



wildlife matters

australian



wildlife
conservancy

JUNE 2004



Faure Island

provides new hope for the
Banded Hare-wallaby



Tim Winton on
Faure Island

Pages 4 and 5



saving australia's threatened wildlife



Pictograph



the awc mission

Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) is dedicated to saving Australia's threatened wildlife and ecosystems. To achieve this mission, our actions are focused on:

- Establishing a network of sanctuaries which protect threatened wildlife and ecosystems: AWC now owns 12 sanctuaries covering 595,000 hectares (nearly 1.5 million acres).
- Implementing practical, on-ground conservation programs to protect the wildlife at our sanctuaries: these programs include feral animal control, fire management and the translocation of endangered species.
- Conducting (either alone or in collaboration with other organisations) scientific research that will help address the key threats to our native wildlife.
- Hosting visitor programs at our sanctuaries for the purpose of education and promoting awareness of the plight of Australia's wildlife.

about awc

AWC is an independent, non-profit organisation based in Perth, Western Australia. Donations to AWC are tax deductible.

During 2002-2003, over 90% of AWC's total expenditure was spent on conservation programs, including land acquisition. Less than 10% was on development (fundraising) and administration.

Cover photo: Banded Hare-wallaby.
(Photo: Barry Wilson)

Welcome to *Wildlife Matters*. In the three months since our last newsletter, AWC staff have been busy helping to provide a more secure future for several of Australia's most endangered species. A highlight of this period has been the translocation of Banded Hare-wallabies to our Faure Island sanctuary in Shark Bay. The Banded Hare-wallaby is an exceptionally important animal: it is the only living relict of an ancient kangaroo family that split from its relatives about 20 million years ago. However, in the period of little more than 200 years since European settlement of Australia, the species has disappeared from the mainland and now clings to survival on two islands off the Western Australian coast.

AWC is determined to help save the Banded Hare-wallaby from extinction. In late May, AWC and the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) translocated a small population of animals from a captive breeding facility on the mainland across to the world heritage listed Faure Island. The purpose of the operation is to establish a third wild population of the Banded Hare-wallaby. The next few months will be critical as this founder population battles to survive in its new home.

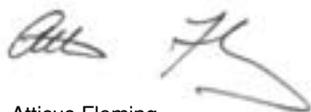
Tim Winton was on hand to assist with the translocation. We are grateful for his support and honoured that he has agreed to write a few words (see pages 4-5) about a very significant event for conservation in Australia.

There is also great progress being made at our other sanctuaries. At Mornington, two leading scientists have been appointed to implement our ambitious conservation and research program. Sarah Legge and Steve Murphy will both be based at Mornington, where AWC is establishing a Field Research Centre to help address some of the key biodiversity issues for northern Australia.

At Scotia, the hard work continues to complete construction of the feral-proof fence around the 'stage one' area of 4,000 hectares. We are aiming to begin releasing animals into this area within the next six months in what Sir David Attenborough describes as 'a vitally important project for Australia and for the planet'.

Working in partnership with other organisations is an important part of the way AWC does business. For example, the translocation of Banded Hare-wallabies to Faure Island was carried out in partnership with CALM while at Mornington we benefit from the assistance and support of the local aboriginal communities, our neighbours, CALM and the Tropical Savannas CRC (among others). We are committed to this collaborative style as we believe it will deliver the greatest benefits for Australia's wildlife.

Another aspect of our work is, of course, the commitment to practical, on-ground land management. Whether it is creating one of Australia's largest feral-free areas at Scotia, implementing fire management over 3,000 square kilometres in the Kimberley or literally pulling out weeds by hand at Curramore, AWC has staff in the field striving to save Australia's wildlife. Thank you for supporting their efforts to date. Your continued support will help AWC consolidate and expand our on-ground conservation programs, which will be great news for Australia's threatened wildlife.



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Conservation in Action

News from AWC Sanctuaries

Scotia

Construction of the feral-proof fence at Scotia is proceeding well. Almost 10 kilometres of the existing fence has been rebuilt to 'feral-proof' standard. The 4,000 hectare area known as 'stage 1' will be surrounded by the upgraded fence by the end of July, in time for an initial release of endangered mammals in spring 2004.

Routine biological surveys have confirmed the presence of two small threatened mammals at Scotia – the Southern Ningauai (pictured) and Bolam's Mouse. These species have not been reintroduced – their continued survival at Scotia highlights the importance of the mallee habitats protected within the sanctuary. Both species will benefit from AWC management including our feral predator control program.

Thank you to all of the donors who have generously contributed to the Scotia appeal. Additional funds are still required to cover the cost of translocations, monitoring equipment and fencing. If we can raise these additional funds, four species (Bilbies, Burrowing Bettongs, Woylies and Bridled Nailtail Wallabies) will be released later this year – all 4 animals are currently listed as extinct in NSW!

Please help by making a tax deductible donation to AWC or by introducing AWC to a friend. Now is a great time to donate, with the financial year end approaching.

Mt Zero-Taravale

The preliminary results from a botanical survey of Mt Zero-Taravale are very exciting. In addition to confirming the presence of several rare and threatened species, a number of plants discovered on the property may be new to science.

AWC and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service are continuing a joint research program in the wet sclerophyll forests of Mt Zero-Taravale. A recent biological survey carried out as part of this research program revealed the first record of the native Swamp Rat in the Mt Zero-Taravale area.

Paruna

In April and May, AWC translocated 49 Brushtail Possums from Karakamia to Paruna Sanctuary. Brushtail Possums have declined significantly in the Avon Valley, including Paruna, partly due to fox predation. However, as a result of co-operative feral predator control measures implemented by AWC and CALM, species such as the Brushtail Possum are now making a comeback.

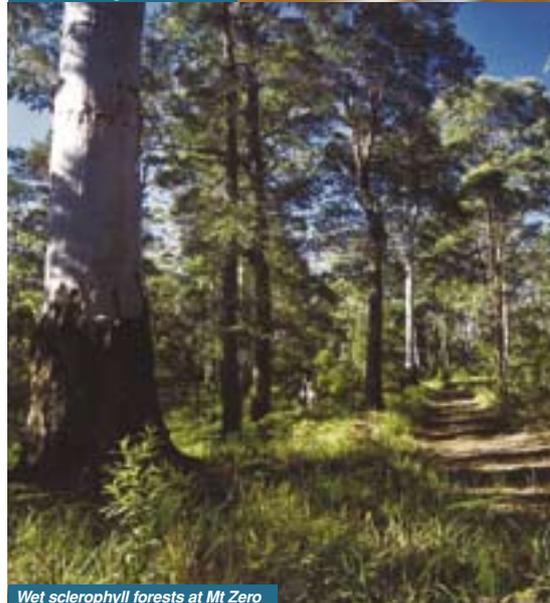
In other news, 50 Woylies will soon be translocated from Karakamia to the Avon Valley National Park. AWC is pleased to be working with CALM to help restock an important national park.



Construction of feral-proof fence at Scotia



Southern Ningauai at Scotia



Wet sclerophyll forests at Mt Zero

AWC participation in Threatened Species Recovery Teams

Since the early 1990's, Federal and State Governments have established Recovery Teams to assist with the planning and implementation of recovery actions for various threatened species. AWC staff are now represented on several Recovery Teams including the Gouldian Finch Recovery Team, the Black-eared Miner Recovery Team and the Arid Zone Fauna Recovery Team (covering species such as Bilby and Mala). A delegation of AWC staff, led by Andre Schmitz, recently attended the annual meeting of the Arid Zone Recovery Team in Dryandra, WA. The participation of AWC staff in this forum highlights the strong scientific basis to our work and the valuable contribution that AWC is making to national programs for the conservation of Australia's threatened wildlife.



awc sanctuaries

The Banded Hare-wallaby

A living treasure



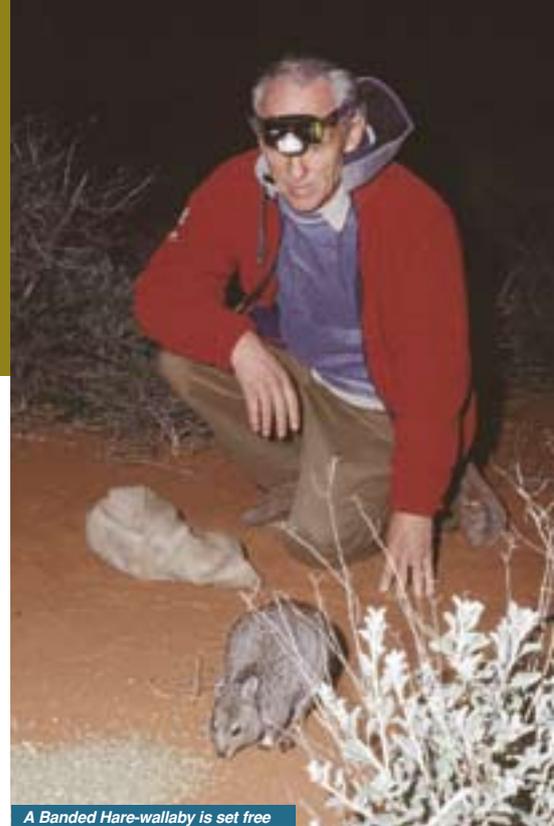
It's just after dusk on a lonely, windswept island. Only a few early stars are out. Fifteen people wind their way through low scrub in single file, trying, despite their excitement, to speak in hushed tones. Torches flash about feet and ankles, casting shadows across the red dirt, and every now and then a beam lights up one of several figures nursing bundles swathed in hessian.

The group gathers in a small clearing. All lights are doused except a solitary headlamp. Somebody kneels on the sand, places a sack on the earth before them. Slowly, carefully, they begin to fold the cloth back on itself. People speak in reverential whispers. If you were a passing stranger you'd be forgiven for finding this bush gathering odd in the extreme. There's something almost liturgical about the whole scene, as though you'd stumbled upon a weirdo cult undertaking some nocturnal rite.

A moment later you'd see what all the fuss is about. From the folded lip of the

hessian bag a small grey head emerges. Ears, snout, black, protuberant eyes. A tiny pair of forefeet rises over the lip of the sack and after a moment's hesitation, while it sniffs and tastes the air, the whole creature steps out onto the earth and looks about at its new surroundings. You can't help but gasp a little in surprise and wonder because even if you don't really know what you're looking at - this thing like a miniature kangaroo no bigger than a child's teddy bear - you're immediately enchanted. You marvel at the length of its tail and soft-padded hind legs, the lateral black bands in the fur of its hunched back. What a strange and beautiful creature!

What you're seeing is a Banded Hare-wallaby, a marsupial so rare as to be almost mythological. Extinct on the mainland, it's now confined to Bernier and Dorre Islands in



A Banded Hare-wallaby is set free

Shark Bay. The strange ceremony you've just witnessed is the release of the first of seven of these animals into the wild sanctuary of AWC's Faure Island. You've seen a tiny, fragile step in the homeward journey of a species, an uncertain but incremental step towards survival and hopefully, in the longer term, a return to the Australian mainland. What might at first have seemed a solemn ceremony is, first and foremost, a practical act, an experiment in reclaiming habitat for endangered species.

It's difficult to describe the feeling of seeing such a special creature after only ever seeing specimens in books, and even harder to convey the emotion involved in actually holding one of these animals in your hands, feeling its heart beat against your chest, and then



Unloading our precious cargo on Faure Island



Tim Flannery releasing a Banded Hare-wallaby



seeing it hop free into an uncertain future. For me it was a moment of great privilege, something I never expected to encounter. For blow-ins like myself and Luc Longley, neither of us scientists, though both of us passionate about the natural world, it was a rare moment, one we felt we hadn't earned but were thrilled to be part of. Surrounded as we were by luminaries such as Tim Flannery and Barry Wilson, with former lessee of the island, Dick Hoult and so many hardworking board and staff members of AWC, it was, palpable evidence of the Conservancy's vision at work, a practical outcome of so much research, fund-raising, dreaming and legwork. For me it was a little bit of history in the making, a moment of

practical action as much as a symbol of hope for our ravaged land. It was a gift to be there to see it happen.

Tim Winton

Author *Dirt Music*,
Cloudstreet,
The Riders...



A profile of the Banded Hare-wallaby

Few Australians have been fortunate enough to see a Banded Hare-wallaby (*Lagostrophus fasciatus*) in the wild. However, it was one of the earliest macropods known to science, with a description from Shark Bay by William Dampier in 1699, and specimens taken in 1801 by Charles Alexandre Lesueur and Francois Peron. It is not a true 'hare-wallaby', like the Rufous Hare-wallaby or the Spectacled Hare-wallaby. In fact, a recent paper indicates the species is the only living relict of an ancient kangaroo lineage that split from the family tree approximately 20 million years ago. From an evolutionary point of view, this makes it a living treasure.

The Banded Hare-wallaby was once found across large areas of semi-arid southern and western Australia. Sadly, however, the range and population of the Banded Hare-wallaby has declined dramatically since European settlement as a result of factors such as land clearing, competition from introduced herbivores (rabbits and sheep) and the impact of feral predators. The species was extinct on the mainland by the 1960's. It now occurs naturally on only two small offshore islands. Our attempt to establish on Faure Island a third wild population of the Banded Hare-wallaby is a vital step in saving the species from extinction.

An adult Banded Hare-wallaby weighs between 1.3 kg and 2.1 kg. It has dark transverse bands on the rear half of the body, contrasting sharply with its general dark grizzled-grey coloration. The muzzle is long and pointed, and the nose is naked rather than hairy. The generic name 'hare-wallaby' refers to the supposed resemblance of these small kangaroos to a European Hare. Banded Hare-wallabies shelter within dense thickets of Acacia and other low spreading shrubs. They are herbivorous, feeding on shrubs and to a much lesser extent grasses. Water requirements are met from dew and the moisture content of food plants.

Research and Conservation at Mornington

A New Vision for Land Management in the Kimberley

The decline of native animals in Australia has been dramatic. Among the most depressing examples is the sudden and widespread population crash of Gouldian Finches throughout their range. Once found in flocks of thousands from Cape York across to the Kimberley, Gouldians are now restricted to tiny refugial pockets with flocks rarely numbering more than a hundred.

Covering 312,000 hectares, AWC's Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary in the Central Kimberley contains one of the largest remaining populations of Gouldian Finches. Its large area and relatively large population of Gouldians therefore presents an opportunity to examine the ecological processes that have caused their decline, or that are hindering population recovery. These processes are most likely related to fire

or grazing, or a combination of both.

A long-term research and conservation program is now underway at Mornington that will investigate these issues and identify land management strategies to help restore populations of Gouldians and other wildlife. The program has a wide scope that will not only benefit Gouldians, but also benefit the wide diversity of other fauna and flora found on Mornington and else-

where across the Kimberley and northern Australia. Two leading scientists have been appointed to implement this ambitious program. AWC is pleased to welcome Dr Sarah Legge and Steve Murphy to the team of committed AWC staff based at Mornington.

The Mornington program is an important initiative by AWC, representing a substantial investment in practical research and on ground land management. It reflects the AWC



Steve Murphy and Bluey in the field

philosophy that it is not enough to simply purchase land – successful conservation requires a long-term commitment to practical, on ground land management informed by the best available science.

AWC acknowledges the support and assistance of members of the Tirralinjti and Tablelands aboriginal communities, whose contribution is vitally important to conservation activities at Mornington.



Fire management planning



(M.Fidler)

Research on Gouldian Finches



Key tasks and objectives of the Mornington Research and Conservation Program

Some of the key tasks and objectives of our Mornington program include:

- Undertake research designed to fill the gaps in our understanding of Gouldian Finch ecology. A Field Research Centre is being established, with key research issues initially focusing on the effects of fire and grazing on granivorous (seed eating) species such as the Gouldian.
- Implement land management actions based on our current knowledge of Gouldian Finch ecology, including information gathered from research in the Northern Territory. Such actions will include the staged destocking of the property, commencing with the destocking of 50,000 hectares of core Gouldian Finch habitat in 2004.
- Conduct fauna and flora surveys within and outside areas that have been destocked to determine the effects of grazing on a broad range of species, with a special focus on riparian communities.
- Implement and monitor a fire management regime that aims to maximise floristic and structural diversity across a range of habitat types – in other words, implement a fire program that aims to maximise biodiversity rather than increase the amount of feed for cattle!

AWC is well placed to turn this ambitious project into reality. Thanks to support from donors and productive relationships with many other organisations such as

the Tropical Savannas Co-operative Research Centre, the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), and the Kimberley Regional Fire Mapping Project, AWC has already made significant progress:

- In March, a fire-planning workshop was held at Mornington to discuss fire management objectives and the various ways to achieve them. It was attended by representatives from CALM, Tropical Savannas Co-operative Research Centre, WA Fire and Emergency Services, Kimberley Regional Fire Mapping Project, neighbouring land-owners (Mt House-Glenroy Stations), and members of Tirralintji and Tablelands Aboriginal Communities.
- In April, burning was undertaken in collaboration with the team from the Kimberley Fire Project. This was principally designed to protect the vegetation communities on the sandstone escarpments and uplands from hot and extensive late dry season fires.



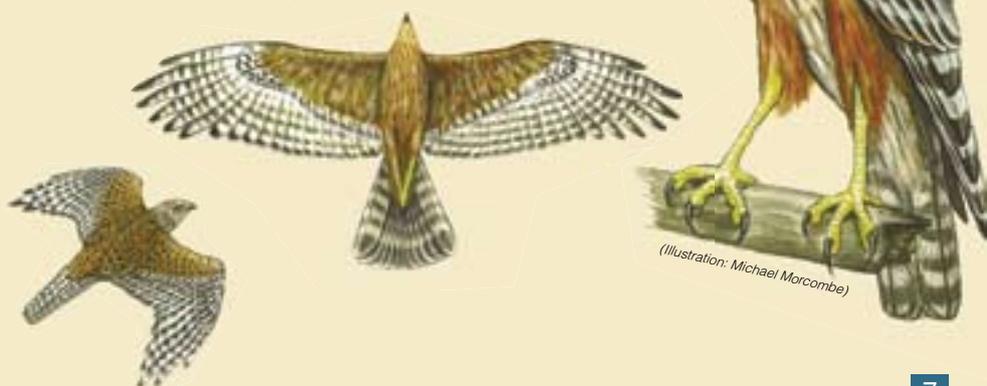
Sarah Legge counting grass seeds after an experimental burn

- An on-going project at Mornington is the establishment of a Field Research Centre that will facilitate research undertaken by AWC staff, as well as research by visiting scientists from other institutions. When completed, the Research Centre will have a well-equipped field ecology lab, including a herbarium, reference library, and computing and network facilities. Collections for the field herbarium have commenced.
- Initial research activities have commenced, with surveys to identify key nesting and feeding sites and small 'experimental burns' to test methods for monitoring the effects of fire on grass seed stores.
- In conjunction with CALM, a mammal survey was undertaken in several habitat types on Mornington. This survey is part of a larger Tropical Savannas CRC project looking at the decline of mammals in the region.

Confirmation of Red Goshawks at Mornington

Some recent notable wildlife sightings at Mornington include an observation of an adult female Red Goshawk *Erythrotriorchis radiatus*. This rare raptor is listed as Vulnerable in the Action Plan for Australian Birds and under Federal endangered species legislation. Red Goshawks have all but disappeared from New South Wales, but they still persist over a large range that covers the eastern part of Queensland, across the Top End and into the Kimberley.

Despite this large range, it is suspected that there may be fewer than 1000 individuals in the wild. With a home range of up to 200km², the Red Goshawk is a large, powerful raptor that specialises in hunting medium to large birds – the female observed recently on Mornington was eating a blue-winged kookaburra *Dacelo leachii*. Habitat loss and altered fire regimes are thought to be the main processes threatening this spectacular species. Efforts are being made on Mornington to find nesting areas so that they may be factored into future management plans.



Fire management at Mornington

