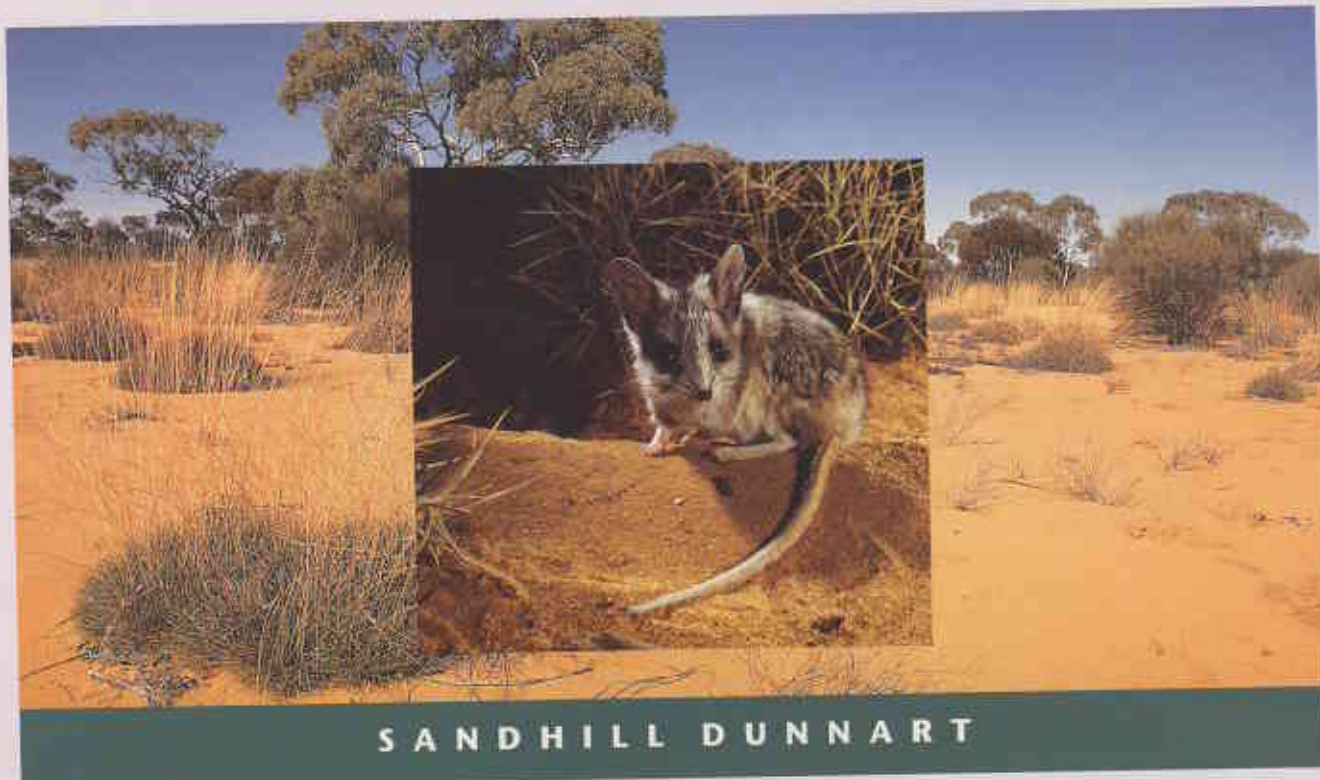




# ENDANGERED!



SANDHILL DUNNART

A well-directed throw of a boot was responsible for bringing the nocturnal sandhill dunnart to the attention of European science - and its own life to an abrupt end. This was in 1894, and in broad daylight members of the Horn Scientific Expedition flushed one from spinifex near Lake Amadeus in the Northern Territory.

The sandhill dunnart seemingly disappeared until 1969 when a bulldozer driver clearing mallee on Eyre Peninsula (South Australia) caught one as it fled burning spinifex. Four more were soon caught nearby.

Since then, sandhill dunnarts have been captured occasionally in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia and South Australia and remains have been found in owl pellets recovered from caves at Ayers Rock.

The sandhill dunnart is the largest of all the dunnarts. Males weigh 30-45 g and females, 25-35 g. It is easily distinguished by both its size and a long muscular tail terminating in a vertical feather-like crest of stiff hairs. A variety of

climatic zones and vegetation types are occupied. All recorded habitats have sandy soils, sometimes with low dunes, and an understorey of spinifex grasses. A population in Queen Victoria Spring Nature Reserve has been studied by CALM staff while researching the effects of fire on desert vertebrates. Few have been captured despite intensive trapping, but nonetheless some information has been obtained on the species' ecology.

Reproduction occurs in spring and early summer. A lactating female has been captured in December and one with four dependent juveniles in January. From birth the young are carried in a rudimentary pouch comprising a circular flap of skin enclosing the mammary

gland and a ring of eight teats. Once the young outgrow the pouch the mother cares for them in the nest. Other desert dunnarts shelter in burrows, but the sort of shelter used by sandhill dunnarts is still unknown.

The diet has not been studied, but may comprise insects, lizards and small mammals. A radio-tracking study is planned to find out more about its ecology and preferred habitat which should help pinpoint areas where other populations may exist.

The reasons for the rarity of the sandhill dunnart are unclear. Perhaps, like some other mammals, it suffers from the deprivations of foxes and feral cats. Unfortunately, much of the habitat where sandhill dunnarts were first caught in South Australia has been cleared for agriculture. At present, there is no direct human threat on populations in the Great Victoria Desert, but research is needed to provide a better understanding of the needs of this mysterious and elusive dunnart.

Photos  
Babs and Bert Wells

DAVE PEARSON

# LANDSCOPE

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



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.



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.



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

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## 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.



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