



# ENDANGERED!



THICK-BILLED GRASSWREN

The thick-billed grasswren (*Amytornis textilis*) has declined dramatically since the turn of the century. It was once widespread in the southern arid zone, from Shark Bay to western New South Wales. However, the three subspecies are now well separated and confined to very small areas.

One subspecies occurs only in the basins of Lake Eyre, Lake Torrens and Lake Frome, the second is restricted to South Australia's northern Eyre Peninsula, and the third is only known definitely from near Shark Bay. Even in this area, it has disappeared from Dirk Hartog Island. It may still occur on the Nullarbor Plain, but a sighting in 1984 is the only record since early this century. Grasswrens have not been found in subsequent searches in the area.

Thick-billed grasswrens are slightly larger than the well-known splendid

fairy-wrens. Their plumage is earthy brown, with fine white streaks, and the birds have long tails which are held erect.

They eat seeds, vegetable matter and some insects. The birds seem to eat more seeds than other grasswrens, which probably explains why they have heavier bills than these species. Thick-billed grasswrens breed in late winter and usually lay two eggs. Their nests are cup-shaped, with a rough hood, and are usually near the ground in a low shrub.

In the Shark Bay area, thick-billed grasswrens can be seen on Peron Peninsula and south and east of Hamelin Pool. Their distribution is patchy, but the best place to see them is at Monkey Mia, where two to three birds inhabit each hectare. Sometimes they perch briefly on exposed branches, but often all that can be seen is a glimpse of a bird, with head

held low, in a blurring run to the heart of the next patch of cover. They prefer areas containing shrubs of the saltbush family, and shrubs of various other species that are 1-3 metres tall, and spreading.

The reasons for the thick-billed grasswren's massive decline are unclear. Perhaps the species declined as a result of stock and rabbits degrading their habitat, and through cat predation. However, the bird is still found in some areas that are heavily grazed. On Peron Peninsula it is found close to Denham, even though the cat population there is probably high.

More research is needed on habitat requirements and on the effects of grazing on the habitat if the species is to be made more secure.

Photos

Bert Wells (inset) and Jon Green

ALLAN BURBIDGE

# LANDSCOPE

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When European scientists first set foot on our shores they found a bewildering array of animals and plants. Péron the Explorer takes an intimate look at the French scientist whose name lives in Western Australia's newest national park. See page 20.



This tour of the Gascoyne's desert coast guides you through Shark Bay and WA's newest national park. See page 10.



Close to where the fictional Gulliver is believed to have been shipwrecked lives one of the world's oldest organisms. Lilliput's Castles, on page 34, describes the creatures and the ecosystem they have built.



Seagrass covers 3 700 square kilometres of the ocean floor around Shark Bay. Grasses of the Sea, on page 42, takes us on a journey through these underwater meadows.



At first glance, Shark Bay is dry, arid and inhospitable. But if you look more closely you discover its Hidden Treasures. See page 16.

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## COVER

Green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*), the commonest turtles found along our coast, begin to congregate in the waters of Shark Bay from the end of July. The Bay is the southernmost nesting area for these long-lived animals. During summer, female green turtles lay their eggs on the white sandy beaches of Bernier, Dorre and Dirk Hartog Islands, and occasionally at the northern tip of Peron Peninsula. Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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