

Greater Bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*)

Conservation Status

NATIONAL: Vulnerable (*Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*)

Description

The Bilby is an important part of traditional indigenous culture in the deserts of Central Australia and was a valuable food source in the past. The large rabbit like ears of the Greater Bilby have also made it a popular Australian icon at Easter.



Bilbies have long pointed snouts and compact bodies, measuring between 29 and 55 cm in length. They carry their crested black and white tail like a stiff banner when running. Bilbies belong to the family of ground-dwelling marsupials known as Bandicoots, distinguished from other Bandicoots by their larger ears, long silky fur and longer tails.

Distribution

A hundred years ago, Bilbies were common in many habitats throughout about 70% of Australia, from the dry interior to temperate coastal regions. Changes to the Bilby's habitat have seen their numbers greatly reduced. Bilbies now only survive in small isolated populations in the driest and least fertile regions of arid Australia. Fragmented populations are found in mulga shrublands and spinifex grasslands in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory; in the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts and the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia; and the Mitchell Grasslands of southwest Queensland.

Diet

Bilbies are active at night, sheltering in their burrows during the daytime. They use their strong forelimbs and claws to build extensive tunnels and to dig for food. One Bilby may make up to twelve burrows within its home range to use for shelter. Feeding areas are identifiable by numerous, scattered excavations up to 10 cm deep. They have long slender tongues that they use to eat a specialised diet of seeds, insects, bulbs, fruit and fungi. They feed mainly on disturbance promoted plants and are therefore dependent on fire.

Breeding

Bilbies live alone or in pairs, sometimes accompanied by a recently independent young. They have a backwards-opening pouch with eight teats. Normally two young are born at a time, remaining in the pouch for about 80 days.

Threats

There are many threats contributing to the dramatic decline of Bilby populations. The greatest being habitat loss and change, and competition with introduced animals. As agricultural activities extended over the more fertile regions of Australia the Bilby's habitat has changed rapidly. Changing fire patterns also affect the type and abundance of food plants. Domestic stock like cattle and sheep eat the Bilby's food sources, while rabbits compete with Bilbies for their food and burrows. Also foxes and feral cats prey on them.

Recovery Plan

The Bilby is protected throughout Australia where it occurs. The national Recovery Plan focuses on: managing the Bilby's remaining habitat; captive breeding; monitoring existing populations and re-establishing Bilbies in areas where they previously occurred.

There are reintroduced populations in: Currawinya National Park (Queensland); Scotia Sanctuary (New South Wales); Arid Recovery at Roxby Downs, Venus Bay Conservation Park, Thistle Island, Yookamurra Sanctuary (South Australia); Dryandra Woodland, François Peron National Park (Western Australia).

References & More Information

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities 2009. *Greater Bilby (Macrotis lagotis)*. Commonwealth of Australia. <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/bilby.html>

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Friend T., Morris K. & van Weenen J. 2008. *Macrotis lagotis*. In: IUCN 2010. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2010.3. www.iucnredlist.org

Strahan R (Ed) 1995. *Mammals of Australia*. The Australian Museum Trust. Reed New Holland, Australia.