

Nature Notes

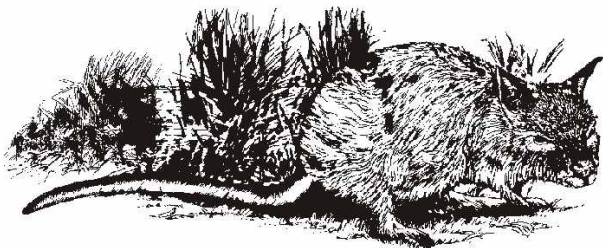
Junior Ranger

NT HARE-WALLABIES

The Mala or Rufous Hare-wallaby *Lagorchestes hirsutus* is a rabbit-sized wallaby once common throughout the spinifex plains and sand dunes of central and Western Australia. Today it is on the edge of extinction.

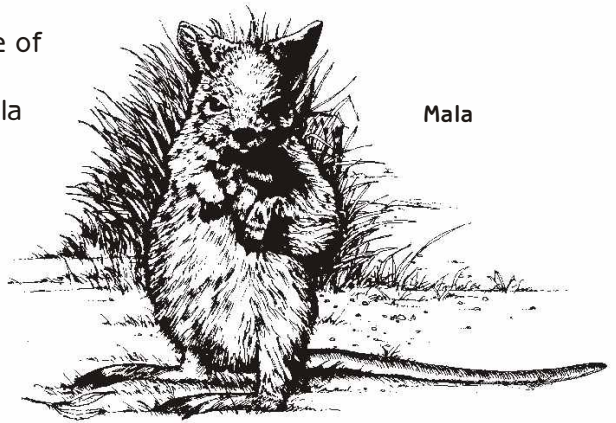
Five species of hare-wallaby were present in Australia at the time of European settlement. Unfortunately two have vanished, they are now extinct. In the NT, one species is still common, while the Mala is classified as 'extinct in the wild'. Luckily Mala still occur in the wild on Bernier and Dorre islands off Shark Bay in Western Australia.

Hare-wallabies get their name from their hare-like speed. During the day they rest in a short burrow under a clump of spinifex, They come out at night (nocturnal) to feed on the seeds and leaves of some grasses.



Spectacled Hare-wallaby

The hare-wallaby found in the Northern Territory is the Spectacled Hare-wallaby, *L. conspicillatus*. It gets the name 'Spectacled' from the red rings around its eyes that look a bit like glasses. They are most common in the spinifex grasslands of the northern half of the Territory but occasionally occur in places to the south like the Tanami Desert.



Mala

SO WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MALA?

Mala were still common in the Tanami Desert until the 1930s, but their numbers crashed dramatically in the years that followed.

The key to understanding the Mala's disappearance is the movement of Aboriginal people off their traditional country to settlements, missions and cattle stations. This put an end to traditional burning, which was common throughout Australia before European settlement. Setting fire to small patches of vegetation in winter as part of their hunting practices, removed a lot of the flammable spinifex and helped prevent big destructive fires in summer.

This 'patch burning' also helped animals like the Mala. It produced a habitat with areas of old vegetation where the animals could shelter, and areas of new growth where the animals could feed. When Aboriginal people stopped burning the Tanami, the habitat changed affecting the Mala and other species.





DID YOU KNOW...

The Mala's scientific name, *hirsutus*, means hairy and refers to its long hair that gives it a shaggy appearance.



As Mala numbers got lower, feral cats and foxes then became more of a problem. With only small isolated groups left, the feral predators gradually ate their way through them.

Although it may be too late for the Mala, attempts are now being made by environmental agencies like Parks & Wildlife and communities to reintroduce patch burning in parts of the Northern Territory.

CAPTIVE BREEDING TRIUMPHS AND TRAGEDIES

Since 1979 Parks and Wildlife scientists and Warlpiri people from the Tanami have been working together to save the Mala. Five wild Mala caught in 1980 were taken to Alice Springs to start a captive breeding program. Although the recovery program has faced set backs over the years, over 200 animals were successfully bred.

Reintroduction into the wild failed because feral cats killed the released population. As a result, a one

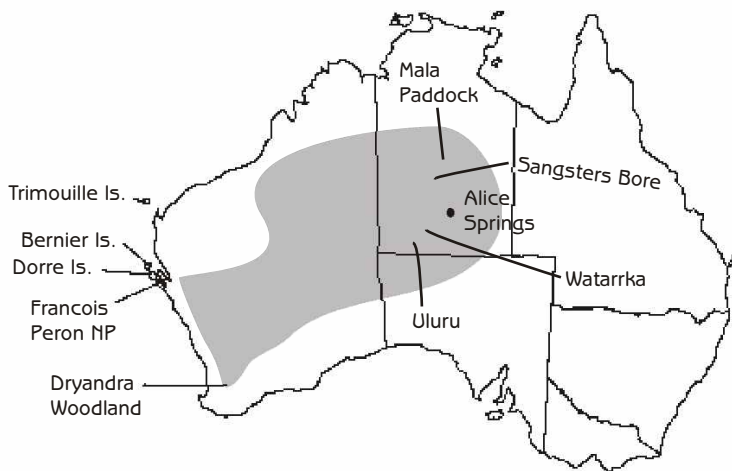
kilometre square paddock was built in 1986 around the release site using an electric fence.

In 1987 one of the last two wild populations at Sangsters Bore were wiped out by foxes. The final population only lasted another four years before a fire destroyed their habitat. In 1997 a single fox killed over 50 Mala inside the Mala Paddock.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

In 1998 Mala were moved to WA and after a successful breeding program have been released on Trimouille Island and into a fenced area at Dryandra Woodland. These successful relocations have increased numbers.

A new step in saving the Mala in the NT started in 2000 when an enclosure was built at Watarrka National Park. This enclosure contains animals from the Tanami Desert Mala Paddock. A new enclosure will also be opened at Uluru at the end of 2005. Both have reliable water sources and the most recent developments in predator proof fencing.



During the day Mala and other Hare-wallabies rest in very short burrows under clumps of spinifex. To find out what the Warlpiri people of Central Australia call these burrows use this grid to decode its name.

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Want to learn more about Hare-wallabies?

Check out the reference books *The Mammals of Australia* edited by Ronald Strahan and *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia* by Menkhorst and Knight.

