

MULGARAS ON DISPLAY

In response to a request from the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Mr. Pat Green, Warburton Project Manager, obtained a pair of unusual carnivorous marsupials and sent them to the Department's Wildlife Research Centre.

After various data were recorded and photographs taken, the Mulgaras (an Aboriginal name) were sent to the Perth Zoological Gardens for housing in the new nocturnal house.

The Mulgaras (*Dasyercus cristicauda*) were caught near the Laverton Road in sand dunes, eight kilometres west of Warburton. Local Aboriginal women covered the holes and dug out the burrows, finding a male and female with four young. Two, a pair about two-thirds grown (the female weighing 29.3 grams and the male 34.0 grams) were sent to Perth and the others were kept for food. They are considered by the locals to be a delicacy.

This rat-sized animal is one of about 120 species of marsupial found in Australia and like other desert animals, its numbers, which fluctuate greatly, are dependant upon good and bad seasons. It is a nocturnal animal and escapes the intense heat of the day by staying in its burrows, or sheltering under tussocks of grass. The animal is also active by day and has been seen to briefly bask in the sun, as well as search for prey.

The beast has a thick-set body and a broad head. The fur is reddish or sandy-brown and the tail is short and thick with a crest of black hairs at the tip. It is found from the Pilbara in Western Australia to south-western Queensland, usually in spinifex country among sand ridges and stoney deserts.

The Mulgara was once given the name of "Canning's Little Dog" by men of the expedition led by Canning to open up and survey the Great Stock Route from Wiluna to Halls Creek across the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia.

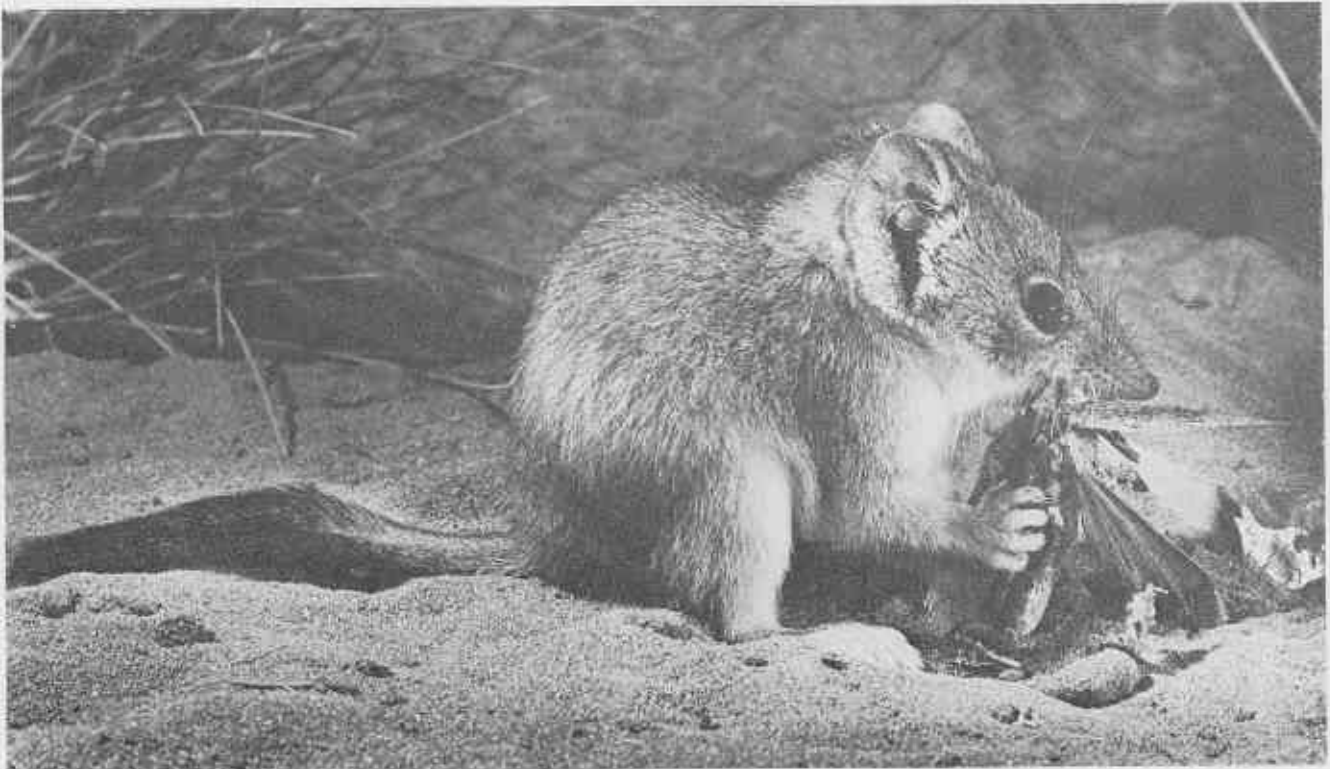
It lives basically on insects, small lizards and mice. A number of studies carried out by officers of the C.S.I.R.O. have disclosed interesting facts about the Mulgaras' ability to survive in the desert without ever drinking water or eating succulent plants. By eating 25 per cent of its body weight each day (in particular, mice), the Mulgara obtains enough fluid from the lean flesh to activate its specially developed kidneys. Urea can be excreted in a highly concentrated dry form.

Professor Wood Jones, an eminent zoologist, reported that the Mulgaras' ability to multiply, in the event of a mouse plague, was astonishing.

Digging burrows is done with the forepaws and the movements are so fast that sand flies out between the hind legs in an almost continual spray. At the early stage of digging its burrow, when its head and part of the body is underground, the Mulgara is vulnerable to predation. At this stage of excavating, it digs for a few seconds, leaps backwards and spins around to face away from the hole. Digging is resumed after a brief survey for danger. At the end of a burrow, a nest of dead grass and bark or similar material is made.

While kept in captivity, it has been found that young were born thirty days after mating. From birth, six or seven young bury into the fur and cling to the female's nipples. The female Mulgara does not have a proper pouch. Tufts of longer hairs on a shallow ridge are found along each side of the mammary area. The mother drags and bumps the babies around until after six weeks, when they are left in the nest. At approximately twelve weeks, the young begin their own short excursions.

The carnivorous marsupials represent one of the most persistent and oldest order of mammals in Australia. They are found in all habitats including the desert and are no less fierce than their relatives, the Tasmanian Tiger, the Tasmanian Devil and the native cats.



The Mulgara—(*Dasyercus cristicauda*)

Photo by A. G. Wells