

JR Nature Notes



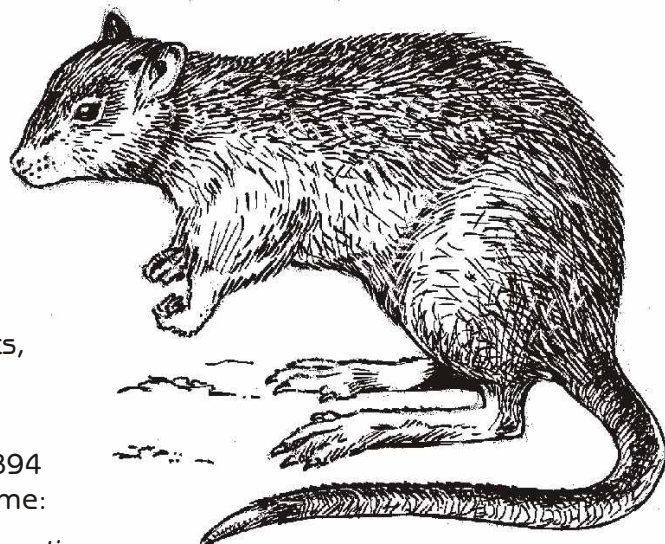
OUR LITTLE DESERT DIGGER

The red sandhills and sand plains of Central Australia are a different place today than was the case 100 years ago. You'll no longer see many animals that used to live there. The Malas, Bilbies and Golden Bandicoots have all bitten the dust! Sadly, the Burrowing Bettongs have also gone.

Once upon a time, Burrowing Bettongs *Bettongia lesueur* were common animals in the dry parts of Australia. They dug large warrens where they hid during the heat of the day. At night they came out to feed on tubers, bulbs, seeds and the green parts of some plants.

Bettongs are similar in size and habits to the European rabbit. They're sometimes called 'rat-kangaroos' because they look like a cross between a big rat and a kangaroo.

Bettongs are quite vocal creatures, making a variety of grunts, whistles and squeals.



Professor Baldwin Spencer from Melbourne University traveled to Central Australia in 1894 with the Horn expedition. He wrote at the time:

'Judging by the number and size of the excavations which it makes, it is the most common form of marsupial amongst the sandy plains and sandhills, where we often saw it during the daytime, dodging with wonderful speed and agility in and out amongst the bushes and tussocks of porcupine grass.'

It's a different story today. Now you'll only see these hard working desert diggers on 4 small islands off the coast of Western Australia.

To reveal the names of these islands, change each letter to the one that comes before it in the alphabet.

C B S S P X C P P E J F
 and islands off the Pilbara coast.

C F S O J F S E P S S F
 and

islands in Shark Bay.

ARCH ENEMIES OF AUSTRALIA'S BETTONGS

Bettongs disappeared from the mainland after European rabbits arrived, ate their tucker and then kicked them out of house and home. European foxes have also decimated the Burrowing Bettong population.



WHEN DID THEY GO?

It seems that the crunch time for the Burrowing Bettong came in the big drought of the 1920s.

Droughts are a regular feature of the climate in Central Australia but the one of 1924-1929 was especially bad. Scientists believe that the drought had a bigger impact on the native fauna than any other in recent history. It was the first big drought since rabbits had made their way to Central Australia. The bettongs found it hard to compete with them for food and their numbers were pushed to a critically low level.

Unlike rabbits, bettongs are not prolific breeders and weren't able to recover as quickly once good conditions returned. Once they were reduced to low numbers, they were easy pickings for crafty predators like the European fox.

ANOTHER NAME FOR THE BURROWING BETTONG

In Western Australia the Burrowing Bettong is known by its Aboriginal name. Use the following grid to work out what this is.

9 across and 2 down

5 across and 5 down

10 across and 6 down

1 across and 5 down

6 across and 8 down

4 across and 9 down

C	O	C	K	A	T	O	O	R	M
I	C	O	W	O	R	R	U	B	O
C	E	N	T	I	P	E	D	E	T
A	N	T	P	E	E	W	E	E	H
D	R	A	G	O	N	Y	R	T	X
A	N	E	R	W	B	M	A	L	O
H	S	U	B	L	I	C	T	E	F
O	E	E	I	T	I	B	B	A	R
T	A	B	E	B	L	U	B	F	O
O	G	N	I	D	U	N	E	G	G

Now can you find these 30 words in the grid? They go in all directions and some are written backwards.

- | | | | | |
|--------|-----------|--------|--------|---------|
| ANT | BUSH | DINGO | FROG | RABBIT |
| BAT | CAT | DRAGON | HOT | RAT |
| BEETLE | CENTIPEDE | DUNE | LEAF | ROO |
| BILBY | CICADA | EGG | MOTH | SEED |
| BULB | COCKATOO | EURO | OWL | TERMITE |
| BURROW | COW | FOX | PEEWEE | WREN |

Want to learn more about Bettongs?

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.

