

The Great Australian Marsupial Night Stalk



Western Grey Kangaroo (*Macropus fuliginosus*)



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While most Australians can easily identify an elephant or tiger, very few can tell the difference between some of our marsupials such as the Chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*) or a Southern Dibbler (*Parantechinus apicalis*). Many Australians travel overseas and are aware of global conservation issues but are less informed about what is happening in their own backyard.

Now in its eight year, The Great Australian Marsupial Night Stalk is a national community education program committed to raising community awareness of – and interest in – Australian marsupials and the threats they currently face; and translating this into real action.

From 1 September to 16 October each year, community groups, individuals and families across Australia conduct a 'spotlight survey' of marsupials and feral species in their local bush or nature reserve. Their observations are sent to Perth Zoo for collation and analysis. The results are published online and sent to conservation and wildlife agencies to assist and inform conservation management strategies.

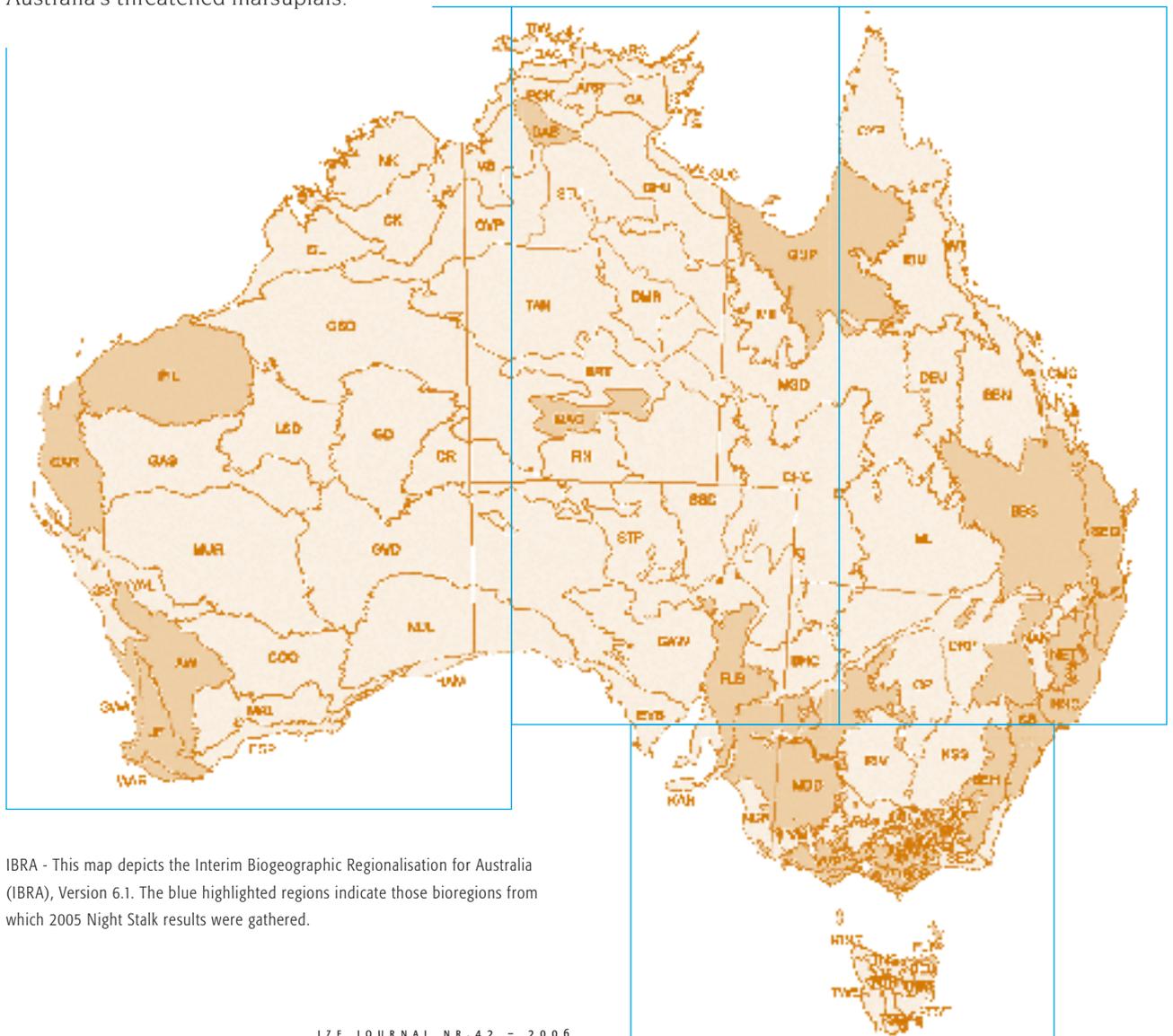


Large conservation programs are frequently regarded as the domain of environmental organisations, universities and governments – often considered inaccessible to the average person. Night Stalk breaks down this perception and gives the general public a chance to be part of a real conservation program. One of Night Stalk’s strengths is its simplicity and its appeal to a wide cross section of the community. The program is also an education tool with hundreds of people accessing the Night Stalk website which includes a ‘gallery’ of Australia’s threatened marsupials.

Arming themselves with torches and a ‘Spotter’s Log’, participants venture into the wilderness at night in search of Australia’s nocturnal native fauna. By taking an active part in research data collection, participants increase their understanding of Australian native species and the impact of feral animals.

The following comment is typical of participants in Night Stalk: “We had an adventure we won’t forget in a hurry, especially the children. We were thrilled to learn we have a resident echidna which five of the children got to see. We are now going to leave our fallen trees in place as homes.” (Hayley Ayres-Findlay, Home-based Learning Network, Western Australia)

This example of behavioural change has also been demonstrated by groups who have embarked on long term environmental projects in their local areas following their participation in Night Stalk. Calista Primary School in Perth, Western Australia, has been involved in the Night Stalk Program from the beginning. Their interest led to a nest box and tree planting project that continues today.



A sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*)



(photo: Rob Doonaard/IZP)



The results and analysis of Night Stalk surveys provide valuable data for conservation agencies in their native species protection planning and recovery strategies. It also provides a snapshot of species diversity in rural and metropolitan Australia.

In 2005, seventy surveys from around Australia were submitted to Perth Zoo and analysed according to the biogeographic region in which they occurred. The 'Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia'

Night Stalkers in action in 2004



(IBRA) divides Australia into 85 bioregions. These bioregions and sub-regions are the reporting unit for assessing the status of native ecosystems. The 2005 results came from 881 participants, surveying 242 km of track over 102 hours. Participants included members of the general public; school groups; conservation/landcare groups; and scout and guide groups. Across Australia, 21 marsupial species or subspecies were recorded of which 11 are listed as 'threatened'. Five introduced species were recorded. The most widely recorded marsupial was the Western Grey Kangaroo, with 567 spotted in Western Australia.

Another strength of Night Stalk is that it provides conservation organisations with the opportunity to see if their actions are making a difference. For example, over the past three years the number of threatened marsupials species spotted has increased from one sighting in 2003 to seven sightings in 2005. The number of feral species reported has declined from fifteen species in 2003 to five species in 2005.

Night Stalk is an evolving program with Perth Zoo committed to improving the program for future years. The Zoo would like to acknowledge the support of the program's sponsor, Tiwest, a local Western Australian resource company who has provided invaluable support through sponsorship funding and promotion of the program since 2003.

We are keen to share our Australian marsupial conservation education experiences with the international zoo community so we encourage you to visit the Night Stalk website at www.perthzoo.wa.gov.au/nightstalk and let us know your thoughts. ♦