

BUSH RAT

The southern bush rat (*Rattus fuscipes*) is a common resident in the areas of thicker vegetation throughout the south-west of WA. Although it is common, it is rarely seen because of its nocturnal habits.

When a bush rat is seen, it is usually assumed to be a European or black rat (*Rattus rattus*). This species probably arrived with the first ships and has established itself through most inhabited areas around the coast of Australia. This is the rat with the sinister reputation as a disease carrier and general nuisance in urban areas.

So, what are the differences between our indigenous bush rat and the introduced black rat? The bush rat is a lot smaller than the black rat, and it has

longer hairs which give it a fluffy appearance, but the most distinguishing feature is the difference in tail length. The bush rat's tail is equal to or shorter than its head and body length, whilst the black rat's tail is always considerably longer than its head and body length.

The habits of the two rats are also very different. Black rats are very good climbers and like to live in an urban environment, whereas bush rats are poor climbers, rarely found in dwellings and almost never in urban areas.

The black rat is very aggressive and fast moving. If caught in a confined area it will run and jump aggressively, often hissing, whereas the bush rat is much more docile,

although it will jump in its efforts to escape confinement.

Bush rats eat seeds, fruits, insects, fungi and other plant material. They inhabit burrows in thick vegetation from which they venture out to forage for food at night. Bush rats breed mostly through the spring, summer and autumn periods, although they are capable of reproducing throughout the year.

Several litters may be produced in a season, each consisting of about five young. It takes about four to five weeks for the young to gain independence and they are capable of reproduction at four months of age.

Bush rats have disappeared from many areas due to loss of habitat and predation. After

their dense habitat is changed by clearing, fire or grazing the bush rats fall easy prey to predators such as cats, foxes and native predators. If bush rats are present in adjacent bush they will recolonise these areas quickly if suitable habitat returns to the area (as happens after fire).

Competition for food from larger, more aggressive black rats will also have a negative effect on bush rat populations.

The southern bush rat (Rattus fuscipes) is one of several attractive native rodents. This one was found in thickets of red swamp banksia (Banksia occidentalis) at Black Point in D'Entrecasteaux National Park. Photo - Ray Smith



LANDSCOPE

VOLUME EIGHT NO. 1 SPRING ISSUE 1992

014887



Small and shy and quite unlike their exotic, urban cousins, high climbing rodents live throughout the Kimberley. See page 10.



Once it was a traditional battleground for Aboriginal people. Today the competition is between sailboarders while families of picnickers look on. See page 23.



The various groups of Aboriginal people around the Swan River lived in harmony with the seasons. See page 28.



His name is connected with plants and places around Australia. He was interested in everything from Aboriginal customs to the size of trees. Read about A Man of Science on page 16.



Learn about the incredible variety of orchids in the Stirling Range. See page 36.

FEATURES

RATS OF THE TREE TOPS
GORDON FRIEND, CATH KEMPER AND ANNE KERLE 10

CUNNINGHAM: A MAN OF SCIENCE
SUZANNE CURRY 16

MATILDA BAY RESERVE
JACQUELINE PONTRÉ 23

HUNTERS AND GATHERERS
PETER BINDON AND TREVOR WALLEY 28

ORCHIDS OF THE STIRLING RANGE
ANDREW BROWN 36

KANGAROO HILLS TIMBER RESERVE
ANDY CHAPMAN AND ROB THOMAS 43

LERPS, BUGS AND GUM-LEAVES
JANET FARR 50

REGULARS

IN PERSPECTIVE 4

BUSH TELEGRAPH 6

ENDANGERED SANDHILL DUNNART 22

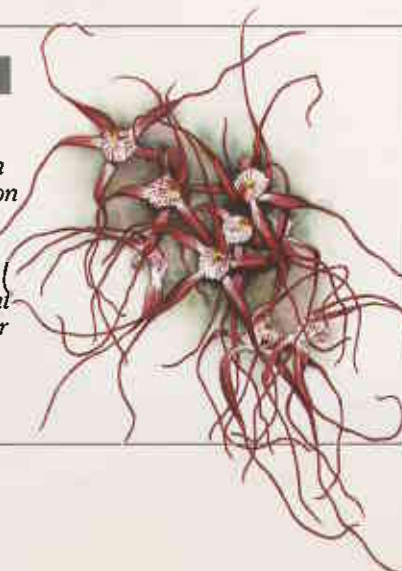
URBAN ANTICS 54

SPECIALS

ARBOR DAY POSTER COMPETITION 47

COVER

The many coloured orchid (*Caledonia polychroma*) is well named. Aside from the rich pinks there are clumps of lemon yellow and pure white. The orchid is found in the low areas of the Stirling Range, preferring wandoo and sheoak woodlands. While most years its vibrant flowers can be seen, it flowers best after fire. The illustration is by Phillipa Nikulinsky.



Managing Editor: Ron Kawailak
Editor: David Gough
Contributing Editors: Verna Costello, Helenka Johnson, Tanyia Maxted, Carolyn Thomson
Scientific and technical advice: Andrew Burbidge, Roger Underwood
Design and production: Sue Marais
Finished art: Gooitzen van der Meer
Advertising: Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8296
Illustration: Sandra Mitchell
Colour Separation by Prepress Services
Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Print

© ISSN 0815-4465 All material copyright No part of the contents of the publication may be reproduced without the consent of the publishers.



Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
Department of Conservation and Land Management,
50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152.