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Plants & Animals

Bilby



Macrotis lagotis

The bilby has survived where other desert-dwellers have disappeared, and it is one of very few medium-sized mammals still found in WA's desert regions.

In recent years, there have been calls for this strikingly attractive and uniquely Australian mammal to replace the Easter bunny, and each year, the major Australian supermarket chain [Coles](#) donates funds from the sale of chocolate bilbies to wildlife research.

DESCRIPTION: Bilbies have long rabbit-like ears, a long pointed snout and a long black tail, which is white on the latter half. They are covered with soft bluish-grey fur. Males may grow up to half a metre long, with a tail up to 290 millimetres, but females are smaller.

OTHER NAMES: Dalgyte, rabbit-eared bandicoot, ninu, walpajirri.

STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION: Once distributed throughout arid and semi-arid Australia, the bilby is now confined to northern deserts, including parts of the Pilbara. It is a threatened species.

PREFERRED HABITAT: This species inhabits open arid country with spinifex grasslands and acacia shrublands.

LIFE HISTORY: Bilbies are largely solitary, widely dispersed and found in low numbers. They are comparatively slow moving but have superb

hearing. They also have strong claws and are very efficient burrowers. In sandy soil they can disappear from sight within three minutes. Their burrows go down in a steep spiral to a depth of around two metres. The steep descent makes it very difficult for predators such as foxes and cats to unearth a bilby. However, they were a favourite food of Aboriginal people.

Bilbies dig burrows wherever they go and may use as many as two dozen at any one time. These nocturnal animals always feed close to a burrow, mostly within 100 metres or so, and may visit several burrows each night before choosing one in which to spend the daylight hours. The main food items are bulbs and insects such as termites, witchetty grubs and honeypot ants. Bilbies have a high breeding rate in good times and can breed throughout the year, an adaptation which allows them to quickly take advantage of good seasons in the harsh desert environment.

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HOW TO SEE THEM: Desert travellers may be able to locate the burrows and diggings of these secretive animals.

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