

Our Diminishing Heritage

The Woylie (Brush-tailed Bettong; Brush-tailed Rat Kangaroo) was once very common in the southern half of Australia, and its range extended through south-western Australia, southern South Australia and north-western Victoria to central New South Wales. It was probably once the most common and widest ranging of all rat kangaroos, but it was this very abundance which led to its destruction. Around the turn of the century, dealers in Adelaide were selling Woylies at ninepence a head for coursing, and disease and competition from rabbits and foxes were additional factors in the decline of the species. In the eastern states this decline was so rapid that Wood Jones writing in 1923 said "... this animal seems to have disappeared from South Australia . . . so far as this State is concerned, the race is represented only by some half-dozen skulls".

The Woylie was known by early naturalists as a kangaroo rat, for although it is a small marsupial, it does look like a large grey rat. The common name of Brush-tailed Rat Kangaroo is still used although the aboriginal name (Woylie) is receiving increasing acceptance and useage.

There are five genera of rat kangaroo which can be split into two groups, bettongs and potoroos. The bettongs, with the exception of the Boodie (*Bettongia lesueur*) which digs burrows (see S.W.A.N.S. Vol. 4, No. 1), all make their nests on the surface. The Woylie's nest is made in a hollow, usually scratched out at the base of an overhanging tussock or bush, and is generally well concealed and difficult to detect. When the nest is being made the nesting material is carried curled up in the Woylie's prehensile tail; this habit has also been observed with Woylies kept in captivity.

Woylies are partly carnivorous and, in captivity, are avid meat eaters. In the wild, food consists mainly of herbage and tuberous roots.

Woylies have five toes on the forefeet with long nails which are used for scratching holes to search for roots and grubs and for holding the food (in possum-fashion) when eating. In those times when they were more abundant they were known to gather around camps at night and approach close to people for scraps of food. Although they were once used for coursing and obviously could not outrun dogs, they are extremely agile and nimble animals.

Sadly, it does appear that the species is now extinct in eastern Australia and South Australia. That Woylies remain at all in Western Australia is due to one or all of a number of factors, including the later introduction of

predators, the later clearing of the land for agriculture and our geographical isolation. However, the range of the species in Western Australia has been reduced drastically and Woylies are now known to survive only in three localities in the South West—

in Tutanning Wildlife Sanctuary, east of Pingelly
at Dryandra

in the Tone/Perup River area east of Manjimup.

Existing known populations would appear to be relatively scarce. The Tutanning Reserve is set aside in perpetuity for the conservation of flora and fauna and the other two areas are State Forest. There has been some concern that the much-criticised woodchip industry will destroy Woylie habitat, but the Forests Department has excluded that part of the State Forest where Woylies are known to exist from the woodchip industry area.

It is possible that there are other isolated pockets of Woylies still to be found in the South West. If so, then it is important that these areas be set aside and conserved. The Department's research staff will be most interested to hear from any reader who makes a positive sighting of a Woylie outside its present known range.



WOYLIE

Bettongia penicillata

DISTRIBUTION:

Formerly found in southern S.A., north-western Vic. (Murray) and central N.S.W., but now apparently restricted to the south-west of W.A.

HABITAT:

Dry sclerophyll woodland.

LOOKS:

Medium, slender build; similar to a large grey rat.

General colour—grey-brown; undersurface yellowish-white.

Ears—short and rounded with yellow hairs.

Head—short; snout is naked.

Tail—prehensile, tapering; with crest of black hair on tip.

Feet—5 toes on forefeet; 4 on hindfeet; long claws.

WEIGHT:

Male and Female—900 g (average from W.A. Museum specimens).

LENGTH:

Male and Female—Head and Body 327 mm (Museum specimens)

Tail 296 mm (Museum specimens)

BREEDING:

Nests are made of grass and sticks; usually well hidden. Tip of tail is curled around nesting material to carry it. Probably breed throughout the year.

Litter size—one.

