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QUOKKA



SHORT-TAILED WALLABY

SCIENTIFIC NAME: Setonix brachyurus

IDENTIFICATION: Grizzled grey-brown above with a tinge of rufous, and the underparts are lighter in colour. Fur long, thick, coarse. Ears very short and rounded, snout unfurred. Tail short, tapered, and close-haired. No definite body markings.

Head and body length 435–540 mm (males) 400–500 mm (females)

Tail length 260–310 mm (males) 245–285 mm (females)

Weight 2.7–4.2 kg (males) 2.7–3.5 kg (females)

HABITAT: On Rottnest Island the quokka is widely dispersed. The quokka survives on the island in a harsh, seasonally arid habitat where the largest populations exist around the lakes and settlement areas. The quokkas tend to inhabit areas that provide refuge such as low dense heath, low forest (*Acacia rostellifera*) and the salt marsh and lakeside communities. The mainland quokka lives in the Darling Range and south-west regions of Western Australia, mostly inhabiting densely vegetated swamps and sometimes tea-tree thickets on sandy soils along creek systems and dense heath on slopes.

DIET: Studies of the diet in the northern Jarrah forests found the quokka to be a browser, with peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*) and *Thomasia* species being dominant vegetation items in their diet. Plant quality on Rottnest Island progressively declines in water and nitrogen content through the summer. By the end of summer, animals become anaemic and many die, those populations farthest from sources of fresh water suffer the highest mortality. Seasonal debility arises from insufficient drinking water for metabolic and thermoregulatory needs which, in turn, leads animals to eat more succulent but less nutritious plants, thus adding the effects of nitrogen deficiency to those of dehydration.

STATUS: Vulnerable

INTERESTING FACTS:

- The Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh referred to Rottnest Island as 'Rottenest' (rat nest) after the rat-like animals he saw there and which we now call quokkas.
- During the 1920s, quokkas were considered pests of pine plantations and other farming practices near Perth and were consequently hunted and poisoned.

