), most of which they dig up with their strong front legs. One of the bilby's favourite plant foods is the bush onion or yalka (*Cyperus bulbosa*) that grows in desert sandplains after fires.



Photo: WWF-Canon/Martin Harvey

### DID YOU KNOW...

The species is culturally important to many Aboriginal people, and was formerly a valuable food resource. Aboriginal people in WA and the NT are involved in a number of on-ground projects, from monitoring bilby populations using traditional tracking methods to fire management work to improve habitat.

# CATS AND FOXES - DEADLY PREDATORS



## WHY ARE CATS AND FOXES A PROBLEM IN AUSTRALIA?

Foxes were introduced into Australia soon after European settlement and are now well established over most of the non-tropical mainland. Foxes are incredibly resourceful and can survive on berries, insects or scavenged carrion in tough times, and in boom times they can hunt and feast on dozens of native reptiles and small mammals in a single day. They are very drought-tolerant and have thrived in desert Australia for over 70 years - preying mainly on rabbits up until Calici virus successfully decimated rabbit populations in the 1990s. Foxes are believed to have contributed to the mainland extinction of Mala, as well as tipping a number of native mammals such as Brush-tailed Bettongs, Black-footed Rock-wallabies, Golden Bandicoots and Western Quolls further toward extinction.

Cat arrival is believed to predate European settlement in Australia, with the first thought to have become established from shipwrecks off the coast of WA. Since then cats have invaded every environment in Australia, including many offshore islands. Cats feed on a huge range of live prey including birds, reptiles and small mammals. In desert environments cats survive the extreme summer temperatures by sheltering in burrows dug by bilbies or dingoes, or by hiding in hollows in trees.



Fox eating baited rabbit. Photo: Brent Johnson

Feral cats have been associated with the demise of a number of native animals including Numbats, Burrowing Bettongs, Bilbies and Malleefowl.

## WHY ARE THEY A THREAT TO BILBIES?

Cats and foxes successfully prey on both young and adult bilbies, particularly after large wildfire events when bilbies have to range further from home burrows to search for food. It is quite a sobering thing to be walking alongside Aboriginal people following the tracks of a bilby only to be shown tracks of a fox picking up the scent and trailing after the bilby. A little further along are the scuffle marks and the remains of fur or a forlorn tail-tip.

By looking for residual hair from native mammals in the scats of cats and foxes it is possible to measure the impact they are having on our native species. Recent research work in the Tanami Desert has shown bilby fur in roughly 3 per cent of the cat scats examined. It seems remaining bilby populations in some desert areas are able to persist alongside fairly high levels of foxes and cats, probably as a result of favourable fire regimes in the region. These regimes can create enough high-quality food resources so bilbies do not need to spend long hours above ground looking for food.

## WHAT'S BEING DONE?

There are many recovery projects in progress. These include breeding bilbies - for release into fenced areas or predator-free islands - at Venus Bay and Roxby Downs in SA, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in the NT, Shark Bay and Dryandra Woodland in WA, and Currawinya in QLD.

Aboriginal people in the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts in WA and the NT's Tanami Desert are working alongside scientists and Land Council staff to survey and monitor wild bilby populations. WA's Department of Conservation and Land Management is also developing fox and cat baiting methods and running baiting trials in several bilby habitat areas across the country.

The National Bilby Recovery Team, chaired by the Threatened Species Network, oversees much of the national effort and provides input into project design and management planning. In addition the Australian Government recently launched National Bilby Day, which will be held annually on the second Sunday in September to raise awareness about the plight of bilbies and other threatened species.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Be a responsible pet owner: make sure your pets are desexed and do not let them roam at night or wander into areas where they may chase native animals
- Contact your Threatened Species Network Coordinator to find out more about bilby recovery programs.

### CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

Colleen O'Malley  
Arid Rangelands Coordinator  
Threatened Species Network  
**Ph:** (08) 8952 1541  
**Email:** rangelands@wwf.org.au  
**Visit:** www.wwf.org.au/tsn

- Arid Recovery Project  
www.aridrecovery.org.au
- Qld Save the Bilby Fund  
www.easterbilby.com.au/save\_bilby/fundraising.asp
- SA DEH - www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/bilby.html

Other web sites:

- www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/bilby.html
- www.calm.wa.gov.au/schools/ecoed\_programs\_tsp.html
- www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/bilby.html
- www.epa.qld.gov.au/nature\_conservation/biodiversity/endangered\_wildlife/
- www.nt.gov.au/ipe/pwcnt/mammals/greater\_bilby\_vu.pdf

You can also find out more information about Australia's threatened species by visiting [www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened](http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened) or contacting the Department of the Environment and Heritage Community Information Unit on free-call 1800 803 772.

