ARE THERE ANY DIBBLERS LEFT?

In 1967 considerable publicity was given to the re-discovery of the Dibbler *(Antechinus apicalis)*. The Fauna Wardens Bulletin Vol. 1, No. 3, June 1967, described how the Dibblers had been sent to La Trobe University in the hope that a captive breeding colony would be established. News has since been received that the Dibblers failed to reproduce and it now appears that a further attempt must be made to locate more specimens. Nearly four years have elapsed since the Dibbler hit the headlines and readers will probably welcome the following summary of events that have taken place following the rediscovery of this rare marsupial.

Until 1967 the Dibbler had been considered extinct for about 83 years. It is a small carnivorous marsupial with a body length of about 4½ to 5½ inches and a distinctive tail which tapers sharply in its 3½ inch length. The forearms are distinctly reddish, but the overall appearance of the fur is grey-brown, speckled with white. This speckled appearance is evident from the eyes almost to the tip of the tail. Close examination of individual hairs reveals that, from the base, each hair changes colour from grey to reddish-grey to pure white. A very striking feature is a ring of near-white fur around each eye.

The Dibbler was rediscovered when Honorary Warden Mr Michael Morcombe was attempting to collect a live specimen of the Honey Possum to photograph for ancillary illustrations in a book he was writing on wildflowers. The Honey Possum is often seen on banksia and other large wildflowers, so Mr Morcombe constructed cylindrical traps of flywire strengthened with medium thickness fencing wire to fit over the flowers. The traps were originally set near Oyster Harbour, Albany, but after three unsuccessful days they were shifted to a site east of Albany, between Cheyne Beach and Lookout Point. On the morning of January 27, a trap set about two feet from the ground caught a small female marsupial. The Dibbler had been found again after 83 years.

Two days later a second Dibbler was trapped, this time a male. At this stage, Mr Morcombe was understandably unsure of the identity of the animals he had caught, so he kept them for several months and observed their habits. He learnt that Dibblers are agile climbers who move swiftly and surely along branches and twigs, often springing a foot or more from branch to branch. Thin branches or twigs are grasped between the thumb and the first digit, but when branches are too thick to allow this the Dibbler uses the full claw for climbing, with the tail acting as a balance. During rapid descent the tail is pressed firmly against twigs and stiff leaves to give stability. If disturbed the Dibbler will drop to the ground and burrow vigorously beneath loose leaves.

Dibblers are not entirely nocturnal, but do tend to shun harsh sunlight and glare. Consequently they are most active in early morning or early evening, and during the day sleep beneath a mantle of leaves. Mr Morcombe noted that, in captivity, his Dibblers formed a chamber of leaves and twigs re-inforced with shredded paper. It is thought that in their wild state, a similar type of nest would be built in a hollow in the ground.

Both Dibblers were caught on banksia flowers and nocturnal examination shows that in addition to an abundance of nectar there are large numbers of small insects associated with these plants. In captivity the Dibblers licked and probed fresh banksia flowers for nectar and insects. Small insects were held in the paws to be eaten, but larger prey such as spiders were buffeted and disabled by being snatched up, bitten and dropped several times before finally being eaten.

After several months Mr Morcombe sent a photograph of his two animals and a request for further information to Mr B. Marlow, the Curator of Mammals at the Australian Museum in Sydney, who suggested that Dr David Ride of the W.A. Museum be shown the animals. Dr Ride positively identified them as Dibblers, and shortly afterwards led a small party to the original capture site. Here a further female was discovered who subsequently gave birth to seven small joeys. The adults and young were then forwarded to La Trobe University in Melbourne where it was hoped to establish a captive population. The three adults died within one year and although the young reached sexual maturity they failed to reproduce and died also. However, by comparison with events in other species of *Antechinus* it was possible to gain a reasonable idea of their pattern of reproduction.

Since 1967 further attempts have been made to locate live specimens; these have been unsuccessful, but it would be naively pessimistic to assume that the three found in 1967 were the total population. It is hoped that we have not seen the last of the Dibbler; perhaps another Honorary Warden will follow in Mr Morcombe's footsteps.