Our Diminishing Heritage

Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies (*Petrogale penicillata*) were once found on steep rocky hills and cliffs over much of mainland Australia, but populations have decreased considerably in eastern Victoria, south-eastern New South Wales and south Western Australia. The species is apparently quite common however, in tropical northern Australia.

The taxonomy of rock wallabies is very confused and it is not clear just how many species there are. Some rock wallabies are very different, e.g. the Yellow-footed Rock Wallaby and the Little Rock Wallaby while others are very similar, e.g. the Purple-necked Rock Wallaby and Rothschild's Rock Wallaby. Dr. W. D. L. Ride in his book "A Guide to the Native Mammals of Australia," recognises seven species, four of which occur in Western Australia. These are the Little Rock Wallaby (*Peradorcas concinna*) and the Short-eared Rock Wallaby (*Petrogale brachyotis*) which are found in the Kimberleys, Rothschild's Rock Wallaby (*Petrogale rothschildi*) from the western Pilbara and Dampier Archipelago and the Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby.

The agility and sure-footedness of these wallabies is amazing and they can be observed leaping from rock to rock, negotiating precipitous cliffs and gullies with ridiculous ease. That they can be seen during daylight hours is unusual and, in fact, of Western Australia's marsupials, only the Numbat is more diurnal in its habits. Rock wallabies will "sun bathe" on rocky outcrops but they do seem to require fairly stable temperatures; it has been suggested that their wide range throughout the continent can be attributed to their rocky environment which maintains constant temperatures. Dr. E. Ealey of the Division of Wildlife Research, C.S.I.R.O., while studying habitat requirements in the Pilbara, found deep caves among the rocks where the air temperature did not fall below 27°C or rise above 32°C although the shade temperature outside varied between 18°C and 46°C.

Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies vary in appearance over much of their range, but all have a distinctive long, slender tail which is bushy or tufted at the tip; the tail is not used to support the weight of the body to the extent that it is in other wallabies, but is used rather to balance the body when jumping. The hind feet have thick "pimpled" pads which prevent slipping on the rocks.

Because the range of this animal has been much reduced in Western Australia, especially in the south-west, the species is fully protected and has been declared "rare and likely to become extinct". Several areas which have been set aside as fauna sanctuaries and reserves harbour Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies, viz.:—

1. Recherche Archipelago Wildlife Sanctuary (Reserve No. A22796).
2. Mt. Caroline Wildlife Sanctuary (Reserve No. 11047).
3. Mt. Stirling Wildlife Sanctiary (Reserve No. 11048).
4. Nangeen Hill Wildlife Sanctuary (Reserve No. 23187).
5. Tutakin Hill Water Reserve (Reserve No. 11039).
6. Kalbarri National Park (Reserve No. A27004).
7. Barlee Range Wildlife Sanctuary (Reserve No. A26808).
8. Barrow Island Wildlife Sanctuary (Reserve No. A11648).
9. Depuch Island (Reserve for Aborigines).

A small population is known also on private property near Bruce Rock.

With a few notable exceptions, e.g. Kalbarri National Park and Barlee Range Wildlife Sanctuary, the reserves for the conservation of the Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby are small (under 350 acres) and as was explained in S.W.A.N.S. Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 42, reserves of this size are subject to external influences such as predation by foxes, etc. That isolated pockets still occur in the south-west as islands in a sea of wheat is due to the indestructability of the animals' rocky habitat and the protection it affords. Unfortunately no research has been carried out on Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies, and it cannot be said with any certainty that these isolated populations will survive indefinitely. It is to be hoped that the reduction in the range in the south-west has been halted, but as the north of the State is opened up, the remaining habitat will be further reduced and reserves are needed in suitable areas.

The Department is most interested to receive information on areas where rock wallabies occur anywhere in the State.

The penalty of $1,000 which can be imposed for interfering with these animals is a sizeable deterrent to miscreants, but the real need is more research and more sanctuaries. There are good populations and ideal habitat in the Kimberleys which should be protected now, before short-sighted man has the opportunity to destroy another part of his own heritage.

BRUSH-TAILED ROCK WALLABY

Petrogale penicillata

Close up of head; the two colours of the ear are particularly clearly shown

This animal is one held by the W.A. University. It is a hybrid and is probably a cross between a male Recherche (Hackett's) Rock Wallaby and a female Rothschild's Rock Wallaby

DISTRIBUTION:

Throughout the state in suitable localities. Now very rare in the southern half of the State.
Also found on Westall (Coombe), Wilson, Salisbury and Mondrain Islands in the Recherche Archipelago, Barrow Island and Depuch Island in the Pilbara.

LOOKS:

A medium-sized wallaby with a very long tail. Colour very variable. General colour grey-brown; often with light facial stripe; black stripe under arm-pit with pale stripe behind it; tail black with outer half bushy; ears—bottom half pale, top half black.

LENGTH:

Head and body—480-530 mm approx.
Tail —440-480 mm approx.

WEIGHT:

4-5.5 kg approx.

BREEDING:

Like all the kangaroo family these wallabies produce only one young at a time. Little information is available on breeding seasons, growth, etc.

DIET:

Again little information is available. Incidental observations show that they are grazing animals. They probably do not drink water as most areas where they occur have no fresh water available.