



ENDANGERED!



SPECTACLED HARE-WALLABY

Hare-wallabies are a group of small wallabies, so named because of their perceived similarity to European hares. However, the only real resemblance is their habit of sheltering in 'squats' in dense vegetation, from which they erupt if disturbed, often from almost under a person's feet.

Two hundred years ago there were five species of hare-wallaby in Australia. The eastern hare-wallaby and the central hare-wallaby are now extinct. The banded hare-wallaby is extinct on the mainland and found only on Bernier and Dorre Islands in Shark Bay, while the rufous hare-wallaby (or mala), which also occurs on these islands, remains on the mainland only in one very small colony in the Northern Territory. The fifth species, the spectacled hare-wallaby, has been least affected since non-Aboriginal settlement, but has declined so much in Western Australia that it is considered threatened.

Spectacled hare-wallabies weigh about three kilograms and live in tropical grasslands. In Western Australia they lived in spinifex

grasslands in the Pilbara, the Great Sandy Desert and the Little Sandy Desert, and in tussock grasslands, sometimes with a shrub or tree overstorey, in the Kimberley. Today, they are abundant on Barrow Island, but have become very rare in the Pilbara and are infrequently sighted in the Kimberley. They have disappeared completely from the deserts and are extinct on the Monte Bello Islands. They are still fairly common in parts of the Northern Territory and Queensland, but have disappeared or become rare in some parts of both.

Spectacled hare-wallabies browse shrubs and graze most grasses in their habitat, including the tips of spinifex leaves, which become a major part of their diet in times of drought and in long unburnt spinifex country. Although usually solitary animals, up to three may be seen together on occasions. On Barrow Island, breeding takes place throughout the year, with peaks of births in March and September. There, they spend the day in hides tunnelled into large spinifex hummocks where temperatures

seldom rise above 30°C. Each wallaby constructs several hides within a home range of eight to ten hectares.

Being well adapted to the harsh conditions of the dry tropics, they do not drink, even when water is available. They are able to produce highly concentrated urine; indeed studies have shown that they have lower body water turnover than any other mammal of comparable size.

Spectacled hare-wallabies are vulnerable to fox and cat predation (cats eliminated them from the Monte Bellos) and to changed fire regimes; very large, hot fires remove all their cover and food, leaving no unburnt areas from which animals may recolonise regenerating vegetation. Smaller, more frequent fires favour the wallabies since this regime produces a mosaic of vegetation ages that provides shelter with food nearby.

Photos
Jiri Lochman (inset) and Robert Garvey

ANDREW BURBIDGE

LANDSCOPE

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Each year more people seek wilderness experiences, but many are unprepared for the difficulties they might encounter. Learn about the basics of outback safety and bushcraft on page 35.



Botanists search for a eucalypt last seen by Giles in his expedition across WA deserts 115 years ago. See page 28.



Will the honey possum become a secondary victim of dieback disease? See page 22.



Australia is a land of lizards - tough competitors evolving amid spinifex and wildfires in the Great Victoria Desert. Turn to page 10.



Straight and vigorous pines don't grow by accident. Years of research and breeding have gone into producing the perfect pine. See page 49.

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COVER

The tiny honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), seen in our cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky, feeds almost exclusively on nectar and pollen. However, most of its important food plants are threatened by dieback disease caused by the *Phytophthora* fungi. The endangered scarlet banksia (*Banksia coccinea*) is one plant species used by the possums that is highly susceptible to the dieback disease. See story on page 22.



Managing Editor: Ron Kawalilak
 Editor: David Gough
 Contributing Editors: Verna Costello, Tanyia Maxted, Carolyn Thomson
 Designers: Sue Marais, Sandra Mitchell, Stacey Strickland
 Finished art: Sandra Mitchell
 Advertising: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8296
 Illustration: Ian Dickinson, Sandra Mitchell
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