

endangered

by Tony Friend



Dibbler

An enigmatic and elusive animal, the dibbler (*Parantechinus apicalis*) is small and stockily built—40 to 120 grams in weight—with bright white rings around the eyes, body hairs tipped with silver giving a grizzled appearance, and a hairy, short and strongly tapering tail. It is classed as endangered on international, national and Western Australian threatened species listings. Like all small carnivorous marsupials, it has a pointed snout and a mouth that opens wide to expose many sharp teeth. Dibblers feed mostly on insects, but will eat berries and feed on banksia flowers, probably taking nectar as well as the insects that feed on the blooms.

Dibblers are most active during the hours around dawn and dusk. They spend the remainder of the day and night resting above ground, under vegetation, or in natural hollows or burrows of other species.

Early collectors found dibblers near the west coast, (Perth, the Victoria Plains and New Norcia districts) inland near Kojonup and on the south coast near Albany, where the Nyoongar people used the name 'dibbler'. However, no

dibblers were seen after 1904 and they were feared to be extinct.

In 1967, wildlife photographer Michael Morcombe was trying to catch honey possums in traps set over slender banksia (*Banksia attenuata*) flowers at Cheyne Beach east of Albany when he captured two dibblers. Subsequently, dibblers were also discovered near Jerdacuttup, 300 kilometres east of Cheyne Beach, at Torndirrup National Park in Albany, in Fitzgerald River National Park and on Boullanger and Whitlock islands off Jurien Bay. Although the Cheyne Beach population was still present in 1994, the only reliable sites are now at Fitzgerald River National Park and the Jurien Bay islands.

Recent surveys in Fitzgerald River National Park show that the species occurs patchily, mainly in mallee-heath vegetation that has been unburnt for more than five years. Dibblers thrive where foxes are controlled, but *Phytophthora* dieback threatens their habitat by killing proteaceous plants like banksias and changing vegetation structure dramatically.

Dibblers are seasonal breeders. They mate in late March and up to eight tiny young appear

in the females' open pouches in late April. The young are deposited in nests in June and are first seen out and about in August.

On Boullanger Island, in some years, most or all adult male dibblers die in April after the mating season, in some ways resembling the phascogales and *Antechinus* species. This hasn't been seen on nearby Whitlock Island, or in mainland sites. It has been suggested that the occasional male die-off is in response to the low nutrient status of Boullanger Island, in contrast to Whitlock Island, where breeding shearwaters have raised nutrient levels by depositing guano.

A research and recovery program led by the Department of Environment and Conservation has been in action since the 1990s and has resulted in a far greater understanding of this animal's ecology, the establishment of a breeding colony at Perth Zoo, and a new wild colony of dibblers on Escape Island, near Jurien. Mainland reintroduction efforts are under way, at the proposed Peniup Nature Reserve and in the Stirling Range National Park.

Photo by Babs and Bert Wells

- 42 Hidden biodiversity: fungi and invertebrates
Biological surveying on the south coast reveals a remarkable array of weird and wonderful fungi and invertebrate species.
- 50 Discovering the coral life in Shark Bay Marine Park
Monitoring of Shark Bay corals highlights the diversity of coral species in this nature-rich place.
- 56 Bound by a love for flora
A committed group of flora enthusiasts has been monitoring south-west flora for 20 years.

Regulars

- 9 Endangered
Dibbler
- 40 Feature park
Purnululu National Park
- 49 Bookmarks
The Big Picture Book of Environments
Life on the Rocks
Native Mice and Rats
- 62 Urban antics
Dead wood

Publishing credits

Executive editor Kaye Verboon.

Editors Samille Mitchell, Rhianna King, Carolyn Thomson-Dans.

Scientific/technical advice

Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Chris Simpson, Keith Morris.

Design and production Natalie Jolakoski, Tiffany Taylor, Gooitzen van der Meer.

Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.

Cartography Promaco Geodraft.

Marketing Cathy Birch

Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0432.

Subscription enquiries

Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.

Prepress and printing Lamb Print, Western Australia.

© ISSN 0815-4465

All material copyright. No part of the contents of the publication may be reproduced without the consent of the publishers.

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation, 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.



Department of Environment and Conservation

Our environment, our future

