

## Easter Bilby Fact Sheet

### Bilbies

The greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) is a small (rabbit sized) marsupial from Australia's bandicoot family. It has a pointed snout, long pinkish ears, a long black tail with a white tip, and strong forelimbs and claws for burrowing and digging up food. Males are much larger than the females and can be up to 2.5 kg in weight. Each bilby moves between up to 12 burrows in their home range in response to food availability.



Greater Bilby. Image: ANCA (1995)

Bilbies are strictly nocturnal, foraging at night and spending the day sheltered in their burrows. The burrows may be three metres long and spiral down about two metres. Bilbies have very good senses of smell and hearing, and retreat to their burrows if alarmed.

They feed on seeds (which are licked up by their long, slender tongues), fruit and insects (e.g. termites, ants and beetles), insect larvae (e.g. witchetty grubs), bulbs and fungi. Areas where bilbies are active may be pock-marked with shallow holes, up to 10 centimetres deep, where they have been digging for food.

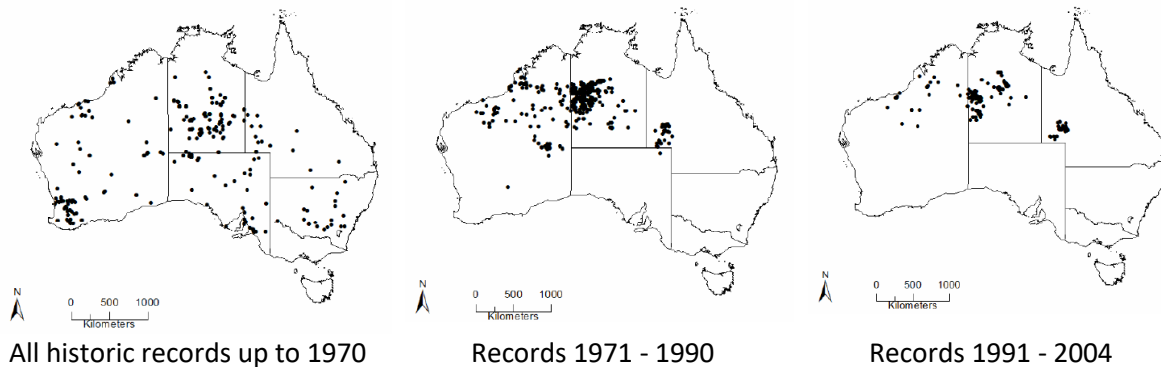
Bilbies usually live on their own, but sometimes form pairs or small groups including the young. They breed whenever conditions are favourable and the young are carried in a pouch after birth. Females can have up to four litters a year in ideal conditions, usually with one to three young each litter. In captivity bilbies live for up to seven years, but their lifespan is probably less in the wild.

Bilbies were important in Aboriginal culture and were known by different names in different traditional lands, e.g. dalgyte, ninu, walpajirri, and yarlpu. Other European names include the rabbit-eared bandicoot and pinkies (originally pincoos, which appears to be derived from pingku, the traditional Kurna word for bilby). Pinky Flat near the Adelaide Oval in South Australia was named in reference to their former abundance adjacent to the River Torrens.

## Conservation status

Bilbies are listed as vulnerable by the national Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. Once common throughout large parts of Australia they are now only found, often in small, isolated populations, in mulga shrublands and spinifex grasslands in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and the Mitchell grasslands of south-west Queensland. They are presumed extinct in New South Wales. A [National Recovery Plan](#) for the Greater Bilby was produced in 2006.

Maps of bilby distribution showing the decline over time.



All historic records up to 1970

Records 1971 - 1990

Records 1991 - 2004

Recorded observations from the national greater bilby database (Pavey, 2006)

NB: Bilbies are now most likely to be found in lands north of the main rabbit zone.

Their demise was a result of many factors. In the late 1800s they were hunted for their skins and were 'by-catch' in rabbit traps. They were pushed out by the development of towns, farms and grazing lands, where domestic stock compete for feed. They are still preyed upon by feral cats and foxes, and they are outcompeted by rabbits.

European wild rabbits reduce the cover provided by native vegetation, prevent the natural regeneration of many plant species, and compete with bilbies for food and burrows. Bilbies are ejected from their burrows by rabbits. Wild rabbits are also food for feral cats and foxes, sustaining the populations of predators and hence maintaining increased predation on bilbies.

An authoritative view from 1925 was that in areas with little predation the bilbies downfall was probably due to 'the extraordinary abundance of rabbits, and the consequent struggle for breeding burrows'. Anecdotal evidence from 1903 linked an increase in locusts with the demise of bilbies (referred to as pincoos), which was attributed to the destructive characteristics of rabbits which when burrowing 'killed every living thing found ... including the very useful pincoo'.

## Easter Bilby's message

Easter Bilby champions the cause of native plants and animals, reclaiming the Australian bush from European wild rabbits. The Easter Bilby's message is, 'it's us or them' – rabbits must be removed so the original inhabitants can survive. Bilbies want their burrows, their food, and their friends back.

The Easter Bilby campaign slogan, '**Bilbies not bunnies**', is for all the displaced and threatened plants and animals. It is a brave and bold effort that can only succeed with help from humans. Without our intervention to control rabbits the plight of bilbies, and other native species, will never improve.

Several educational resources are available telling the Easter Bilby story:

- Books like the 'Easter Bilby's Secret' and 'The BILBY'S RING', and the 'Battle for the Spinifex' poster pack are available through the [Kaye Kessing website](#).
- Haigh's Chocolates promote awareness of the Bilby's message through their [chocolate Easter Bilbies](#).

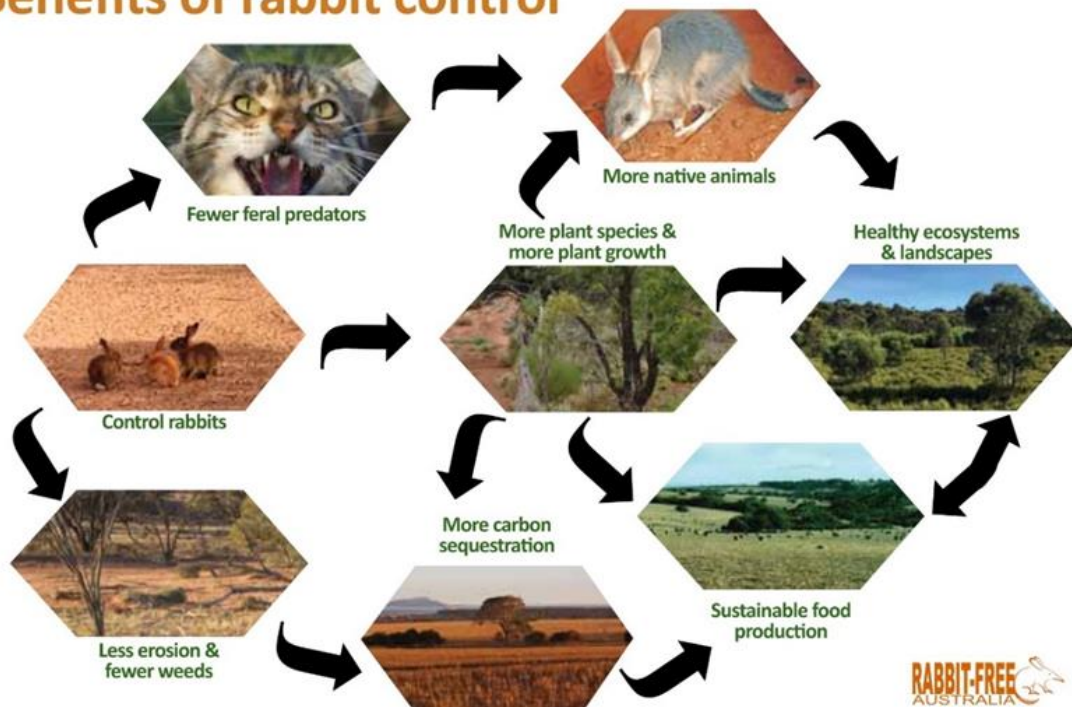
## The rabbit problem

The European wild rabbit is an introduced pest throughout the southern two thirds of Australia. They affect natural environments, primary production, and even townships and infrastructure. Their broad distribution, and the wide range of problems they cause, make them the nation's worst vertebrate pest. European wild rabbits adversely affect over 300 threatened native species, change landscapes, and cause losses of over \$200 million a year to agricultural production.

The benefits of rabbit control include:

- **More plant species and more plant growth.** Rabbits are selective feeders and, even in low numbers, can eliminate entire species of plants. In high numbers they can wreak havoc across entire landscapes.
- **Fewer feral predators.** Rabbits can be easy tucker for introduced predators like feral cats and foxes – helping to sustain those species and hence their predation on native animals.
- **Less erosion and fewer weeds.** The burrowing of rabbits and their destruction of vegetation can leave land bare and open to erosion, the degradation of waterways, and invasion by weeds. Rabbits can also undermine roads, water-tanks and even buildings.
- **More native animals.** More abundant and healthier bushland provides food, shelter and nesting options for a myriad of animals which, together with fewer feral predators, results in healthier populations of native animals ranging from invertebrates to reptiles, birds and mammals.
- **Sustainable food production.** Controlling rabbits results in more crop and pasture growth and production, less damage to infrastructure, and lower costs of production due to less need for pest and weed control.
- **More carbon sequestration.** More plant growth equates to more carbon sequestration.
- **Healthy ecosystems and landscapes.** All of the above improve the health of our Australian landscapes and natural ecosystems.

## Benefits of rabbit control



## References

- ANCA - Greater Bilby Recovery Team (1995) '*Bilby. Australia's threatened plants and animals.*' Australian Nature Conservation Agency. Canberra.
- Jones, Frederick Wood (1925) '*The Mammals of South Australia.*' British Science Guild (South Australian Branch) published by favour of the Honourable the Premier.
- Pavey, C. (2006). '*National Recovery Plan for the Greater Bilby Macrotis lagotis.*' Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts.
- The Advertiser, Friday 1 February 1935, page 23, '*Disappearance of the bandicoot. Destroyer of grasshoppers.*'

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