

# Bill Wills

and the nature of memory





Often, important scientific collections have unlikely beginnings. Lean times on the transcontinental railway in the 1920s led to a young Bill Wills running the dingo trail for his father, at a time when small native mammals were abundant on the Nullarbor. His encounters with these animals provide an insight into species' occurrences in days gone by.



by Allan Wills



Most families have a story about a journey and, it's more than likely, there will be more than one version of the story. After all, life and all its paths and intersections trace many journeys. In November 1927 my uncle Bill Wills met the zoologist Albert Sherbourne Le Souef at Rawlinna, a railway depot and settlement on the Nullarbor Plain. Le Souef was the founding director of Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo.

Their meeting resulted in Bill collecting what proved to be a valuable legacy of scientific specimens. These specimens constitute evidence of the presence of a formerly rich native mammal fauna on the Nullarbor, and make a contribution to the broader documentation of extensive declines and extinctions of many Australian mammal species since European settlement.

### Lean times

The circumstances of Bill being on the Nullarbor began a few years earlier. In about 1924 life became a little



less certain for my grandfather John Nunan Wills and his wife Bessie and their seven children. My grandfather worked on the government camel farm outside Coolgardie and the era of camel transport on the Goldfields was coming to a close. The years of prosperity after World War I were also ending.

My grandfather was perhaps lucky when made redundant. It was a time when jobs were scarce and wages low but my grandfather had the choice of becoming a policeman or joining the railways. He chose to become a fettler on the transcontinental railway, which had recently (1917) been opened, and the family subsequently moved to



Rawlinna, about 100 kilometres north of Caiguna in the state's south-east. A family of seven, and later 10, children was a crowd to feed and clothe on a fettler's wage. In 1928 my grandfather purchased an A Model Ford sedan and 80 to 100 traps, and took to the dingo trail to supplement his income. Bill Wills, then a 16-year-old boy and needing employment, ran the dingo trail for his father with part-time assistance from his older brother Jack.

Bill's own words, recorded in a letter to the then Department of Fisheries and Wildlife (now the Department of Environment and Conservation, or DEC), introduce us to events of that time. In November 1927: "... a Mr Le Soeff [sic] from Taronga Park, Sydney, came to Rawlinna on a field exercise to check on animal and bird life on the Nullarbor [sic] Plain. During his stay I became acquainted with him and accompanied him on several occasions when he obtained a few specimens of birds. The subject of animals, especially Marsupials, was mentioned several times and Mr Le Soeff [sic] promised on his return to Sydney he would

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**Main** This plain of herbs, small shrubs and native grasses was typical of the areas Bill Wills collected specimens on the Nullarbor.

*Photo - Scott Corbet/DEC*

**Insert** Bill Wills.

*Photo courtesy of Mary Dawes*

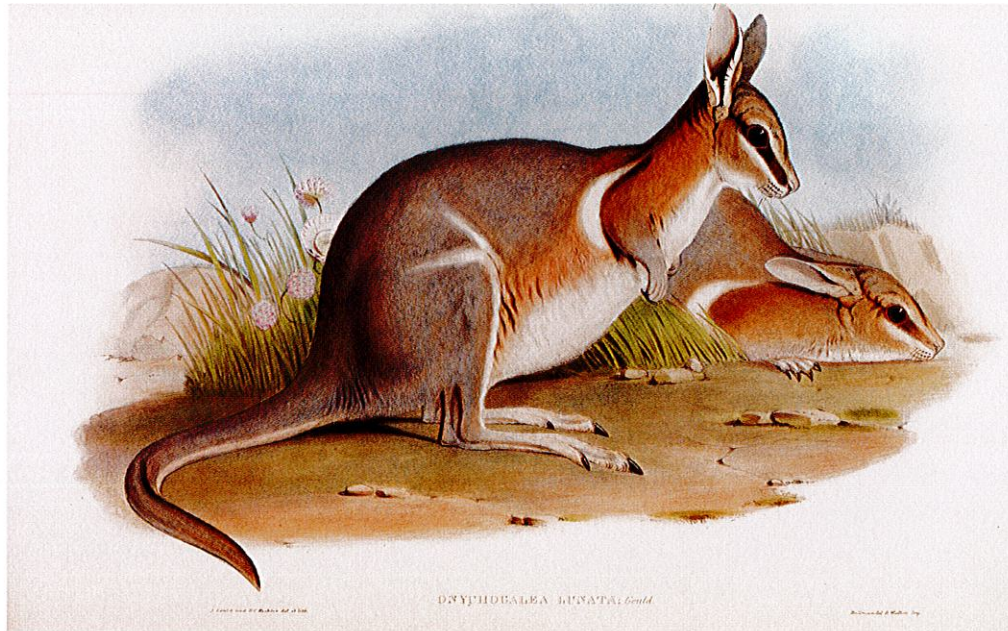
**Above** Kultarr.

**Left** The Great Victoria Desert near Rawlinna.

*Photos - Jiri Lochman*







### Species collected by Bill Wills

| Common names and Aboriginal name         | Scientific name               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Crescent nail-tailed wallaby or tjawalpa | <i>Onychogalea lunata</i>     |
| Western barred bandicoot or marl         | <i>Perameles bougainville</i> |
| Bilby or dalgyte or ninu                 | <i>Macrotis lagotis</i>       |
| Mulgara or minyi-minyi                   | <i>Dasycercus cristicauda</i> |
| Kultarr                                  | <i>Antechinomys laniger</i>   |
| Bolam's mouse                            | <i>Pseudomys bolami</i>       |
| Plains rat or palyoora                   | <i>Pseudomys australis</i>    |

Top left Mulgara.

Above left Bilby.  
Photos - Jiri Lochman

Above No known photographs of the crescent nail-tailed wallaby exist today but this print appeared in John Gould's 1863 publication.  
Illustration - Museum Victoria

forward to me several traps suitable for small animals together with a container of Spirits of Wine to preserve any I could trap or procure. These articles arrived in due course as promised."

The mobility of the new car enabled Bill to foray along the dingo trail, which ran from Rawlinna down to Cocklebidy Rockhole and 16 kilometres to the east loosely following the route of Eyre Highway, then back to Rawlinna by a different track. The Nullabor Plain north of Rawlinna was within easy access also.

At that time small native mammals were abundant on the Nullabor. In 1928 Bill despatched to Le Souef, via his older brother Jack who was a junior porter at Rawlinna railway station, preserved specimens of seven ground mammal species that he had trapped or shot in these areas (see 'Species collected by Bill Wills, this page'). Le Souef later presented the specimens to the Australian Museum.

### Extinction

Bill consistently declined to be interviewed about the specimens he collected on the Nullabor in 1928. He died in September 1990 and with him a fragment of living memory also vanished. An apocryphal yarn about his shyness is recorded in the entry for the crescent nail-tailed wallaby (*Onychogalea lunata*) in Tim Flannery and Peter Schouten's illustrated book of extinct species *A Gap in Nature*.

Bill's specimen of the crescent nail-tailed wallaby was the last museum specimen collected alive. The species, once found across extensive areas of southern Australia, lived on in central Australia for perhaps a decade after 1928 before extinction. Evidence of its presence, its habits and Aboriginal hunting methods in central Australia was derived from the living memory of traditional custodians interviewed during the 1980s by Andrew Burbidge, a former director of the Department of Conservation and Land Management's

(CALM's), now DEC's, Science Division. No known photographs of a living crescent nail-tailed wallaby exist today. A print in John Gould's 1863 publication *Mammals of Australia* was based on specimens and accounts while it was extant.

Interviews with traditional custodians in the 1980s revealed that Aboriginal people used fenced traps to capture crescent nail-tailed wallabies, or tjawalpa. These fences were encountered by many of the early European explorers of central





**Above** Bill Wills collected mammal specimens in bluebush country of the Nullarbor Plain.

*Photo - Scott Corbett/DEC*



**Left** Western barred bandicoot.

*Photo - Marie Lochman*

**Below left** Plains rat.

*Photo - Hans and Judy Beste/Lochman Transparencies*



Australia. Ernest Giles encountered them in his 1875 expedition. From Chapter 4.3 of Giles' *Australia Twice Traversed*: "Both yesterday and to-day we saw some native wallaby traps in the dense scrubs; these are simply long lines of sticks, boughs, bushes, etc., which, when first laid down, may be over a foot high; they are sometimes over a quarter of a mile long. These lines meet each other at nearly right angles, and form a corner. For a few yards on each side of the corner the fence is raised to between four and five feet, made somewhat substantial and laid with boughs. Over this is thrown either a large net or a roofing of boughs. I saw no signs of nets in this region. The wallaby are hunted until they get alongside the fences; if they are not flurried they will hop along it until they get to a part which is too high, or they think it is; then they go up into the trap, where there is a small opening, and get knocked on the head for their pains by a black man inside."



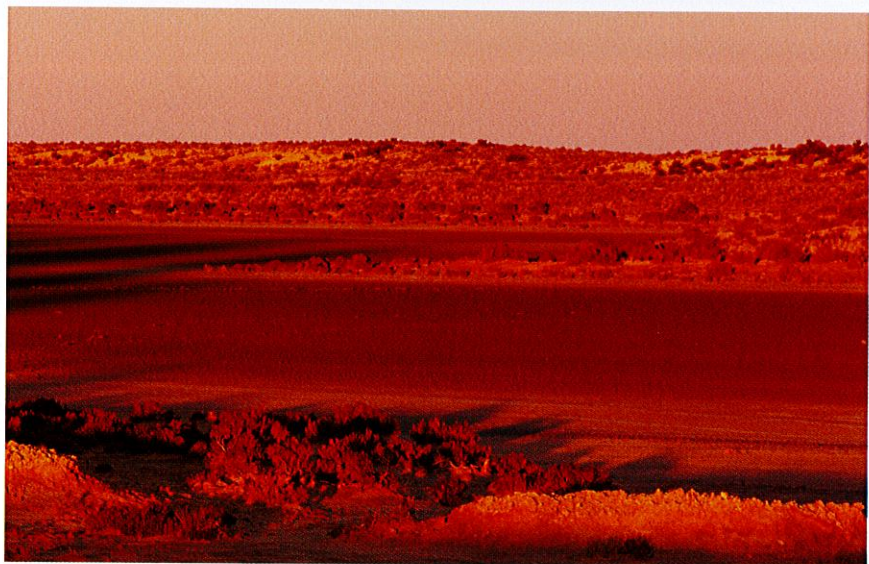


**Above** Animals that once occurred on the Nullarbor Plain have been reintroduced at safe havens such as Faure Island in Shark Bay.

Photo - Marie Lochman

**Right** Salt lake north-west of Rawlinna.

Photo - Jiri Lochman



## The present and future

The western barred bandicoot or marl (*Perameles bougainville*) became extinct on mainland Australia in the 1940s, though it persists in the wild on Bernier and Dorre islands in the Shark Bay World Heritage area. The species has been reintroduced to the adjacent Heirisson Prong which has been fenced and is subject to feral predator control, and to Faure Island which is predator free (see 'Return to Faure Island', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2007). The other five species collected by Bill persist in much-contracted ranges on mainland Australia. The western barred bandicoot, mulgara (*Dasyercus cristicauda*), bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) and plains rat (*Pseudomys australis*) are considered rare or likely to become extinct in Western Australia, and gazetted as such to enable protection.

Subfossil remains, preserved specimens, and the recorded accounts of Aboriginal people and Europeans document the rapid decline, severe

range contractions and, in some cases, the extinction of almost 20 per cent of mammal species across Australia since European settlement. Reversing the consequences of extensive changes in ecosystems, and predation by introduced animals, is a challenge to all those who value the ongoing conservation of Australian plants and animals. To help secure the future of threatened mammals, DEC is creating managed areas free from introduced predators and domestic stock on Dirk Hartog Island (see 'New national park to be cat free', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2011), the Peron Peninsula, Perup Nature Reserve (see 'The jewel in the crown', *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 2011) and at Lorna Glen, a former pastoral lease

(see 'Into the wild: restoring rangelands fauna', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 2009), where native fauna formerly abundant in these areas may once again flourish. With such reintroductions the land and its animals may slowly return to the way they once were—the way people like Bill Wills remembered them.

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