

Dibbler

Parantechinus apicalis (Gray, 1842)

Size

Head and body length
140–145 (142.5) mm

Tail length

95–115 (105) mm

Weight

60–100 g in males
40–75 g in females

Subspecies

None recognised

Description

Small rat-size dasyurid. Brownish-grey above, freckled with white, and greyish-white tinged with yellow below. Dibblers are readily distinguished by a white ring around the eye, a tapering hairy tail, and the freckled appearance of its fur. Being a marsupial, females have a shallow pouch

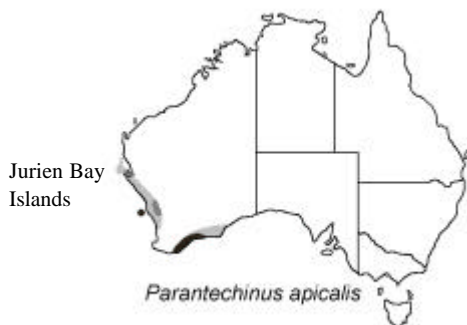


Photo. Babs & Bert Wells/Department of Conservation and Land Management

Other common names

Freckled antechinus, speckled marsupial mouse

Distribution



Key To Map: Black = present distribution;
Mid-grey = historic (> 30 years); Pale-grey
= Late-Holocene sub-fossil

Sub-fossil distribution extends along the west coast from Perth north to Shark Bay and along the south coast from Torndirrup to Israelite Bay and as far inland as Peak Charles. They were presumed to be extinct in the wild for 63 years until an individual was captured in 1967 in a trap set for Honey Possums at Cheyne Beach, east of Albany, Western Australia. In 1985, dibblers were also discovered living on two small islands, Boullanger and Whitlock, off Jurien Bay, on the west coast of Western Australia.

The dibbler is currently known from Whitlock and Boullanger Islands, Jurien Bay, and Fitzgerald River National Park on the south coast. It has also been recorded in Torndirrup National Park and Waychinicup National Park in recent years. Captive-bred dibblers from Whitlock and Boullanger Island stock have been introduced to nearby Escape Island in Jurien Bay, Western Australia.

Habitat

In Fitzgerald River National Park, dibblers have usually been trapped in dense, long unburnt vegetation with a thick litter layer and sandy soils, although some have been trapped from vegetation regrowth approximately 10 years post fire. Dibblers typically occupy heath and mallee-heath vegetation communities, where they have been located on the south coast of Western Australia.

The habitat on Boullanger Island and Whitlock Island is very different from that along the south coast, and comprises low, dense coastal vegetation with an abundance of seabird

burrows. The island habitat, however, may not be typical of recent mainland habitat for dibblers. The presence of flowering shrubs may also be an important habitat requirement.

Behaviour

Dibblers have been reported to be semi-arboreal (pertaining to trees), and love to forage amongst dense leaf litter. Although nocturnally active, they are now believed to also be active during daylight hours, with an increase of activity at dawn and dusk. Evidence from the islands supports the contention that dibblers use burrows for shelter.

Diet

Dibblers have been found to feed on insects (such as moths), spiders, some reptiles, and on berries.

Breeding

Dibblers breed once every year, during autumn (March to April), and females can carry as many as eight young at one time in their pouch. When born, the young are only two millimetres in length. The young remain dependent on their mother for three to four months, and disperse during September and October each year. A common feature of some dasyurid marsupials is the phenomenon of a male die-off after the mating season, where males will breed and then die afterwards. Although this has been reported for dibblers on Boullanger and Whitlock Islands before, it does not always occur, and captive males have survived to breed for a second season.

Threatening processes

On the mainland, feral cats have been known to kill dibblers, and it is highly likely that foxes do so as well. Other possible threats that may have contributed to their decline include land clearing of important vegetation such as *Banksia* woodlands and kwongan heath, dieback disease that can alter the vegetation structure of a plant community, and frequent fire that may reduce thick vegetation.

On the islands, there are no feral cats, foxes, or dieback disease, and the vegetation has not been cleared, or burnt for a long time. However, Boullanger and Whitlock Islands both have introduced house mice, which may compete with dibblers for food.

Conservation status

2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species	Endangered
Western Australian Wildlife Conservation Act	Threatened
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act	Threatened (Endangered)

Management

- Protection of habitat from frequent and extensive fire as well as dieback.
- Exotic predator control on mainland sites.
- The prevention of feral predator introduction, land clearing, or fires on the islands.
- Monitor known island and mainland populations.
- Surveys of predicted sites of occurrence.
- Captive breeding for translocation.
- Research the genetic and taxonomic status of island and mainland populations.

Other interesting facts

- A single mating may continue for several hours.

Selected references

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Woolley, P.A. (1995). Southern Dibbler. In R. Strahan (Ed.) *The Mammals of Australia*. Australian Museum and Reed Books. Chatswood, NSW.

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Website links

http://www.naturebase.net/projects/west_shield.html

<http://www.ea.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/action/marsupials/16.html>

<http://www.perthzoo.wa.gov.au/dibbler.html>