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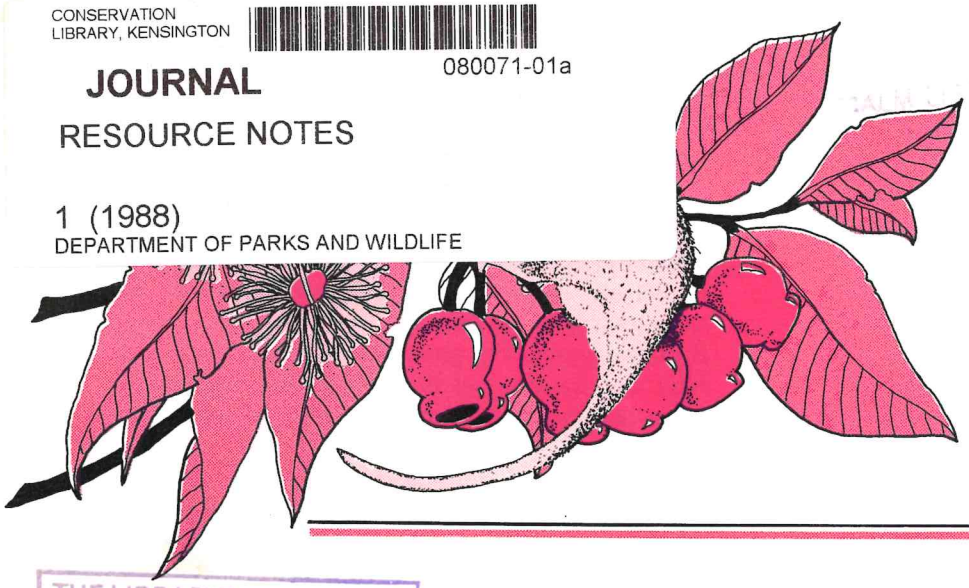

Resource Notes

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WESTERN AUSTRALIA

MARSUPIALS IN THE FORESTS OF SOUTH-WEST W.A.

We do not often see the marsupials that live in the jarrah forests of Western Australia. Most of them are nocturnal: that is they only come out during the night. Some species, such as the grey kangaroo, are active in the late evening and early morning, but may also be seen during the day. One species, the numbat, is entirely diurnal: active only during the day.

Some general points about observing animals: First you must be quiet. Any noise will usually scare animals away, especially sharp noises like the slamming of a car door.

Secondly you must concentrate when looking for animals. Animals usually spot you first and stand still watching you. They are therefore difficult to see. Because most marsupials are nocturnal and otherwise difficult to observe by day, you most often detect their presence from the signs that they leave behind. Watch out for these signs and learn how to interpret them.

Nocturnal animals have special light sensitive eyes which enable them to move around and feed in the dark. To find these animals at night, we make use of this special adaptation.

When a beam of light falls on the animals' eyes, they glow, reflecting the beam. Each species has its own distinctive 'eyeshine' colour or intensity. For example; Western Grey Kangaroo has red eyeshine, the Brush-tailed Possum has orange-red eyeshine, feral cats have yellowish-green. However, eyeshine colour and intensity does vary with the angle of the beam of light.

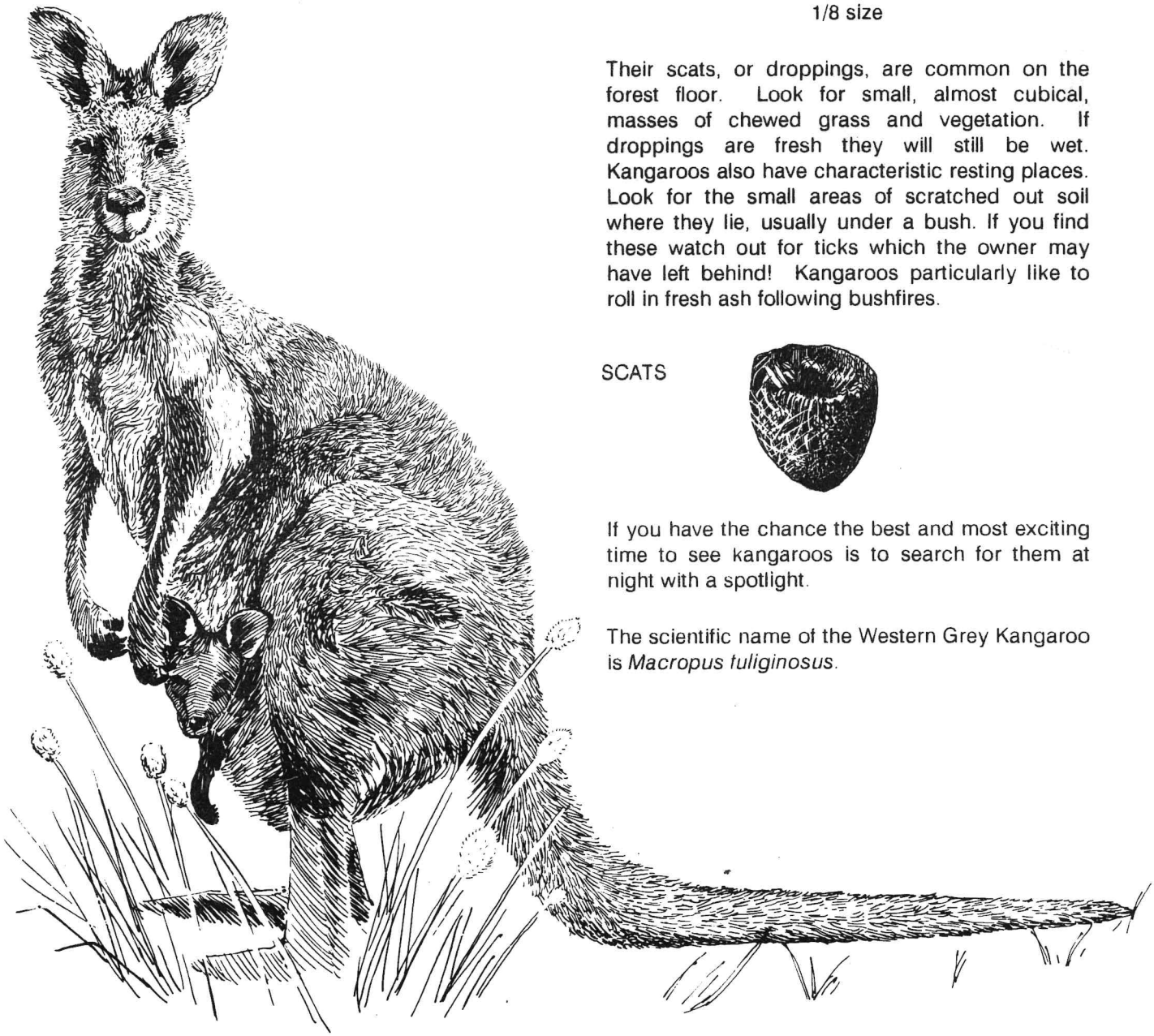
Searching for nocturnal animals requires a strong light. Hold the torch in front of you, at about eye-level, look along the beam as you slowly move it across the vegetation. When the light falls on an animal, the first thing you will notice is the eye-shine, then slowly as your own eyes adjust you should be able to determine the shape, size and type of animal. Next observe where it is, in a tree, on the ground, what it is doing? climbing, feeding, resting?, and is it alone? (At certain times of the year, pairs of animals may be more common).

Many nocturnal animals stop very still for some time when first spot-lit. This gives you an opportunity to observe them, though you may need to use binoculars to see them in detail.

The following notes will help you to observe the marsupials of the jarrah forest, or at least detect their presence.

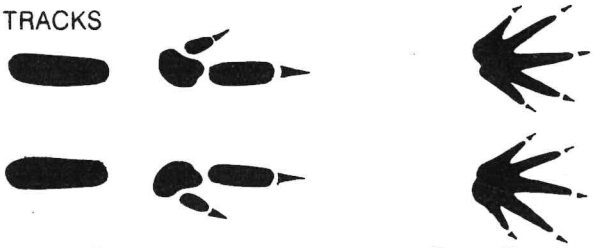
THE WESTERN GREY KANGAROO

The Western Grey Kangaroo is the largest animal in the forest, standing close to 2 metres high on its haunches. Look for it in the bush areas near farmland, or other grassy areas,or in areas of open woodland. They particularly like to graze in places which have been recently burned and have lush new green growth. You can best spot them in the late afternoon, or in the early morning before it gets too hot. During the day they lie up in the shade under a bush. Kangaroos often appear in family groups: a large 'boomer', and a slightly smaller mother, with a smaller joey by her side. The joeys have usually left their mother's pouch by January or February.



If you are unlucky and do not spot any kangaroos you will surely find signs of them. Look for their footprints in sand or moist soil. When the animals move slowly on all fours the tail leaves a characteristic drag mark in the sand. Try to work out what the animals have been doing from the signs. For example, imprints of only the hind feet means that the animal was hopping, if there are imprints of the forefeet and tail it was walking.

TRACKS



Hind Foot Front Foot

1/8 size

Their scats, or droppings, are common on the forest floor. Look for small, almost cubical, masses of chewed grass and vegetation. If droppings are fresh they will still be wet. Kangaroos also have characteristic resting places. Look for the small areas of scratched out soil where they lie, usually under a bush. If you find these watch out for ticks which the owner may have left behind! Kangaroos particularly like to roll in fresh ash following bushfires.

SCATS

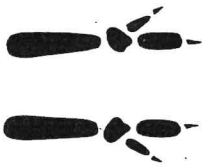
If you have the chance the best and most exciting time to see kangaroos is to search for them at night with a spotlight.

The scientific name of the Western Grey Kangaroo is *Macropus tuliginosus*.

THE WESTERN BRUSH WALLABY

The Western Brush Wallaby is smaller than the kangaroo, and is a grey with a long blackish tail. When it moves it jumps in a more crouched position than the kangaroo with the belly close to the ground. It usually occurs in ones and twos, occasionally in threes, and is best seen at the same times as the kangaroos.

TRACKS
- 1/8 size



Hind foot

Front foot

SCATS

It is common in open forest, and does not like dense undergrowth. It feeds on grasses and herbs. The scats of the Brush Wallaby are similar to those of the kangaroo but smaller, and difficult to distinguish from those of young kangaroos. Its footprints are also very similar to the kangaroo's.

The scientific name of the Western Brush Wallaby is *Macropus irma*.

COMMON BRUSHTAIL POSSUM

The Common Brushtail Possum is the largest possum in our forests; usually about the size of a large domestic cat. It is grey, with a white-tipped black tail, though individuals are sometimes entirely black. It has a 'foxy' face with a pink nose and large upright ears.

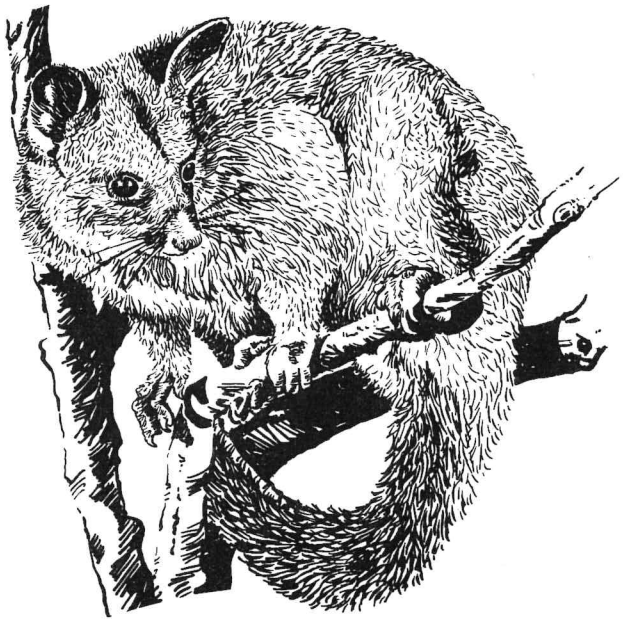
The Brushtail Possum is entirely nocturnal, spending the day in the hallow limbs or trunk of a tree, often high above the ground. At night possums come down to the ground to feed on shrubs. Later they return to a tree to feed on leaves. Whilst feeding on the ground possums are at their most vulnerable, and often fall prey to foxes.

Brushtail Possums are not very common in our forests. If they are present their 'tracks' are clearly visible in the trees. Look for them particularly on large slightly leaning marri trees. If a possum is living in the tree there will be a distinct double 'track' on the trunk where the bark has been flaked off by the possum's claws as it climbs the tree. Other possum signs are small oblong brownish scats on top of logs.

If you are very observant you may also notice 'marker' trees, usually small sapling where the possum has scratched and bitten the bark near the base and left its scent to mark its territory.

Possums are best seen at night by spotlight.

The scientific name of the Common Brushtail Possum is *Trichosurus vulpecula*.



TRACKS - 1/4 size

Hind foot

Front foot

SCATS 0.5 - 1.0 cm diameter

THE YELLOW-FOOTED ANTECHINUS OR MARDO

The Mardo is a small insect-eating (carnivorous) marsupial. Most people have never heard of, and will probably never see this small animal. Mardos feed during the day as well as at night, but they tend to stay in dense creek-side thickets.

The Mardo has no proper pouch and the young, four to six in number, are carried clinging to the fur on the underside of their mother. When the young grow too large to be carried, they are left in a nest, usually in a hollow log or tree, or inside a dead blackboy. Nest boxes put up in trees in the forest for birds are often occupied by Mardos.

Mardos are most common in parts of the forest which have not been burnt for a ling time: places where there is deep leaf litter, and numerous insects.

The scientific name of the Mardo is *Antechinus flavipes*.

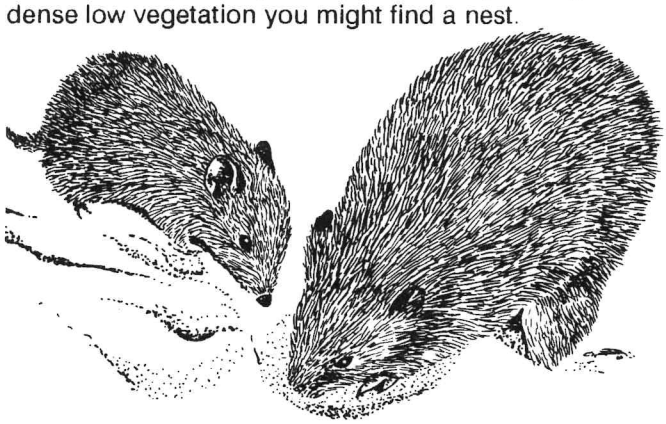
TRACKS
Full size

SCATS
< 0.5cm diameter

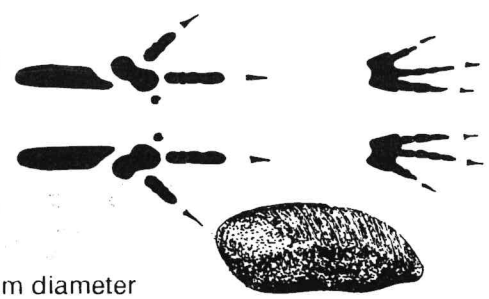
THE SOUTHERN BROWN BANDICOOT

THE Southern Brown Bandicoot, or Quenda, is a small animal, the size of a cat. It is sandy brown, with small ears, a short rat-like tail, and a long nose.

Bandicoots live where there is dense vegetation, which gives them cover at ground level. During the day they sleep in nests made by scraping leaves into a pile. If you search carefully amongst dense low vegetation you might find a nest.



TRACKS
- Half size



SCATS
1.0 - 2.0 cm diameter

Bandicoots move on all fours, and have long sharp claws which they use to dig for food. They eat bulbs and tubers, as well as insects and small lizards Bandicoots make conical diggings, often visible in sandy soils. If you look carefully near such diggings you can find clues to what the animal was eating, e.g. leaves of bulbs, pieces of insect, etc.

The scats of bandicoots are oblong with insect remains being most obvious. Bandicoots are not often seen, their characteristic diggings are the most obvious sign of their presence.

The scientific name for the Southern Brown Bandicoot is *Isoodon obesulus*.

A useful reference is "A Field Guide to Tracks and Traces of Australian Animals" by R.G.B.Morrison published by Rigby, 1981.
Illustrations of tracks and scats after "Mammal tracks and signs" by B.Triggs, Oxford University Press 1984.

- by Dr Per Christensen

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