

Woylie (*Bettongia penicillata*)

Conservation Status

NATIONAL: Endangered (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999)

Description

The common name for the Woylie has changed over the years. In the early days of European settlement of Australia the Woylie was called the Rat Kangaroo, then the Brush-tailed Bettong. Woylie is derived from “Walyu”, the name used by the Nyungar people of Western Australia. We use that name to help us remember that all Woylies are now descended from the 200 that remained in Western Australia in the 1960s.



The Woylie is a tiny member of the kangaroo family. It has the shape of a kangaroo, but is only about the size of a guinea pig. As the name suggests, it has a long, flexible, brush-like tail, which is used to carry nesting material from one place to another. When asleep in the nest the Woylie will often wrap its tail around its neck for warmth.

Distribution

Woylies once lived right across southern Australia – from the western slopes of the mountains in NSW and Victoria, across South Australia and into Western Australia. By the 1970s, its distribution had been reduced to three locations in Western Australia: Perup forest, Tutanning Nature Reserve and Dryandra Woodland.

Behaviour

Woylies are only active at night, sleeping all day in a nest built of soft grasses. The nests are beautifully camouflaged under shrubs, in tussocks of grass and under the broad leaves of the Yacca plant.

Woylies are bold and aggressive and, like their bigger Kangaroo cousins, demand their rights if they meet another adult while searching for food. Woylies challenge each other by lying on their side and kicking at each other with much guttural arguing.

Diet

During the night Woylies will cover many kilometres exploring, looking for food and mates. They eat a mixture of roots, tubers, fungi and insects. They have an excellent sense of smell and use this for locating their food and finding their way around.

Woylies also eat many species of seeds. If there are more seeds than they can eat, or if the seeds are too hard or large, they are collected in the mouth and carried away in the cheek pouches to be buried. A shallow hole is dug with the forepaws and the seeds spat into the hole. Then, with a backward hop the hind legs push dirt over the seeds. It is believed that this behaviour may be important in the life cycle of many Australian native plants. When food is in short supply the buried seeds, which by this time have sprouted, are uncovered and eaten – but seeds not found will germinate and grow into new plants.

Not only do Woylies help native plants spread their seeds, but they also help to control the insects that attack plants like Eucalypts and Acacias. In late spring and early summer many insects (moths and beetles) emerge from cocoons and holes in both living and dead timber. Woylies love to eat these insects, jumping up to catch them in their forearms and munching them with relish.

Threats

The greatest threat to the Woylie is predation by feral cats and foxes.

Recovery Plan

Since the 1970's the Woylie has been successfully reintroduced to Warrawong Sanctuary in SA, Yookamurra Sanctuary in SA and Scotia Sanctuary in NSW. Sadly, the survival of the Woylie is still not guaranteed, as the Western Australian population has suffered a serious decline in recent years and the species has once again been listed as endangered. No one yet knows what has caused this recent decline, although an increase the feral cats is suspected to be the main cause. In 2010, 40 Woylies were transferred to a 420 ha predator-proof enclosure in Perup Sanctuary in South West WA. It is hoped that this population will grow to 400 individuals by 2020.

References & More Information

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts 2010. *Bettongia penicillata ogilbyi* in *Species Profile and Threats Database*.

<http://www.environment.gov.au/sprat>.

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