

NATIONAL BILBY DAY – 13TH SEPTEMBER



Macrotis lagotis, the Bilby, is the largest member of the family of marsupials called bandicoots. They have long pointed noses, huge ears and a black tails with a white crest. The large ears of the Bilby are almost hairless. As well as providing great hearing, they are also believed to help the Bilby regulate its temperature.

The Bilby is one of Australia's most highly endangered species, and has often been used by Government agencies and conservation organizations to highlight the plight of wildlife species. They live in spiraling burrows which they dig up to 2 metres deep. A Bilby may have up to a dozen burrows. Bilbies are truly nocturnal. They don't emerge from their burrows until at least an hour after dusk, and retreat about an hour before dawn.

Bilbies are omnivorous. They eat such things as seeds, spiders, insects and their larvae, bulbs, fruit, fungi and small animals and are mostly solitary, but sometimes live in small groups of up to four.

Before European settlement, Bilbies were distributed over approximately 70% of the Australian mainland. Their range included most of the country west of the Great Dividing Range and were occasionally seen on the coastal plains. Presently Bilbies can be found in a small area in south-west Queensland and in isolated colonies spread across parts of Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Bilbies are listed as Vulnerable in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Endangered in Queensland, and Extinct in the other mainland states.

Major reasons for the decline in Bilby population and distribution are:

- **Loss of habitat:** Agricultural activities now extend over most of Australia's fertile regions, with tree clearing, crop planting and domestic stock grazing making these areas unsuitable for Bilbies. Altered fire patterns have also changed the types and abundance of food plants available to Bilbies.
- **Hunting and trapping:** In the late 18th century Bilbies were hunted for their skins resulting in a large reduction in their population. Many Bilbies were killed by traps and poison baits intended for rabbits.
- **Competition from introduced species:** Cattle and sheep eat the same plants as Bilbies, only they eat much more of them. Rabbits compete for food and burrows with Bilbies. The grazing of cattle, sheep and rabbits reduces native vegetation cover and prevents natural revegetation.
- **Predation from introduced species:** Foxes and feral cats prey on Bilbies. Wherever these introduced pests have spread Bilbies have declined in numbers or disappeared altogether.

Source: "Australia's Endangered Species" REF 574.5290994 KEN, available now in Gecko library