

Our Diminishing Heritage

Marl was the name given by Aborigines to one of the most charming of the smaller marsupials found only in Australia. It is a member of the bandicoot family.

In scientific circles, the Marl is known as *Perameles bougainville*. It is also known as the Little Barred Bandicoot.

Aboriginal names are more preferable today as often the first European settlers misnamed many of this continent's animals, likening them to species seen in their homeland.

The Marl was first made known to science as a result of the voyage of the French corvette "Uranie", commanded by Freycinet which visited Shark Bay in 1818. The expedition carried no biologists, but the medical officers Quoy and Gaimard made collections and published an account of them in 1824. The Marl was included in that list.

Quoy and Gaimard obtained a specimen at the foot of the elevated sand dunes of Peron Peninsular, Shark Bay, where they had seen several animals and tracks were common.

The animals were once found across Australia from the islands of Shark Bay to the Liverpool Plains in New South Wales. It was common in some localities across Australia early in the nineteenth century. The last specimen sighted in New South Wales was in 1867 and the taking of a single specimen by the Western Australian Museum at Onslow in 1909 is thought to be the last sighting on the Australian mainland. The Marl is now thought to be extinct on the mainland. The main reasons are unknown, but the introduction of exotic predators such as the domestic cat and fox, plus habitat alteration by rabbits and stock seem obvious factors.

Today it seems that the species is confined to Bernier and Dorre Islands in Shark Bay, Western Australia. The first specimen from there was taken by Tunney on Dorre Island in 1899. In 1906, Shortridge feared that the introduction of cats to the islands had caused him to only find a weathered skull on Bernier Island. Lipfert, however, obtained 12 specimens during his visit in 1910.

Because of the drastic change in its status, the Marl is classified throughout Australia as rare "likely to become extinct or in need of special protection".

On an expedition to Bernier and Dorre Islands in July 1959, a research team found several specimens including females with joeys. One female had a pair of joeys (crown rump length 12.5 mm) and another had a pair each weighing 9.5 g. A third animal, when frightened, relaxed its pouch muscles and dropped a 11 g joey as it fled. This female did not return for its young and it was therefore unknown if she had another suckling. A fourth female had one joey weighing 17 g.

On this expedition, the Marl was commonly found at night among sandhills. At one stage, an animal appeared at the lighted doorway of a tent and another fossicked at arm's length in the camp kitchen.

Occasionally, specimens were seen in daylight, then suddenly appeared from underfoot in low scrub and disappeared into dense vegetation with rapid leaps.

The Little Barred Bandicoot once occurred in many habitats throughout Australia, including woodland, heath, sandplain, desert and stoney ridges.

This animal, as in all the long-nosed bandicoots, feeds mainly on small invertebrates such as insect larvae, earthworms and spiders. They have also been known to eat berries, seeds and fibrous roots.

The nest is well concealed in vegetation with a flattened heap of sticks and plant debris. The animal simply burrows through this covering of the nest entrance each time concealing its pathway behind.

The Marl is an active solitary animal of the dusk or twilight like most of Australia's marsupials. It has been found to become very tame in captivity but is extremely aggressive to its own kind.

This animal is one of those in Western Australia which, since the advent of European settlement, has changed status from once common in its localities to the list of rare and endangered and likely to become extinct.

The continued survival of the Marl seems to be dependent upon the retention of Bernier and Dorre Islands as nature reserves and it is hoped that no changes will ever be allowed to take place on these islands which would in any way interfere with the last remaining habitat of the species.

Breeding Season

Winter and Spring up to three young carried in a back-opening pouch.

Description

A light delicate build, head and body length of adult approximately 28 cm with tail length about 9 cm. The thin ears are held erect, about 4 cm long, broad at the base and tapering to oval tips. The feet, like kangaroos, are elongated, the second and third toes strongly clawed. The nose is long, thin and pointed with the muzzle naked and flesh-coloured. The soft fur is grey-brown on the shoulders and back, with three black bars radiating downwards from the black loins. The chin, throat, belly and tops of the feet are white, the inner part of the limbs is white and the outer part smokey grey, whilst the dark brown tail is finely tapered.

Distribution

Previously on the Australian continent from Shark Bay in Western Australia, through South Australia and along the length of the Murray River to the Liverpool Plains of New South Wales. Now only found on Bernier and Dorre Islands in Shark Bay, Western Australia.



Photo by A. G. Wells

THE MARL
PERAMELES bougainville

