

Greater Stick-nest Rat (Wopilkara) *Leporillus conditor* (Sturt, 1848)

Size

Head and body length
170–260 (220) mm

Tail length

145–180 (170) mm

Weight

0.18–0.45 (0.35) kg

Subspecies

None recognised.



Photo: Jiri Lochman

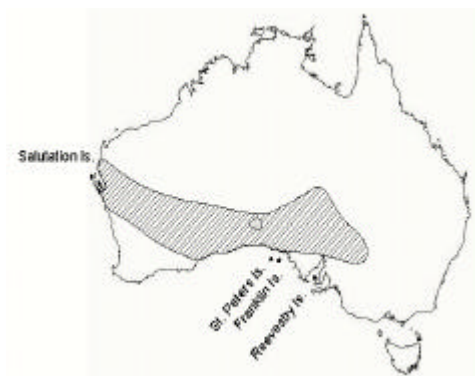
Description

Fluffy fur that is yellowish-brown to grey above and creamy white below. The tail is grey-brown above and whitish below. The tail is usually shorter than the head and body and has a slight terminal brush of hairs. The ears are large, rounded and dark, greyish-brown in colour. The hindfeet have distinctive white markings on the upper surface. The head is large and blunt with large eyes. Animals rest in a hunched posture like that of a rabbit.

Other common names

House-building rat, large stick-nest rat, stick-nest rat, Franklin Island stick-nest rat, Franklin Island house-building rat. Aboriginal Names include Wopilkara, Ulri, Kuranta, Karnanyuru, Kohl.

Distribution



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

The greater stick-nest rat was formerly distributed through southern, semi-arid Australia from the west coast of Western Australia (Shark Bay) to western New South Wales, including the Nullarbor Plain, the Flinders Ranges, the southern margins of Lake Eyre and the Murray-Darling Plains.

The recent natural distribution of the greater stick-nest rat is restricted to West and East Franklin Islands, off the South Australian coast. In addition, captive bred individuals have been successfully reintroduced onto St Peter Island (Nuyts Archipelago Conservation

Park, South Australia), Reevesby Island (Sir Joseph Banks Group Conservation Park, South Australia), Salutation Island and Heirisson Prong (Shark Bay, Western Australia), and a fenced area at Roxby Downs (South Australia).

Habitat

This species occupies semi-arid to arid habitats where there is little or no fresh water. It inhabits perennial shrublands, particularly with succulent and semi-succulent plant species. On Franklin Island the rats use dense shrubs, bird nesting burrows, and crevices among rocks for shelter, as well as construction of the characteristic stick nests. On Salutation Island, stick nests are constructed under *Acacia* shrubs.

Behaviour

A major characteristic of this species is the nests it builds which may reach up to one metre high and one and a half metres in diameter. Rats on Franklin Island however, do not often build nests. The rats usually build the nest around a shrub, which eventually becomes part of the structure. The nest is constructed from branches, and sometimes stones, dragged to the site and the centre is lined with grass or other soft material. All tunnels lead from this to the perimeter of the nest. Very large nests may contain between 10 and 20 animals, with successive generations adding to or modifying the nest. Pairs establish strong bonds, and individuals become aggressive to unfamiliar members. Unlike many native rodents, the greater stick-nest rat is not strictly nocturnal, and some day activity has been noted.

Diet

The greater stick-nest rat is exclusively herbivorous. On Franklin Island, they have been found to feed on the leaves and fruits of succulent plants such as pig-face (*Carpobrotus rossii*), nitre-bush (*Nitraria schoberi*) and some grasses.

Breeding

Breeding may occur at any time of year but there seems to be a peak in autumn and winter. On Franklin Island, rats breed in March and April. The gestation period is about 44 days after which one to four young are born. The young attach themselves to the mothers' teats where they are dragged around beneath her for a month before they are weaned and become independent.

Threatening processes

Habitat destruction, initially by sheep and later compounded by rabbits, further aggravated by drought, has brought about a decline in the species. Predation by native and introduced predators most likely contributed to local extinction in the presence of one or more of these threatening processes.

Conservation status

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

Management in Western Australia

- Exotic predator control on release sites.
- Continue captive breeding program for translocations to mainland sites.
- Monitoring programs for all populations.

Other interesting facts

- The greater stick-nest rat is a very docile rodent and rarely attempts to bite when handled by humans.
- The explorer Sturt recorded finding a rat's nest beneath the nest of a brown hawk, and wrote that 'it is difficult to surmise what pact or understanding reconciled these ill-matched householders'.

Selected references

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Website links

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

http://www.cse.csiro.au/research/Program2/SL/threatened_species/gsnr.htm

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

<http://www.ea.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/action/rodents/rodap3.html#stick>