

Exciting desert discoveries, but . . .

Futile search for the Rufous Hare-wallaby

by ANDREW BURBIDGE

IN 1930-31 the WA Government sent an expedition out to repair wells on the Canning Stock Route.

Attached to this party was a WA Museum employee, Otto Lipfert, whose now antiquated title was "taxidermist".

In his report, which is published in full in Wildlife Research Bulletin No. 12 "The Wildlife of the Great Sandy Desert", Lipfert said that the Rufous Hare-wallaby was "the most common animal" along the stock route, and he collected nine specimens.

Over the past 10 years, staff from the WA Wildlife Research Centre have conducted a series of biological surveys in the State's desert areas.

In addition, Phil Fuller and I have interviewed almost 100 groups of Aborigines from desert communities to try and learn some of their wealth of knowledge about the wildlife of their traditional lands.

We have confirmed one of the world's greatest extinctions — almost all the medium-sized mammals (mean adult body weight 35g to 5kg) that once inhabited these areas are now totally or locally extinct or are in danger of becoming so.

PINE DINGS

Many techniques for the control of wildings are being tried, including: mechanical slashing, crushing, poisoning, commercial harvesting and burning.

Results from experimental fires conducted in plantations in Nannup and Kirup districts are very

The Rufous Hare-wallaby, *Lagorchestes hirsutus*, still occurs in a remnant colony near The Granites, in the Tanami Desert, Northern Territory.

This small population, of less than 200 animals, lives around a chain of salt lakes and it has been postulated that the lakes have acted as natural fire barriers, breaking up the large summer wildfires, and preventing all the country being burnt out at one time.

Previously, patch burning by Aborigines had stopped extensive fires developing, but when they left the desert for European settlements, the fire regimes changed drastically.

There are several major salt lakes and lake chains in WA's Great Sandy and Little Sandy Deserts and some of the country along them is very similar to that near The Granites.

We thought that there was a chance that remnant groups of hare-wallabies might survive in this State also.

We decided that the only effective way to search the vast, inaccessible areas involved, would be from a helicopter.

The cost of charter was beyond our budget and accordingly we sought a grant from the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service under their States Assistance Scheme.

Our application was successful and the search took place in June, 1986.

Five CALM staff took part in the search — Phil Fuller and me from the Wildlife Research Centre, David Pearson and Dan Grace from wildlife research at Kalgoorlie and Ric Stone from Metro Region.

We were accompanied by Dr Gerry Maynes from ANPWS and Lorna Charlton from the Mammal Department at the WA Museum.

We used a Bell 206B Jet Ranger, chartered from West

Coast Helicopters, which was ably piloted by Stuart Janes.

Ric, as well as taking part in the search, drove the Metro Region's Isuzu four-wheel drive truck, which was an essential piece of equipment, carrying our fuel and water.

We worked along the Percival Lakes chain and around Lake Disappointment.

Searching was carried out in two ways.

The most effective was to search from the helicopter.

This involved flying at about five to 10 metres from the ground at speeds from five to 30 knots.

Both rear doors were removed from the helicopter, giving excellent vision.

The search speed and height were worked out by David Pearson, who carried out some experiments over the Tanami Desert colony with the cooperation of Dr Ken Johnson of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory.

We were able to identify lizard, snake and bustard tracks quite easily from the air and would not have missed the distinctive tracks and tail drag marks of the Rufous Hare-

wallaby had we flown near any.

The air searches were supplemented with ground traverses.

Parties of two people walked through likely habitat, covering up to 20km each day, often climbing 30 or more sand dunes before being picked up by the helicopter before dark.

The expedition did make one most valuable discovery.

We found the largest colonies of the Dalgyte (or Bilby) known in the State and probably the largest anywhere in Australia.

The best place for Dalgytes was in an area recommended as a Nature Reserve in 1983, after extensive biological surveys in the Great Sandy Desert.

Unfortunately this area, and others recommended for reservation at the same time, have not been declared.

Why are there no Rufous Hare-wallabies associated with salt lakes in WA?

The answer is unclear, but we did find large numbers of foxes in places where the habitat otherwise seemed suitable.

Office Opening

KIMBERLEY Regional staff have moved into a new office at Kununurra.

The building, which also houses the departments of Health, Lands, Community Services and the Building Management Authority, was opened by WA Premier Brian Burke on July 21.

A two-storey structure built for \$1.9 million by Keywest Building Company, the building was designed to fit in with the special environment of the Kimberley.

Regional Manager Chris Done said: "The new offices mean that it is now possible to have the region's Wildlife Officer, Mike Osborn, and the East Kimberley Ranger-In-Charge, Bob Taylor, work out of the same office as our other officers, myself, Forester Dave Rose and Clerical Officer Val Storey."

The postal address is the same, but the phone number is now 680200.