Ancient animals, ancient names

The Aboriginal names of native animals trip off the tongue, often in an almost perfect rendition of the animals' sounds—quokka, chuditch, woylie, numbat and quenda, to name a few. Aboriginal animal names have always been part of Australia's history, with kangaroo, koala, dingo and wombat having been in common use in the English language for more than two centuries.

by Sue McKenna

Ian Abbott, a Senior Principal Research Scientist at the Department of Conservation and Land Management, has, for many years, combed historic diaries, archives, dictionaries and library collections to create a list of Aboriginal animal names we can use every day.

For centuries, the Nyoongar people in the south-west corner of Western Australia eked their existence from nature. They dined on fish, insects, seeds, corms, tubers, bulbs, fruits and nectar, birds, eggs, small mammals, frogs and freshwater crayfish. Unlike their northern cousins, they did not use rafts or boats so subsequently didn't eat seals or whales unless these became stranded.

They stalked yonka, or western grey kangaroos, by running the animals into soft, swampy bog and spearing them, usually in winter. Another method was to smoke them out and chase them down a hill by shrieking and frightening them. At the base of the hill more men would be stationed with heavy hunting ketj (spears) ready to kill the floundering animals. Kings Park was a favourite spot for this battue, or running down, with the slopes facing Crawley and Subiaco being good hunting spots.

But yonka weren't the only animals to be hunted. There were koora (western brush wallabies), maning (banded hare-wallabies) and moororong or bokal (black-flanked rock-wallabies) to add to the menu.

Women and children collected small species of rodents, such as the now-extinct koolawa (long-tailed hopping-mouse) or bolong (large-eared hopping-mouse), that had been overcome and killed by fire passing through the bush. They collected kjirdon or matakitj (Mitchell's hopping-mice), mookji (ash-grey mice) or konding (Shark Bay mice) in the same fashion. The widespread burning of vegetation ensured an ongoing supply of green pick or fresh new growth for browsing and grazing species, and increased the availability of meat for the Nyoongar people.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The sounds of Nyoongar animal names trip easily from the tongue because they're often an imitation of the sound made by the animal. Early European explorers were amazed at the splendid parade of small creatures in the bush, desert and sandplains. Eager to learn more, they quizzed the Nyoongars who gave them words such as chuditch, numbat, quenda, woylie and quokka—names still in common use today.

Several early pioneers attempted to live in harmony with the Aboriginal people and developed friendships that enabled them to learn elements of each other's languages. The intertwined relationship resulted in intertwined words, so that names used by Nyoongar people quickly found their way into the English language—at least locally. Unfortunately, Nyoongar is not a written language, so there are no references or dictionaries to record the vocabulary. Today we must rely on the spoken word passed from generation to generation through the Nyoongar culture or through pioneers' diaries and notes kept about Nyoongar words.

A few years ago, the language was in danger of dying out, and was largely a vocabulary used by elders whose children had abandoned the tribal language for English. During the last decade, it has revived to the point that three years ago

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Numbats depicted in English zoologist John Gould's publication *Australian Marsupials and Monotremes*, first published more than 150 years ago. Like many native animals, they are referred to by their Aboriginal name.

Above: The name 'emu' is an anomaly, as the word is Portuguese. Marayong is the Aboriginal word for the animal from New South Wales (Sydney) where it was first observed by Europeans.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left: 'Kangaroo' is another anomaly. Research suggests that this word (from north-east Queensland) means 'go away'. The correct Aboriginal name for that region is mania, or man-ya.
Photo – Jay Sarson/Lochman Transparencies

Above left and above: English zoologist John Gould compiled detailed and beautiful publications featuring drawings of Australia's birds and mammals more than 150 years ago. Notes accompanying the drawings were supplied by naturalist John Gilbert, who referred to animals and birds by their Aboriginal names. The dalgyte, or bilby (above), is an example.

Right: James Drummond, the botanist, and his grandson, James Mackintosh. Photo – Courtesy of Mrs Veasey via Rica Erickson, the author of the book *The Drummonds of Hawthornden*, from which it was taken.

the first Nyoongar language class started in Bunbury, with more beginning in Perth. Classes are now being taught at 30 schools in the south-west.

Ian Abbott has been trawling historical archives for information on Aboriginal names of mammal species. So far he has found about 1,100 records of Aboriginal names for native mammals in the south-west, including reliable names for 40 of the 51 species that occurred within the Nyoongar region.

His findings were recently published in the Department of Conservation and Land Management's scientific journal *CALMScience*, and he is encouraging his academic peers and others in the department to use Aboriginal words when describing native mammals. The tide has already started turning, with senior zoologists using Aboriginal names in their scientific and research papers, as they began doing for native rodents shortly after the publication of *Australian Names for Australian Rodents* by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency in 1995.

Discovering the correct Aboriginal words was a long, hard haul that took Ian five years of work. He located and extracted records from books written by early visitors and settlers, from dictionaries and from reports by explorers, historians and anthropologists. He also searched later documents and papers by contemporaries in WA and the eastern states.

Ian's historical searches uncovered some gems. George Grey, the Government Resident at Albany, who was later the Governor of South Australia and the New Zealand and Cape Colony, and subsequently Prime Minister of New Zealand, published lists of Nyoongar words used by people living from Cervantes to Busselton across to Albany and Esperance.

GOULD AND GILBERT

English zoologist John Gould and his wife, artist Elizabeth Gould, visited Australia from England between 1838 and 1840. Elizabeth painted the continent's birds for a published portfolio to be sold in Europe. They travelled to Tasmania, the Bass Strait Islands, South Australia and New South Wales, but John Gould was so impressed by the animals, which came into their tent as they camped beside billabongs, that he created a portfolio for them too, describing many new species from his notes.

Gould's notes referred to animals with Aboriginal names—the koala, wombat, kangaroo and dingo. The anomaly is that the word 'emu' is Portuguese, not Aboriginal, so we're left to ponder why the Aboriginal word 'marayong', from Sydney where the emu was first observed by Europeans, went unrecognised. The word 'kangaroo' might be another anomaly, because instead of being the name of the animal, research shows it's likely to mean something such as 'go away'. The correct eastern name is mania, or man-ya.

Because he never travelled to Western Australia, Gould's notes for all WA species were supplied by John Gilbert, a naturalist who collected mammals in the early 1840s. John Gilbert trekked across south-west WA

HOW DO YOU SAY THAT?

One of the challenges in using the Nyoongar language is pronunciation and Ian's paper includes a guide to pronunciation including emphasis on the first syllable.
Below is a list of animal names on the left, with the Nyoongar word or words on the right. Several Nyoongar words mean there were different descriptions from different districts. Deciding on the most appropriate one will be a task for the Ngoongar people and others.

COMMON USE	NYOONGAR WORD
echidna	nyingarn or donongerde
chuditch	djooditj, ngooldjangit or badjada
dibbler	dibla or madoon
mardo	mado or domat
red-tailed phascogale	kingo
brush-tailed phascogale	wambenga, balat, balawa or koming
fat-tailed dunnart	ngooda
white-tailed dunnart	djoordong
grey-bellied dunnart	donat or djamin
numbat	noombat or wioo
pig-footed bandicoot (extinct)	boda, woda or boodal
quenda	kwenda
western barred bandicoot	mal or nymal
bilby or dalgyte	djalkat
western pygmy possum	mandada or nyeranit
western ringtail possum	ngwayir, womp, woder, ngoor or ngoolangit
honey possum	ngoolboongoor, djebin or dat
brushtail possum	koomal
boodie	boodi
woylie	woli or wol
broad-faced potoroo (extinct)	moda
Gilbert's potoroo	ngilkat
rufous hare-wallaby or mala	woorap
tammar wallaby	dama or bonin
western grey kangaroo	yonka (male), wok or wor (female)
western brush wallaby	kwara or koora
euro	bikada
red kangaroo	marlo
crescent nailtail wallaby (extinct)	worong
black-flanked rock-wallaby	moororong or bokal
quokka	kwoka or bangop
long-tailed hopping-mouse (extinct)	koolawa or kodong
large-eared hopping-mouse (extinct)	bolong
Mitchell's hopping-mouse	djirdon or matakitj
ash-grey mouse	noodji
Shark Bay mouse	konding
western chestnut mouse	djilbitj
water rat	ngoodjo, wamp wamp or ngangaritj
southern bush rat	modit
dingo	doot
bats (not distinguished to species)	bam-bi, ba-bill, babilgun or babitj
Australian sea lion	manyinni
whale (not distinguished to species)	mammang
dolphin	waraneen, kwillen-ah, kear-la or kwilena or waraneen

catching specimens and sending extensive accompanying notes to Gould. Gould then arranged for the artist, Hans Richter, to draw entrancing colour sketches of the animals—detailed paintings that captured forever some species that are now extinct—using Gilbert's notes. And since Gilbert's notes often included Aboriginal animal names, they turned out to be one of Ian's most important sources. Gilbert had wandered across the Western Australian colony as it was being settled, and he recorded many species from Moore River and Toodyay. He was often accompanied by Nyoongar aides and by botanist Johnston Drummond, who was fluent in Aboriginal languages.

Gould's magnificent colour plates are still in demand more than 150 years later and their value steadily increases. Gould lived into old age, but Gilbert, one of our

During his roving missionary work, the founder of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia, Bishop Rosendo Salvado, was one of the early pioneers who compiled lists of Aboriginal words.
Photo – Courtesy of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia

first and best scholars of Aboriginal words and a brilliant preserver of animals, met an ugly death. At the age of 35, in a weird juxtaposition of events and roles, he was speared to death by Aboriginal people as he lay in his tent on the ill-fated Leichhardt expedition to Port Essington in Queensland in 1845.

OTHER SOURCES

From the first instances of European interaction with Aboriginal people, Aboriginal names for animals were commonly used. Ian's Nyoongar word list was inspired by many other sources. The writings of Dr Isaac Nind, who worked at the King George Sound convict colony during the 1820s, was one of the earliest sources. Equally useful were the diaries of Henry William St Pierre Bunbury, a military officer stationed at York, Pinjarra, Busselton and Williams during the 1830s, and the notes of Charles Symmons, Western Australia's first 'Protector of Aborigines' in the 1840s. Other information was uncovered in lists from John Stokes, who carried out British naval surveys of Australian waters in the 1840s, followed by the

writings of Roman Catholic Bishop John Brady in the 1840s and the diaries of British collector Guy Shortridge in the early 1900s.

A book published by George Fletcher Moore in the 1840s contained one of the most significant Nyoongar word lists.

Most of the information, however, came from the early thoughts and observations of pioneers and makes an interesting litany of reading. They included pioneer botanists James Drummond and Augustus Oldfield; the founder of the Benedictine Monastery at New Norcia, Bishop Rosendo Salvado; one of the Avon Valley's first settlers, Robert Austin; Janet Millett, the York-based wife of a missionary; early surveyor Henry Ranford; Western Australia's first Premier John Forrest, who, accompanied by Nyoongar trackers, explored parts of the south-west during his surveying duties in the 1870s; Ethel Hassell, who compiled a word list of the Wheelman tribe at Jerramungup in the 1880s; Alfred Bussell, a pioneer settler who spoke the Aboriginal language fluently; squatter Edward Curr, who sent lists of English words to settlers requesting them to supply the equivalent local Aboriginal words; Sam Isaacs, who had an Aboriginal mother and who lived near Margaret River; Surveyor Frederick Brockman who obtained much of his information from Sam Isaacs; Farmer Job Haddleton who lived near Katanning and wrote a book of notes in 1952; naturalist Richard Helms, who wrote a paper containing word lists of Aboriginal people living south-west of Mt Magnet and along the south-west coast; surveyor Lawrence Wells; Toodyay farmer Thomas Markey; pioneer settler Ednie Hassell, who compiled a list from the south-west capes region and Jerramungup; and pastoralist Bruce Leake, who listed Aboriginal words from Kellerberrin.

A series of jumbled word lists was compiled by the somewhat eccentric Daisy Bates (1859-1951). She originally came to Western Australia from Ireland in 1883 aged just 23. She worked as a governess, married and had a child, returned to England in 1894 without her husband and child to work on magazines, and then came back to Western Australia in 1901 to live with Aboriginal people. In 1904, she was appointed by the State Government to gather information about Aboriginal people. To carry out this task, she distributed 500 blank vocabulary booklets of chosen words to postmasters, police, station owners and other settlers, so they could note the local dialect equivalents. She collated the results and presented them to the State Government in 1911. Daisy Bates later lived with Aboriginal people on the Nullarbor Plain, buying food for herself and the tribe from her income as a freelance writer for the *Western Mail* and other newspapers.

Although there have been a number of word lists published more recently, notably *A Nyoongar Wordlist from the South-West of Western Australia* compiled and edited by Peter Bindon and Ross Chadwick and published by the Western Australian Museum, this latest word list is the first to concentrate solely on the native mammals of south-western Australia.

Above: Daisy Bates, pictured with Aboriginal tribesman Joobaitch early this century, lived with Aboriginal people to learn local dialects. In 1904 the State Government appointed her to gather information about Aboriginal words.
Photo – Courtesy of the Western Australian Museum

Right: Echidna is a Greek word. The Nyoongar words are nyingarn or donongerde.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

As well as providing a comprehensive Nyoongar word list of WA's native mammals, Ian's work was personally rewarding and fulfilling. It has provided the impetus for replacing common names of animals, formed artificially by an English translation of the Latin name, or by using English common names such as Gilbert's potoroo, with a more suitable 'local' name. If this aim is achieved, the official and popular use of Nyoongar names by Western Australians will be a tribute to the original inhabitants.

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Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE

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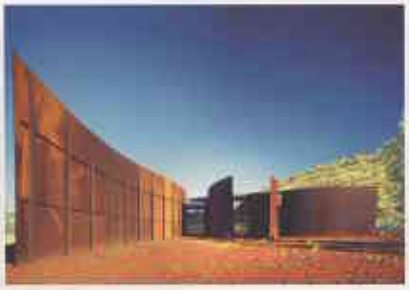
Thirteen years in the making, the Cape to Cape Track offers a unique view of WA's most popular national park. See page 28.



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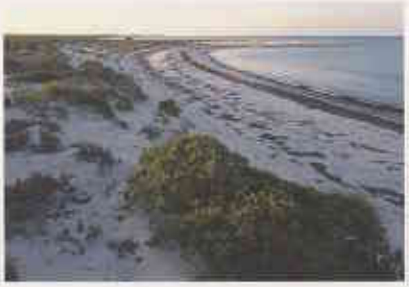
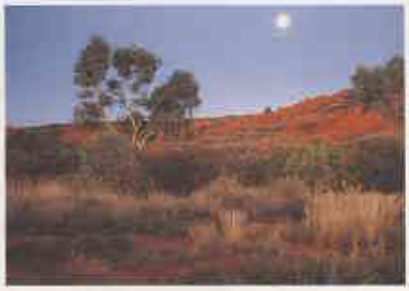


Dirk Hartog Island is our largest island. It has a fascinating history and a valuable biodiversity. Find out why on page 17.

Does the delicate work of Western Australia's botanical artists have a place in the high-tech world of science? See page 23.



'Landscape at the Heart' is an account of the first LANDSCOPE *Expedition to the Carnarvon Range at the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. See page 40.*

FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

Aboriginal names have always been part of Australia's history, and many of the well known names for Australian animals are in common use today. 'Ancient animals, ancient names' (page 35) makes a case for adopting more Aboriginal names for our native mammals. The brush-tailed phascogale, for example, was known to Nyoongar people as the 'wambenga'.

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