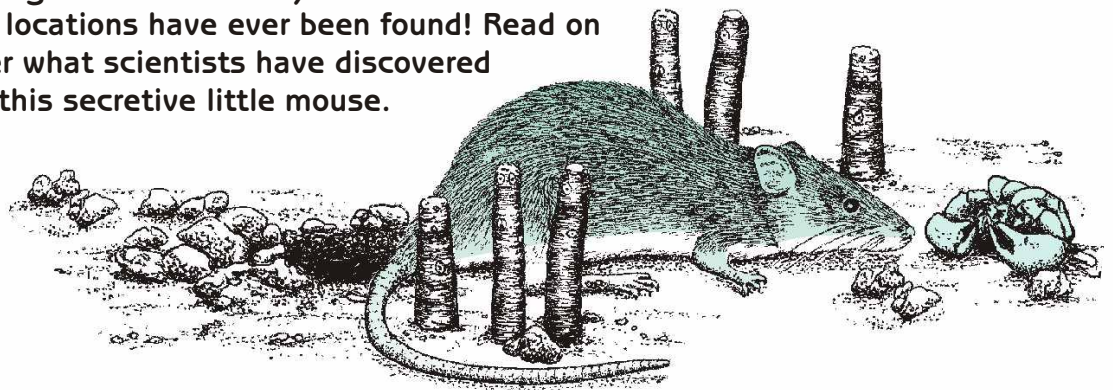


R Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

THE MYSTERIOUS WATER MOUSE

Scientists first found a Water Mouse in the Northern Territory over 100 years ago. Since then only nine more mice from five other locations have ever been found! Read on to discover what scientists have discovered about this secretive little mouse.

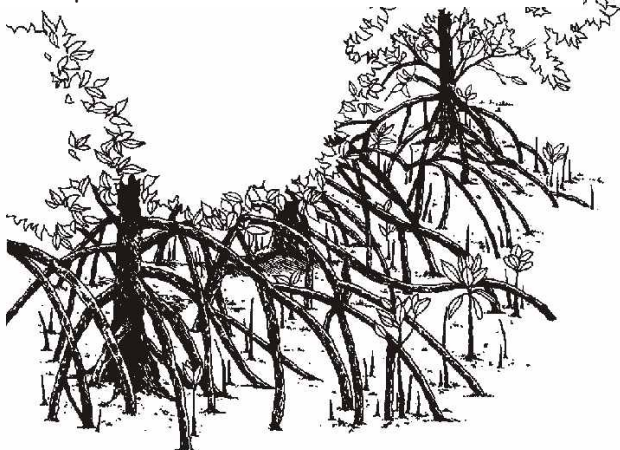


The Water Mouse, or False Water-rat as it used to be known, is slightly bigger and heavier than the introduced House Mouse or pet mouse. Its fur is grey above and white below.

HIGH-RISE APARTMENTS BY THE WATER

Water Mice, *Xeromys myoides* seem to like living on the edge of mangrove forests and floodplain grasslands. Although they can swim, they prefer not to. This may have led to the scientific name *Xeromys*, meaning "dry mouse".

They often build homes of dirt and mud at the edge of the high tide mark. These are about 60 centimetres high and look like termite mounds. Inside are a series of tunnels and nests where family groups sleep and breed.



A SEAFOOD DIET

The mice leave their miniature high-rise homes during low tide at night and move into the mangroves and floodplains to hunt (they're nocturnal). Mangrove worms, shellfish and crabs are their favourite dishes. When they catch a crab, they tear its arms and legs off before getting stuck into the meaty body!

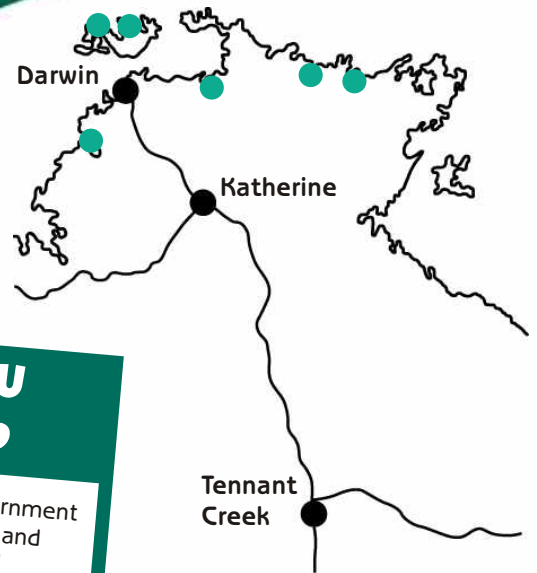
IS THE WATER MOUSE ON THE BRINK?

Scientists cannot agree on whether they are really on the brink because they know so little about them. Scientists certainly haven't found them at many places, but maybe they are just hard to find. They have never been found in huge numbers, so maybe they just aren't common. There are heaps of mangrove forests and floodplain grasslands covering Australia's north, but we don't know how much of it is suitable habitat for them.

Our local Parks & Wildlife scientists only look at plants and animals in the NT. They figure that they can't really classify them as a threatened species because so little is known about them. They have classified them as needing more study. However, scientists working for the Australian (or Federal) Government who look at all of Australia's plants and animals have listed them as a vulnerable threatened species.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS FOR THE WATER MOUSE

Water Mice only seem to occur in a few small isolated areas in the NT. One possible danger is that a local disaster could wipe out a whole little population (think tsunamis, fire or disease). Cats, dogs and feral pigs probably eat a few of them. Clearing or changing their habitat too much could also cause a problem, but how big of a problem? For instance, we just don't know whether floodplain weeds or cattle grazing actually bother them at all. More study needs to be done. Hopefully we might find more populations of this unique little mouse, and maybe they are doing just fine!



The Water Mouse has only been found in six locations in the NT (above). Strangely, one was found in the stomach of a crocodile!

SCIENCE SNIPPET

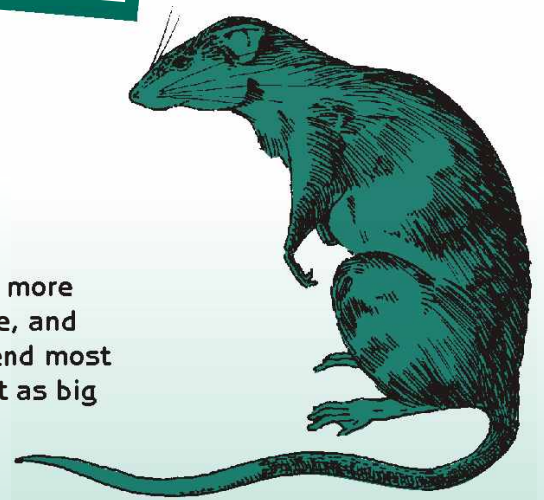
Scientists use different levels of threat when classifying threatened species. The lowest level is vulnerable, then endangered, then critically endangered and worse still is extinct in the wild (lives only in zoos or botanic gardens). The final step is extinct.... game over!

DID YOU KNOW?

The Australian Government (based in Canberra) and Traditional Aboriginal Owners manage Kakadu and Uluru - Kata Tjuta National Parks, not Parks & Wildlife (NT Government). A single Water Mouse was once found in what is now Kakadu, way back in 1903.

WHO AM I?

I am the Water Mouse's closest Australian cousin, but I am much more common. I am found around nearly the entire Australian coastline, and even in many major river systems. I am a super swimmer and spend most of my time in and around water. I'm pretty chunky, getting almost as big as a small Brushtail Possum. My scientific name is *Hydromys chrysogaster*. Complete the puzzle to reveal my common name.



- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Long slimy Water Mouse food. | 1. <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 2. Water Mice like to live near ... | 2. <input type="text"/> | _____ R _____ |
| 3. Come out at night. | 3. N <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 4. Fur colour underneath a Water Mouse. | 4. <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 5. Fur colour on top of a Water Mouse. | 5. <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 6. Salt tolerant coastal plants. | 6. M <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 7. Food with many legs to tear off. | 7. <input type="text"/> | _____ |
| 8. Animals on the brink are.... | 8. T H <input type="text"/> | _____ |