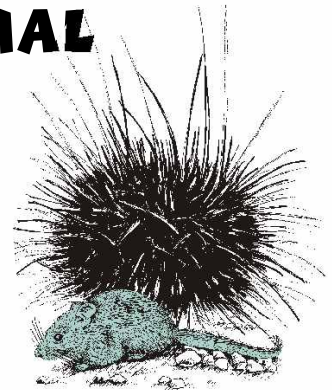


R Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

WEST MACS MARVELLOUS MAMMAL

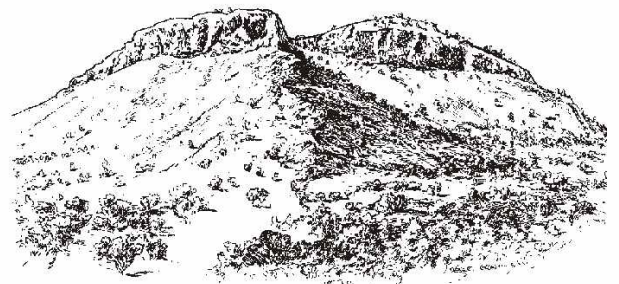
The Central Rock-rat, *Zyzomys pedunculatus*, is an extremely rare rodent! Scientists searched for the Rock-rat everywhere, and for over half a century it was even thought to be extinct. Then, in 1997, out of the blue it was rediscovered near Ormiston Gorge in the West MacDonnell National Park. For 55 years this small mammal had not been seen, then it was found, but now it looks like it has disappeared again!



OUR THREATENED DESERT RAT

The Central Rock-rat is listed as a threatened species. Their population at Ormiston Gorge is monitored so that we can learn about their lifecycle and needs. This will help us protect them into the future.

We are not really sure what threatens the Central Rock-rat but we suspect that the introduction of large grazing animals, like horses or cattle, introduced predators and changes in fire may have played a role. However, they were probably never very common.



Ormiston Gorge area

GUIDE TO THE ROCK-RAT

An adult rat can grow to 14cm long with a tail also 14cm long - this makes it quite a large rat.

The long thick tail has tufts of hair at the end. They store fat supplies in the base of the tail to survive on when food is harder to find.



Their large black eyes are used for finding their way around at night. It also allows them to avoid predators

They have a very 'Roman nose' profile - meaning that from side-on they seem to have a very large humped nose like Roman soldiers did!



Hump

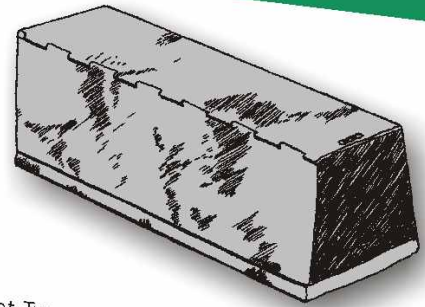
HOME AMONGST THE SPINIFEX

When scientists were trying to find the rock-rat they were faced with a very difficult question - where would a Rock-rat choose to live? There was very little information about where the rat had first been caught. Scientists thought that perhaps large rocky gorges in the West MacDonnell Ranges would be the best place to start looking. Unfortunately they found no rats at all. When the rat was eventually rediscovered, it was found living half way up a mountain slope with lots of Spinifex grasses and only a few scattered large rocks. Spinifex seems to be very important for the rat - it offers protection from predators and covers the entrance to their holes.

THE 'BOOM AND BUST' CYCLE

The Rock-rat feeds on the seeds of small plants and grasses. During drought these plants become more scarce and Rock-rat numbers drop dramatically. After good summer rains their numbers recover, almost to the point where they become common! Many small animals in Central Australia go through this regular 'boom and bust' cycle. This happened in the year 2000 when Rangers at Ormiston Gorge began catching them in high numbers all over the place. By 2002 the country went into a drought and the Rock-rat once again disappeared. It now hasn't been seen for the past four years! We think it is still around but in very low numbers and this makes it hard to find them. Regular Rock-rat surveys are conducted at Ormiston Gorge and hopefully the animal will appear again soon.

SCIENCE SNIPPET

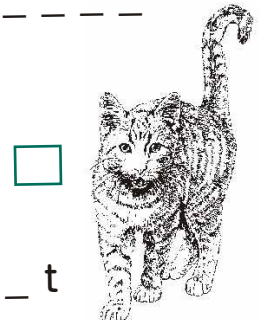
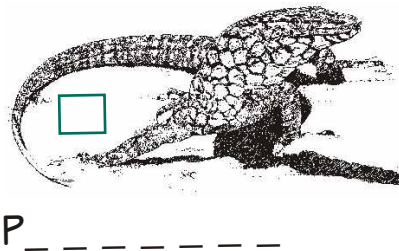
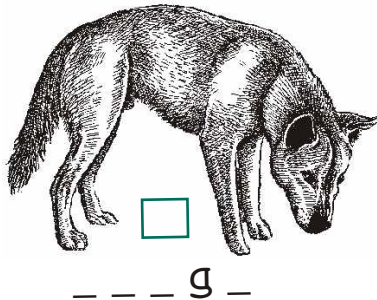
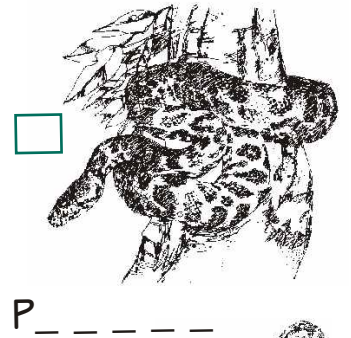
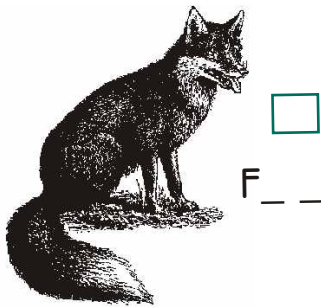


Elliot Traps are used to capture small mammals. The traps are boxes with a hinged entrance door. A ball of rolled oats and peanut butter is placed in the back of the trap to encourage the animals to enter. As the animal enters the trap it steps on a plate that



AN OCCASIONAL MEAL

The Central Rock-rat may be eaten by quite a few animals that live in Central Australia. Some of these animals are introduced 'feral' animals. All the animals below would find the Central Rock-rat a tasty meal. Can you fill in the missing letters to name them? Tick the boxes to identify the ones which are feral animals.



Want to learn more about Centralian Rock-rats? 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.