HORSES HELPING THE CONSERVATION CAUSE

Rangelands Restoration is a conservation program that is restoring native mammals and ecosystem health on Lorna Glen, a 245,000 ha ex-pastoral lease in the arid zone of central WA that is jointly managed by DEC and the local Wiluna Martu people. Key restoration activities include controlling introduced predators (feral cats, wild dogs and foxes) and herbivores (cattle and camels), boundary fencing, managing fire and reintroducing a suite of native mammals that once occurred in the region, but which have become locally extinct.

Captive bred bilbies were reintroduced to Lorna Glen in 2007 and were initially monitored by radio tracking and trapping. However, over time, the bilbies dispersed and because of their great mobility, mostly solitary behaviour and the nature of the terrain, it has been virtually impossible to continue to monitor them using trapping, searching on foot or using machines such as ATVs. This is where horses come in. In March 2011, a trial was carried out using observers on stock horses who rode transects through the bush in search of signs of bilbies such as burrows, digs and scats. The trial was a great success. Horses were able to traverse country not readily accessible to ATVs, were less damaging to soil and vegetation than machines, had greater endurance and speed than people on foot, and were an elevated platform from which to observe bilby tracks, digs and burrows. In May 2012, six volunteer riders participated in the 'great bilby muster', surveying some 36,000 ha over four days, with each rider covering about 20 km each day. A total of 247 observations of bilby burrows, tracks and diggings were recorded, providing valuable information about bilby density and distribution on Lorna Glen.

The intention is to repeat the survey every two years to see whether the bilby population is increasing, decreasing or stable. To this end, we are seeking volunteer riders and horses to help out in May 2014. If you are interested, please contact Dr Neil Burrows at neil.burrows@dec.wa.gov.au

Neil Burrows

Did you know ?

... that the species richness (number of different species) of aquatic invertebrates in gnammas (rock pools) on outcrops in the WA Wheatbelt is 45 to 60 species per rock outcrop? This is very much richer that that recorded from rock pools in the eastern states or from other parts of the world (around 20 species per outcrop). Not only is there great diversity but many of the species are local endemics. It is thought that these pools were important refugia during past periods of climate change and that they became particularly ideal locations for speciation.

Brian Timms, University of NSW