

The bilby

Some facts about the bilby from the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia

What is a bilby?

A bilby is a shy, nocturnal marsupial, unique to Australia. It has a grey and white silky coat, long, sensitive ears and a pink pointed nose. It has thick claws and strong forelimbs that enable it to dig rapidly in the desert soil. It is about the size of a cat, with the male growing up to half a metre in length from tip to tail, and weighing around one to two and a half kilos (just under six pounds). It has an unusual black or dark grey tail with a pure white brush at the tip, which it holds in the air behind itself when it walks or runs about. These delightful little creatures normally live for about ten years.

What are the ancient, traditional Aboriginal regional names for the bilby?

MANKARR (Manjilijarra – Western Australia)

WARLPAJIRRI (Warlpiri – Northern Territory)

NINU (Pitjantjatjarra – South Australia)

AHURT (Arrente – Northern Territory)

DOL-GOITCH or DAL-GYTE (also had widespread use)

What is the modern scientific name of the bilby?

Macrotis Lagotis: The greater bilby. (Family: Peramelidae)



Where does a bilby live? What does it eat?

Once much more widespread across the Continent, the bilby now lives in a variety of habitats in arid desert regions of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland, typically where spinifex and dry grasses are found. It selects grassy areas, often with sparse shrubs or low bushes, so that it can move about easily, see or sense any lurking predators, and can always have a clear run back home. It tends to lead a solitary life, digging many spiraling burrows in the ground, which can each be up to three metres (ten feet) long and two metres deep. On average, the bilby will dig a new burrow every couple of weeks, and over a period it will use every one of them. At night, the bilby will leave the protection of its burrow to forage for food, using its long snout to dig out bulbs, tubers, spiders, termites, witchetty grubs and fungi, and using its long tongue to lick up grass seeds that have fallen to the ground. On average, the bilby will move up to about 240 metres (750 feet) from the tunnel entrance of the burrow but, depending on the food supply, it will sometimes move further afield.

At what time of the year are the bilby young born?

Providing that food supply is plentiful, bilbies will breed throughout the year. About fourteen days after the start of development, the tiny babies, measuring only 11mm (about half an inch), will travel along the birth canal and instinctively climb up the mother's silky coat into her backward facing pouch (backward facing so that when she is digging, the pouch will not fill with soil). Like other young mammals, the baby bilby needs its mother's milk to grow, and to gain weight and strength. With marsupials, the teats are positioned inside the pouch (the bilbies have eight) and the baby will latch on to a teat, feeding as and when it requires, in a warm, totally safe environment.

While it is there a tissue forms on each side of its mouth, to help it to hang on tightly. This tissue breaks down about sixty days later, enabling the young bilby to climb in and out of the pouch until it is about eighty days old. For the next couple of weeks, the babies are left in the burrow while the mother is foraging each night for food, but she returns frequently to allow the babies to suckle from her teats. The babies will then go out foraging at night too, sleeping in the burrow during the day and this will continue until there are new-born in her pouch. This period can vary from an average of two weeks after they are permanently out of the pouch, to many weeks later.

How many young does a female bilby have?

Generally one or two, but occasionally three babies are born at one time. Sometimes only one will survive, although rarely, all three might survive.

They mature very quickly and by six months of age the young female is ready to produce a family of her own.

Why have I not seen a bilby yet?

In earlier times, bilbies were found across large areas of Australia, but numbers have declined rapidly in the last one hundred years because of competition for food with farm livestock, and feral rabbits introduced into Australia since European settlement. Other feral animals introduced into Australia, and not native to the Continent, such as feral cats and foxes, have also severely depleted bilby numbers by preying upon them for food, to the point that they have been officially classified nationally, internationally and in the Northern Territory, as Vulnerable to Extinction, while in Queensland under their state legislation the bilby is classified as endangered.

As the bilby is an Endangered Species, what is being done to help the bilbies?

In order to try and save the bilby from extinction, there have been a number of efforts to create predator-free reserves in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and even New South Wales, with varying degrees of success. Importantly, very interesting work is being carried out by local Aboriginal communities in the Outback, close to the areas where the bilby still exists in its traditional habitat and natural environment. For these communities, the bilby is not only a lovely animal, but a very important part of their culture and spiritual beliefs (The Dreaming), literally going back tens of thousands of years. Therefore, for Aboriginal Australians, who did not introduce the feral animals now threatening the bilby's survival, the loss of the bilby would be very deeply felt. Local Aboriginal communities are working alongside Land Council members and scientists to survey and monitor bilby populations, using traditional tracking skills and expert knowledge of the country. Special methods are being developed to reduce the numbers of predators preying on the bilby. These projects are overseen by the Threatened Species Recovery Team, assisted by the Threatened Species Network, and supported by the Natural Heritage Trust, an Australian Government department. In this way, different people and organisations who share a common concern about the threat to the survival of the bilby, and other native wildlife, can all join together to work for the common good.

Where can I see a bilby?

Finding a bilby in their natural habitat is almost impossible. Desert travellers may be able to locate the burrows and diggings of these secretive animals. But you can be sure to see a bilby in many of the various wildlife sanctuaries around Australia.

One such place is the Alice Springs Desert Park where visitors can easily access the diversity of arid zone landscapes, plants and animals, with the added bonus of a managed environmental experience. The Park ensures guaranteed viewing of desert plants and animals, including the greater bilby - and many wild species are attracted to the habitats by the additional water and food resources. For more information visit their website at www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au



Greater bilby [nt] (*Macrotis lagotis sagitta*)

Once widespread across most of the mainland, the bilby is now confined to the deserts of central Australia. Photo supplied by Alice Springs Desert Park

How is the Wildlife Preservation Society helping, and how can you help?

Members of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia have been working since the Society's foundation in May 1909 to preserve and protect Australia's wildlife in all its forms.

Any funds donated to the Society's bilby project will be put towards a bilby conservation project in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

For enquiries please contact our Society:

Email: info@wpsa.org.au

Tel: 02 9556 1537 International: 61 2 9556 1537

Fax: 02 9599 0000 International: 61 2 9599 0000

Address: Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia Inc
PO Box 42
BRIGHTON LE SANDS NSW 2216
Australia

Website: www.wpsa.org.au