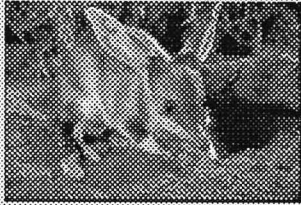


from the maker's of the wanderer's rest

The Bilby

(Macrotis lagotis)



The Bilby, Ninu or Dalgyte, is one of Australia's most attractive mammals. Its hard to be impartial when talking about the Bilby, and its "cute" features have captured the hearts of many Australians. Having personally seen this beautiful mammal in the wild, I admit to being quite enamoured with it, and its poise, grace and attractiveness seem to snare almost every person who is lucky enough to see one.

The Bilby belongs to a family known as the bandicoots (*Peramelidae*) and was previously called the Rabbit-eared Bandicoot. The Bilby is best described by Strahan (1995). "The long, soft, blue-grey fur and delicate features of the Bilby seem out of character with the harsh deserts it now occupies". The Bilby is also characterised by its large ears, long pointed snout and black and white tail that is carried like a stiff banner during its cantering gait (Strahan, 1995). The Bilby is a strange mixture of traits, resulting in what would appear to be an awkward looking animal, but nothing could be further from the truth. As Finlayson commented the species has carried "a number of structural peculiarities to grotesque lengths yet manages to reconcile them all in a surprisingly harmonious and even beautiful, whole" (Strahan, 1995). The Bilby can weigh between 800g and 2.5 kg, and can be as long as 55cm. The prominent tail can also be up to 29 cm in length (Flannery, 1990).

The forelimbs of the Bilby are well developed, and coupled with its strong claws, it is superbly equipped for burrowing. Bilbies dig spiralling burrows, which may go down as far as 1.8 m, and be as long as 3 m (Flannery, 1990). Burrows are usually on clay pans or soft, deep sands (Flannery, 1990). Bilbies are well equipped to cope with the arid climate in which they live, and can derive most of their water from the food they eat. This food includes seeds, bulbs, fruit, fungi, insects and sometimes small vertebrates (Flannery, 1990). Bilbies are strictly nocturnal, coming out late into the night, although the author and other colleagues have seen them quite early in the evening. Bilbies have no more than two young at a time, and usually give birth between March and May. The gestation period is 21 days (Flannery, 1990). Like other marsupials, the Bilby has a backward opening pouch with eight teats, in which young are raised for about 80 days (Strahan, 1995).

Perhaps the saddest part of the Bilby story is its range reduction and subsequent endangerment. The Bilby was once common over most of the continent, south of about 18 degrees S (Flannery, 1990). It was one of the most common mammals in WA, at the turn of the century, and John Gilbert noted that it was "tolerably abundant over the whole of the grass district of the interior where it is exclusively confined". The Bilby even extended into the Toodyay, York region of the WA wheatbelt (only about 150km from Perth), where it was described as abundant. Bilbies were once in every Australian state and territory except Victoria and Tasmania, but are now gone from all but Queensland, WA and the Northern Territory.

In WA, they have disappeared from the vast woodlands of the wheatbelt, where they

once numbered in their hundreds or possibly even thousands. They are now confined to the harsh climes of the eastern desert and Kimberley, including the Warburton Ranges, Dampier Land, the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts and have recently been discovered in parts of the Pilbara. The sudden, massive and widespread contraction in range of this species, in just 90 or so years, is attributed to several factors. These include competition with the introduced rabbit, clearance of land for agriculture (undoubtedly a major factor in the WA wheatbelt), changes in fire regimes, livestock grazing and perhaps most notably the introduction of the fox and cat. Recent evidence would seem to suggest that cats and foxes are major predators of the medium-sized mammal fauna in WA, and areas which have been baited by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) to exclude foxes, have seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of rare and endangered medium-sized mammals (such as the Woylie in the south-west forests). It would appear that foxes and cats have a lot to answer for, but we must remember that they are only part of the equation, and we have a lot of responsibility to accept for land clearance and destruction of the Bilby's habitat.

On a positive note, however, the Bilby is not as endangered as many other mammals in WA, and appears to be holding its own in the state's north. There have also been successful breeding attempts and re-introductions by CALM and the Northern Territory Conservation Commission.

References

Western Wildlife 4.1.
The Bilby

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Mammals
