

THE BILBIES FIGHT BACK

Under threat from changed fire regimes, reduced habitat and introduced species like foxes and cats, the endangered bilby may be fighting back.

During the past two years, rangers and traditional owners from the Central Australian region have been conducting monitoring surveys of the iconic species, the greater bilby, over a vast area and the signs are that overall bilby numbers aren't dropping.

Under the guidance of traditional owners, the Wu-laign Rangers (Lajamanu), the Muru-warinyi Ankkul Rangers (Tennant Creek) and the Warlpiri Rangers (Yuendumu, Nyirripi and Willowra) have undertaken many surveys of bilbies and other threatened species and to detect foxes and cats.

Surveys have also been carried out by the Elleuwurru community members on Murray Downs station.

The survey found four active burrows, fresh tracks, scats and diggings.

Those discoveries were significant because they were the first confirmed record of bilbies east of the Stuart Highway for at least 25 years and at least 150 kilometres south-east of any other known bilby populations.

On each survey, rangers and traditional owners would drive along a road or track and stop every five kilometres to look for all types of animal tracks or footprints, diggings, scats and burrows.

Any signs were recorded on an electronic cybertracker or data sheet.

Even with the modern technology available though, organisers maintain the survey wouldn't have been possible to the same extent without the skills, particularly tracking skills, of traditional owners.

On one survey in the Lander River area in the Tanami Desert, traditional owners dug up a huge male bilby.

The find was cause for great excitement as many people

knew how to track bilbies, but they'd never actually seen one before.

Aside from the surveys, action is also being taken to reduce fox numbers.

The Warlpiri Rangers have been baiting foxes at Sangsters Bore and the Muru-warinyi Ankkul Rangers at Mungalawurru west of Tennant Creek.

In each of those locations, fox baiting devices specially designed by the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Service so only foxes can take the poisoned bait have been used.

The aim of the baiting program is to give threatened species a chance to rebuild their numbers by reducing the number of foxes.

The recent surveys follow a study 10 years ago and when compared with that survey, the indications are that bilby numbers are being sustained.

This good news though is tempered by the latest results showing that bilbies are disappearing from some areas such as sites near Nyirripi and Kintore.

It's unclear what the reasons behind the reductions in those areas are.

Bilbies only eat bush onions, witchetty grubs and a few types of grass seeds so they can be seriously affected by changes to fire regimes, increases in predators such as foxes and over grazing by cattle.

Therefore, the number of bilbies in an area can reflect the health of the country.

The surveys program has funding for this year and it's hoped it will be able to win support for another three years after that.

Currently it's funded by the Natural Heritage Trust and the Northern Territory Government with assistance provided by the Central Land Council and Desert Wildlife Services.



Top: Castine, Rachel and Eva looking for tracks near Mungalawurru;
Above: Muru-warinyi Ankkul Rangers Louise and Brian using a Cybertracker
Right: Clark Martin with a bilby;
Below: Warlpiri Rangers tracking bilbies at Sangsters Bore.

