

endangered

by Tony Friend



Gilbert's potoroo

Hidden in the dense heaths of Two Peoples Bay, east of Albany on Western Australia's south coast, the last few Gilbert's potoroos (*Potorous gilbertii*) in existence went about their nightly business undetected until 1994. The species had been believed extinct since the early 1900s, and the rediscovery heralded the beginning of a race against time to prevent that presumed extinction from becoming a reality.

Potoroos and bettongs comprise the small family Potoroidae, most closely related to, but distinct from, the kangaroos, wallabies and rock-wallabies, which together make up the much larger family Macropodidae.

From early records and sub-fossil remains in caves, it appears that Gilbert's potoroos were never very widespread. At their peak they were only found in the wettest parts of the south-west and south coast, between the Leeuwin-Naturaliste ridge and the Albany area. They prefer long-unburnt heathland and although in pre-European times this fire-prone environment would see colonies wiped out by wildfire from time to

time, potoroos would have moved back into recovering habitat from nearby populations. With the clearing of bushland connecting these habitat patches, and with the arrival of cats, then foxes, these recolonisation events would have become less frequent. Finally only one population remained, at Two Peoples Bay. Wildfire remains the greatest threat to the survival of the species.

Intensive surveys indicate that there are only 30 to 40 Gilbert's potoroos in the population on the slopes of Mount Gardner in Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve. As its survival has relied on a single, small population, the species is classified as critically endangered.

Although the females produce only one young at a time, they can give birth every four months, so up to three young can be produced in a year by one female. The Two Peoples Bay potoroos breed well and, as they can live up to 10 years, many more young are produced than can be supported by the available habitat. Early attempts to breed these hypersensitive animals in captivity failed and conservation efforts are now concentrating on direct translocation from the wild to new sites and cross-fostering Gilbert's potoroo

pouch young from wild mothers to captive long-nosed potoroos (see 'Cross-fostering Gilbert's potoroo', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2008).

The first translocation, to Bald Island east of Albany, started in 2005 and is showing signs of success. Over a period of two-and-a-half years, 10 potoroos were moved to the island from the wild population on Mount Gardner. Most females have pouch young whenever they have been checked and the Bald Island population is now more than 20 strong. The island colony is now large enough to provide animals for the next translocations.

Meanwhile, a 380-hectare area near Mount Many Peaks, east of Two Peoples Bay, has been fenced to exclude foxes and cats and will soon provide a safe haven in which another Gilbert's potoroo population can be established. As well as Bald Island, another source of animals for this translocation may be gained through the cross-fostering project.

Anyone wishing to be involved in the Gilbert's potoroo recovery program should contact the Department of Environment and Conservation's Albany Work Centre on (08) 9842 4500.

Photo by Jiri Lochman

- 52 Into the wild: restoring rangelands fauna
The former pastoral station Lorna Glen is now becoming a haven for threatened wildlife, thanks to fauna reintroduction efforts.
- 59 Lane Poole Reserve into the future
A draft management plan guides the future of this popular camping and recreation area near Dwellingup.

Regulars

- 3 Contributors and Editor's letter
- 15 Bookmarks
Pemberton Wine Region Western Australia
The Clean Industrial Revolution
Rescuing the Rangelands
- 30 Feature park
Rowley Shoals Marine Park
- 45 Endangered
Gilbert's potoroo
- 62 Urban antics
Stark raven mad...

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