

Bilby and kowari populations boom in outback Queensland thanks to feral cat control program

ABC Western QLD

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26 July 2021



Fourteen kowaris were recorded on a recent monitoring trip at Astrebla Downs National Park. (Supplied: Department of Environment and



A bilby in Currawinya National Park makes its way to its burrow. (Supplied: Cassandra Arkinstall)

While an abundance of rodents south of the Queensland border has wreaked havoc for farmers, ecologists are ecstatic about booming populations of other tiny animals in outback Queensland.

Record numbers of native marsupials have been spotted across the state this year, including the endangered bilby.

Rangers from the Department of Environment and Science recorded 471 bilbies at Astrebla Downs National Park in far-west Queensland last month.

"We've never recorded that many bilbies in the entire time that we've known bilbies to be living in western Queensland," said senior ecologist John Augusteyn.

"It's an incredibly exciting place to visit right now, it's just teeming with wildlife."

The rangers also spotted a record 14 kowaris — a tiny, carnivorous desert marsupial listed as vulnerable in Queensland.

Dr Augusteyn captured the elusive kowari, which he described as a "little Pepé Le Pew creature", on video for the first time in a decade.

Senior parks and wildlife ranger Barry Nolan said the moment was as hilarious as it was exciting.

"Imagine an animal that's 150 millimetres long, six inches long," Mr Nolan said.

"When John was taking that footage, it bounced out of its burrow and challenged him like a dog coming at him and went back in.

"We were in fits of laughter. I nearly fell on the ground, I was laughing that hard.

"They have just got attitude plus. They are just an incredibly charismatic little animal."

Successful feral cat control program

Mr Nolan said the boom among various marsupial populations, which also included the native long-haired rat, at Astrebla Downs was due to a combination of good rain and a successful feral cat control program.

The Department has removed more than 3,000 feral cats from the park since 2013.

Mr Nolan said, in particular, a switch from using spotlights to thermal imaging cameras since 2014 to find the cats had been "groundbreaking".

"[The cats became] pretty well quickly aware of white lights and vehicles being a threat to them," he said.

"With thermal technology, that will change.

"Once the earth loses its heat that it got from the sun during the day, anything that provides body heat glows quite well under thermal technology, even if it's behind vegetation and stuff," he said.

"The efficiency of being able to do it means that you can cover more country in a short period of time.

"Literally, you can protect more bilbies and kowaris in a single night than you could before."

Bilbies boom at Currawinya

The fully-fenced part of Currawinya National Park, 900 kilometres south, has been free of feral cats since 2018.

The bilby population there is excelling too.

The Save The Bilby Fund released six captive-bred bilbies into the 2,800 hectares of fenced land in 2019.

Now, there are 180, said volunteer and PhD candidate Cassandra Arkinstall.

"We released six bilbies initially and then over the course of two years there was a total of 36 bilbies that had been released into Currawinya," Ms Arkinstall said.

"The rest are just wild-born or bilbies that were born on the park.

"That's almost a six-fold increase, which is just fabulous."

The national recovery team for the bilby hopes to increase the marsupial's wild population to 10,000.

Ms Arkinstall said reaching that number in the next 12 or 13 years was now looking achievable, but ecologists and conservationists would not be lulled into a false sense of security.

She said at the moment, feral cats were feeding on the long-haired rats.

But if dry conditions continue, that population will collapse, and cats could set their sights back on bilbies and kowaris.

"It's not something that we can just walk away from and think, 'Okay the bilbies are doing fine at the moment.'

"When things start to switch and we might start to see those good conditions start to dry out a bit, then feral cats are able to prey switch and go for things like bilbies."