

Australian Threatened Species

Julia Creek Dunnart *Sminthopsis douglasi*

CONSERVATION STATUS

COMMONWEALTH: Endangered

(Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999)

QUEENSLAND: Endangered (Nature Conservation Act 1992)

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The Julia Creek Dunnart is a small, carnivorous marsupial resembling a large mouse, with brownish fur on its back and a white underbelly. Like others in its family, it has large eyes, narrow feet and a pointed snout, but is distinguished by a prominent facial stripe and dark hairy rings around the eyes and ears. Its long, tapering tail is slightly shorter than the combined head and body length.

WHERE DOES IT LIVE?

The Julia Creek Dunnart is restricted to the Mitchell Grass Downs country of northwest Queensland. It gets its name from the fact that until recently, all known individuals had been found within a short radius of Julia Creek and Richmond. During dry conditions, especially when ground cover is sparse, the Dunnart may shelter in cracks in the ground. After rain it likes the protection of low plant communities.

WHAT DOES IT EAT?

This nocturnal species has short, sharp teeth ideal for crunching insects, centipedes, spiders, scorpions and skinks. These invertebrates contain a high percentage of water, which means the Dunnart does not need to drink often - a great adaptation for life in arid conditions.

DID YOU KNOW...

- This little marsupial only weighs between 40 and 70 grams, but it is the largest member of its genus
- During short-term food shortages it can go into a kind of hibernation known as 'torpor'
- It may have the ability to detect rain through its keen sense of smell. It has been known to travel up to 10 kilometres after local rain, almost always toward the rainfall area
- The species is capable of hunting lizards and mice, and young Dunnarts can catch their own insect dinners from just 10 weeks of age
- Up to 8 young are born in each litter. A newborn Dunnart weighs just 15 milligrams, is only 4 millimetres long, and breathes through its skin! The mother carries her young in a tiny fold of belly skin that works as a pouch.



Photo: Viewfinder Australia Photo Library

PRICKLY ACACIA: A MAJOR THREAT!



WHY IS PRICKLY ACACIA A PROBLEM IN AUSTRALIA?

Prickly acacia (*Acacia nilotica*) is native to the tropics and subtropics of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia), through to Pakistan, India and Burma. It was introduced to Queensland in the late 1890s to provide shade and food for livestock. It was declared a noxious weed in the state in 1957 and is now regarded as one of the worst weeds in Australia. Around 7 million hectares of arid and semi-arid country is infested in Queensland alone. Easily spread and highly adaptable, it has the potential to invade most of northern Australia, including the majority of Queensland and the Northern Territory, and much of Western Australia.

Growing in thorny thickets, this thirsty weed robs native pastures of water and its dense canopy prevents the growth of most native plants beneath. The plant reduces the productivity of grasslands, restricts stock access to watercourses and interferes with mustering.

Prickly acacia threatens the environment by turning grasslands into impenetrable, thorny scrub and by replacing grasses with less stable, short-lived plants. In the Mitchell Grass Downs it poses a threat to 25 rare and threatened animal species and 2 endangered plant communities.



Photo: N. March (QLD NR&M)

WHY IS PRICKLY ACACIA A THREAT TO THE DUNNART?

The Julia Creek Dunnart and many other small mammals are at risk from the prickly acacia as it kills off the grasslands native animals depend on for shelter and food. Climatic factors, introduced predators (especially cats) and over-grazing may have also contributed to the species' decline.

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

A recovery team of members of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, Queensland Department of Primary Industries, Queensland Department of Natural Resources, La Trobe University, Queensland Wildlife Preservation Society and Agforce is working to protect the dunnart and its habitat. Among other activities, the team has negotiated voluntary conservation agreements on private land and conducts surveys to identify critical Dunnart habitat and distribution.

Determined efforts are being made to combat the spread of prickly acacia. The National Prickly Acacia Management Group is overseeing the implementation of a national strategy. Efforts centre on preventing the spread of the weed outside the National Prickly Acacia Containment Line, defined in 1999, and minimising impacts within it.

In addition the Australian Government recently launched its new four-year, \$40 million *Defeating the Weeds Menace* program, which takes a national approach to tackling our most significant weeds.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Private landholders are the front-line defence against prickly acacia. They can prevent seed dispersal by stock by:
 - Running sheep instead of cattle in infested paddocks
 - Preventing cattle from browsing on seeding plants
 - Quarantining cattle before transport
 - Clearing mustering lanes, fencing off dense infestations and clearing around watering points
 - Asking local councils or state/territory weed management agencies for advice on control methods
- Gardeners and horticulturalists can help reduce Australia's weed problem by not buying invasive plants. Check with your local nursery for a list of potential weeds and alternative local native species.

CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

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Weeds Australia
Visit: www.weeds.org.au/noxious.htm

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

- Recovery plan for the Julia Creek Dunnart: www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/recovery/juliacreek-dunnart/
- CRC for Australian Weed Management: http://www.weeds.crc.org.au/documents/wmg_prickly_acacia.pdf
- Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines: <http://www.nrm.qld.gov.au/factsheets/pdf/pest/PP9.pdf#search=:prickly%20acacia>

