

Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve



Water Pythons and Dusky Rats



Huge Hidden Populations

Fogg Dam Conservation Reserve is known for its abundance of animals; two in particular, being Water Pythons *Liasis fuscus* and their prey, Dusky Rats *Rattus colletti*.

Both species are nocturnal so are rarely seen by park visitors.

In the dry season, when the water recedes, there can be huge numbers of these animals in the Reserve.

Scientists have compared the estimated total weight of these populations per square kilometre (their biomass) with that found on the Serengeti Plains of Africa.

Following the Food

When the wet season rains flood the area, Dusky Rats move to higher ground on the levee banks or in fringing forests. Many of the Water Pythons follow them, sometimes travelling up to 12 km. This annual migration of terrestrial reptiles following their prey is the first recorded by scientists.

Only found in the Top End

Dusky Rats only occur in the Top End of Australia. They live and breed in burrows in the floodplain soil during the dry season. They feed at night, mainly on seeds, leaves and roots of grasses and sedges.

They breed between May and November, producing up to

12 young per litter. They can breed when they are only one month old.

When conditions are right they can build up their numbers very quickly. In a 'good' year it was estimated that there were **100,000 Dusky Rats per sq km (or 8,000 kg per sq km)**.

Dusky Rats are about 37 cm long (body about 17 cm, tail about 20 cm).

Borrowing Burrows

Water Pythons occur across northern Australia. They mate between June and August and can grow up to 2.5 metres.

They lay their eggs in the forests that fringe the floodplains either in burrows made by Floodplain Monitors *Varanus panoptes*, or amongst the roots of melaleucas. The burrows provide a constant warm temperature for the eggs, so the female abandons the eggs a few days after laying them. However, females that lay amongst the melaleuca roots stay coiled around the eggs, incubating them until they hatch.

Young pythons hatch during November and December. Scientists estimated that about **250,000 Water Pythons live on the Reserve, (about 800 kg per sq km)**. However, if there is a decrease in Dusky Rat numbers there is a corresponding decrease in Water Python reproduction.

Sensing their Prey

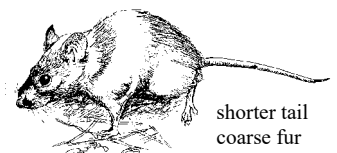
Water Pythons find the Dusky Rat burrows with their sense of smell. Then, like all pythons, they sense the warmth of their prey with the heat sensors on their lower jaws.

Small pythons can fit into the burrows or mud cracks to catch their Dusky Rats. Large ones wait until the Dusky Rats come out of their burrows to feed at night.

Native Rat or Introduced Rat?

There are two easy ways to identify the difference between a native rat and an introduced (feral) rat.

Native rats have coarse fur and their tails are about the same length as their body.



Dusky Rat
Rattus colletti

Feral rats have sleek, soft fur and their tail is much longer than their body.



Black Rat
Rattus rattus long tail soft fur