

# Conservation of the Dalgyte

Few Australians are familiar with one of the country's most beautiful and graceful native mammals, the Rabbit-eared Bandicoot, otherwise known as the Dalgyte or Bilby. In addition to its prominent, rabbit-like ears, the Dalgyte boasts long silky hair over most of its body and a strikingly marked black and white tail. Despite its distinctive appearance, however, and its canter-like movement, the Dalgyte is mostly unknown to the average Australian as it is now confined to remote and arid desert areas where few travellers venture.

However, the confinement of the Dalgyte to these remote desert areas is relatively recent. Previously, the animal was regarded as quite common in such areas as the wheatbelt of Western Australia and the more arid woodlands of Victoria and New South Wales, areas where they are now completely unknown. The Dalgyte was last reported in Victoria in 1866 and in New South Wales in 1912, and disappeared from the W.A. wheatbelt during the 1930's and 1940's.

▼ The Dalgyte (*Macrotis lagotis*) This specimen is from the Warburton area. (Photo copyright A. G. Wells).

Although considerable work has been carried out on the biology of Dalgytes it has mostly been on captive populations and little is known of the animal's life in the wild. Consequently, it has been difficult to assess its true status and the full reasons for its decline over much of Australia. With this in mind, a joint programme between the Northern Territory Conservation Commission and the Western Australian Wildlife Research Centre to fully investigate the Dalgyte in the wild is about to get underway with the financial assistance of the World Wildlife Fund Australia.

The principal aim of the project is to establish the current distribution and general abundance of the Dalgyte to assess the range of habitats which it occupies, and to try to understand the reasons for its decline. The data so obtained will greatly assist in deciding which existing National Parks and Reserves are suitable for the re-introduction of the species and/or if necessary, which areas might need to be acquired for this purpose.

The reasons for the decline of the species are not clear although it is thought probable that competition for food and burrows with rabbits is involved. Destruction of habitat by livestock such as sheep and cattle and predation by introduced cats and foxes may also be important and it is hoped the project will shed further light on this aspect.







▲ Tracks of Dalgyte travelling from left to right.

▼ Dalgyte burrow, Tanami Desert, Northern Territory. (Photo A. A. Burbidge)







▲ Characteristic Dalgyte scat.

▼ Typical Dalgyte diggings made in search of termites.



The project is expected to span at least three years as the remoteness of the present Dalgyte populations and their apparent low densities will make field work both difficult and time consuming.

The Dalgyte has important mythological and totemic status among the Aborigines of Central Australia and the immense decline of the species in recent years has caused a great deal of concern to these people, particularly to the tribal elders. Consequently, initial work will involve liaison with Aboriginal communities around the desert region, and familiarisation of the general habits of the Dalgyte and the conditions necessary for its existence, e.g. food sources, soil conditions needed for constructing burrows, and the vegetation communities normally associated with the presence of the species. Much of this early work will be carried out in the Tanami Desert with the assistance of Wildlife Research personnel from the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory.

Using the information so gained, survey work will be carried out in other regions outside the Northern Territory, such as around Broome, Warburton and the Blackstone Range area in Western Australia. Here the diet and habitat studies will continue once colonies are located and, where possible, live specimens will be captured for taxonomic study and contribution to a captive population.

Survey work is also hoped to be undertaken in Queensland toward the end of the three year period.

The following information is based on present knowledge of the Dalgyte. Unlike other bandicoots, the Dalgyte always lives in a burrow and is a very accomplished digger. Their burrows generally have only one entrance which is often concealed by spinifex or other low vegetation. In common with other bandicoots, the Dalgyte seems to be a solitary animal and often has several burrows, which it occupies in turn, scattered over its range. The animal is carnivorous and has been reported to eat both meat and insects, with beetle larvae and termites being its principal food. The breeding season appears to be between late summer and early winter and the litter size ranges from one to three young.