



## Fighting back: mulgaras return

Long-term, sustained feral cat control at Lorna Glen is leading to an increase in mulgaras on the former pastoral station.

by Neil Hamilton, Mike Onus and Karla Forrest



**Above** Mulgaras were once widespread across Australia's arid regions.

**Above right** Mulgaras are effective hunters, feeding mostly on insects. Photos - Jiri Lochman

**Left** A brush-tailed mulgara track at Lorna Glen former pastoral station. Photo - Neil Hamilton/DEC



The brush-tailed mulgara (*Dasymercus blythi*) is fighting back after a combination of factors decimated numbers across arid regions of Australia. The mulgara, a small carnivorous marsupial weighing about 130 grams, has been at risk due to altered fire regimes, habitat loss and predation by feral cats (*Felis catus*), foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and wild dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*).

Once widespread through Australia's central desert regions, mulgaras are now present in fragmented distribution in the extreme western parts of Queensland and throughout the Northern Territory and Western Australia. However, a recent survey has shown a population explosion at Lorna Glen, a former pastoral station about 160 kilometres north-east of Wiluna.

### The hunter becomes the hunted

Mulgaras are an extraordinary yet little-known species. They are keen hunters, making use of their powerful jaws and good forward vision to catch and kill their prey. A fearsome predator to small vertebrates and insects, the mulgara swiftly subdues its prey with several quick bites to the head before peeling back the skin, crushing the skull and consuming both the body and brain.

Despite its hunting prowess, the mulgara has fallen victim to its own



formidable foe, the feral cat. The introduction of feral cats into WA has caused a multitude of problems for native fauna including the brush-tailed mulgara, which is listed as a 'priority' species in WA.

Control of feral cats and foxes is considered critical to the revival of extant species such as the brush-tailed mulgara. Various baiting strategies have been trialled across WA with increasing success (see 'Controlling introduced predators in the rangelands: the conclusion', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2010). Baiting at Lorna Glen since 2003 has resulted in a sustained reduction in cat numbers. It is thought that this decrease has contributed, at least in part, to a recovery of mulgaras on the former pastoral lease.

### Promising signs

During a recent study of feral cat abundance, researchers from the Department of Environment and

Conservation (DEC) were pleasantly surprised to find an abundance of mulgara tracks and burrows in cat monitoring plots. The unprecedented number of tracks was found in different vegetation types from thick spinifex to open shrubland.

In addition, several animals were trapped and a number photographed from remote cameras (see 'Camera traps: paparazzi in the bush' on page 27). This comes as a welcome change because the capture of mulgaras has been sporadic in WA in the past 25 years. Mulgara numbers are difficult to monitor due to natural population fluctuations, but DEC staff are nonetheless optimistic about the results of the survey. The numbers are the most they have ever recorded.

### More species fighting back

In addition to the increase in mulgara activity at Lorna Glen, ground and low-dwelling bird sightings have increased noticeably over the past several years. Species such as the bush stone curlew (*Burhinus gallarius*), red-capped robin (*Petroica goodenovii*), hooded robin (*Malanodytes cucullata*), painted finch (*Emblema pictum*), chestnut-breasted quail thrush (*Cinclosoma castaneothora*), chestnut quail thrush (*C. cinnamomeum*), splendid fairy-wren (*Malurus splendens*), white-winged fairy-wren (*M. leucopterus*) and spotted nightjar (*Eurostopodus argus*) have all become more common in the area. The western bower bird



(*Chlamydera guttata*), previously in very low numbers at Lorna Glen, is also becoming more abundant. In addition, perentie monitors (*Varanus giganteus*) are becoming more noticeable.

The recent increase in bird and mammal sightings suggests that the long-term feral cat control at Lorna Glen has assisted in the recovery of extant species previously present in very low numbers. This trend in species recovery has also been observed elsewhere, even on tropical islands, where DEC staff have undertaken feral cat control. Recently, increased numbers of white-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) and white terns (*Gygis alba*) have been observed on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands where long-term cat control has been conducted.

The mulgara population explosion at Lorna Glen has been met with optimism by DEC staff, who will continue to closely monitor numbers.

The continuation of baiting programs will play a vital role in securing the future of Australia's native fauna including the brush-tailed mulgara.



**Top** Sightings of birds such as the white-winged fairy-wren have increased at Lorna Glen former pastoral station.

Photo - Stuart Miller/Lochman Transparencies

**Above** A brush-tailed mulgara at Lorna Glen, where their numbers have significantly increased.

Photo - Neil Hamilton/DEC

**Below left** Perentie monitor.

Photo - Jiri Lochman



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