Easter Bilby

The bilby has been adopted by Rabbit-Free Australia as their mascot; Easter Bilby. This information sheet is about bilbies and Easter Bilby, and why it's 'bilbies not bunnies', especially at Easter.

Habits and Habitat

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 weigh up to 2.5 kg. Bilbies move around between up to 12 burrows in their home range, depending on food availability.

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 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. The little pits dug by bilbies catch seeds and, when it rains, they collect water that helps new plants germinate and grow.

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. walpajirri, yarlpu, paraki and dalgyte. Other European names include the rabbit-eared bandicoot and pinkies (originally pincoos, which appears to be derived from pingku, the traditional Kaurna word for bilby). Pinky Flat near the Adelaide Oval in South Australia was named in reference to their former abundance in that area.

Greater Bilby. Image: ANCA (1995)

Distribution

Bilbies used to be common across much of Australia. Now they are listed as vulnerable by the national *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999)* and only occur in the wild in the northern extremes of their former range. Isolated populations of wild bilbies survive 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 and updated in 2023.

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 development of towns and farms and from grazing lands where domestic stock competed for feed. They are still preyed upon by feral cats and foxes, and they are out-competed by more aggressive rabbits.

The Recovery Plan guides efforts to grow the greater bilby population and the areas in which they occur, both in the wild and in safe havens, and to maintain genetic variability. Managing the threats of predation and competition from feral pests (including rabbits) is an important element of the plan.

Wild European 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 can be ejected from their burrows by rabbits. Wild rabbits are also food for feral cats and foxes, sustaining the populations of predators and leading to 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 whose burrowing 'killed every living thing found … including the very useful pincoo'.

Easter Bilby

Easter Bilby is an Australian Greater Bilby who champions the cause of native plants and animals, reclaiming the Australian bush from wild European rabbits. Easter Bilby's slogan, '**Bilbies not Bunnies'**, is a reminder that rabbits must be removed so the original inhabitants can survive. Bilbies want their burrows, their food, and their friends back.

Easter Bilby stands 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 – such as controlling rabbits, feral predator removal, and revegetation – the plight of bilbies and other native species will never improve.

Getting rid of rabbits brings hope and new life to Australian landscapes. That is at the heart of the Easter Bilby story and why it is 'bilbies not bunnies'.

Several educational resources are available telling the Easter Bilby story:

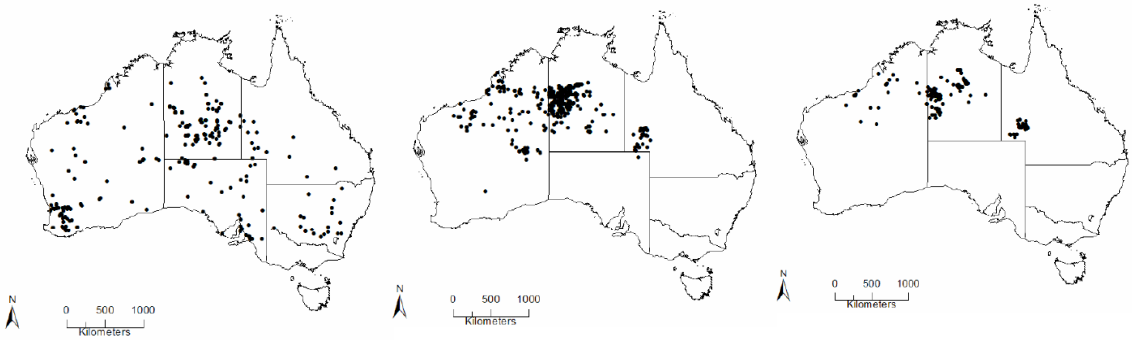
- Easter Bilby's Friends children's books, craft resources and fact sheets are available at: **www.easterbilbysfriends.org.au**
- Easter Bilby children's books and links to licenced Easter Bilby chocolate makers at: **www.rabbitfreeaustralia.org.au/rabbit-free-shop/ website**.

Easter Bilby's Friends

Easter Bilby's Friends are the native animals affected by rabbits and associated pressures. A series of 'Easter Bilby's Friends' children's books introduce various friends and the plants they rely on and show how people are helping them recover and survive.

Craft resources and information on the books and the organisations helping Easter Bilby's Friends are available at **www.easterbilbiesfriends.org.au**.

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.

More information about Rabbit-Free Australia

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Bilbies Not Bunnies

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