

JR Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

SAVING THE MALA

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 at the time of European settlement, two of which are now extinct, with the Mala classified as 'extinct in the wild' in the Northern Territory. Wild populations of Mala are now only found on Bernier and Dorre islands off Shark Bay in Western Australia.

Mala are referred to as hare-wallabies because of their hare-like speed. During the day they rest in a short burrow under a clump of spinifex, and being nocturnal they feed at night on the seeds and leaves of some grasses.

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.

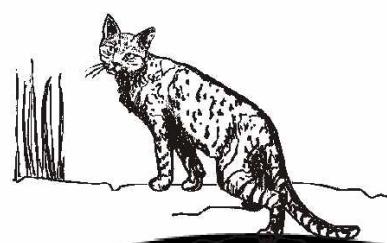
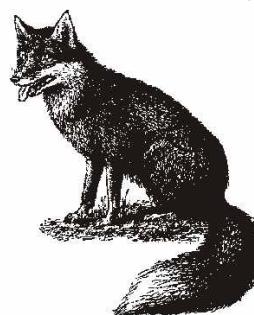
The key to understanding the Mala's disappearance is the movement of Aboriginal people off their traditional country to settlements, missions and cattle stations. This put an end to traditional burning, which was common throughout Australia before European settlement. Setting fire to small patches of 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.



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.



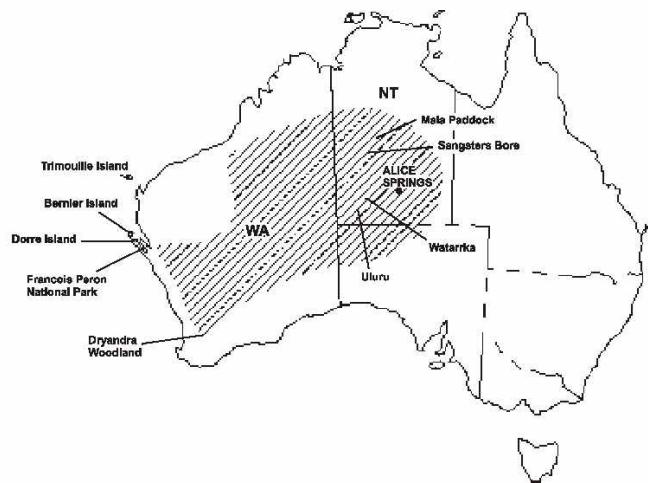
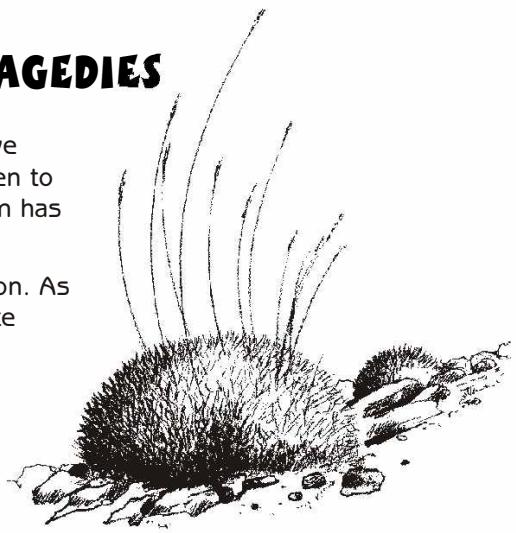


CAPTIVE BREEDING TRIUMPHS AND TRAGEDIES

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.

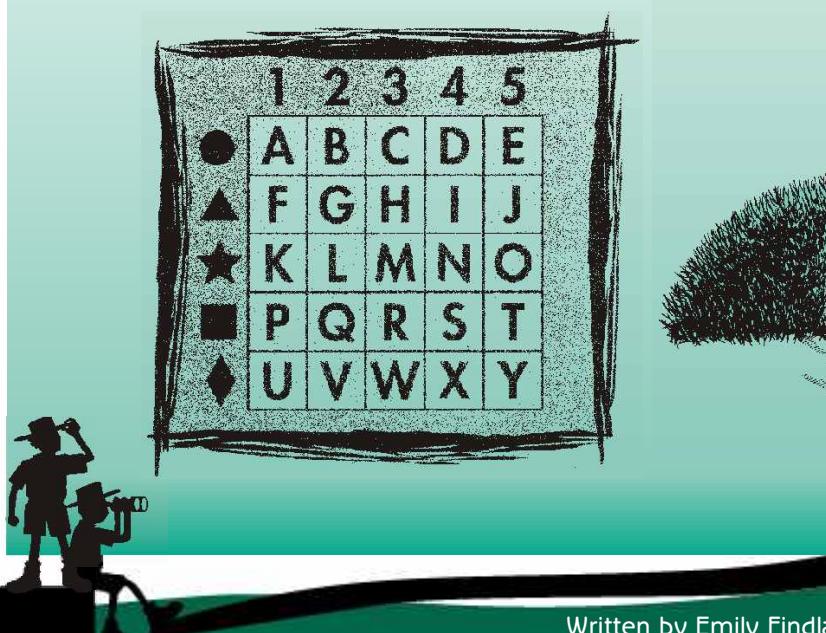
In 1987 one of the last two wild populations at Sangsters Bore were wiped out by foxes. The final population only lasted another four years before a fire destroyed their habitat. In 1997 a single fox killed over 50 Mala inside the Mala Paddock.



PUZZLE

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.

3♦ 1● 4★ 2♦ 1★ 1♦



A BRIGHTER FUTURE

In 1998 Mala were moved to WA and after a successful breeding program were 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.

