

Landmark release sees bilbies return to Sturt National Park in NSW

September 24 2020, by Isabelle Dubach



Bilbies create a whole range of habitats by digging for insects, seeds and plant roots, and helping water and carbon infiltrate the soil. Credit: Rick Stevens

Bilbies are once again bounding in Sturt National Park more than a century after they were declared extinct in NSW.

Thanks to a NSW government collaboration led by UNSW ecologists and Ecological Horizons with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Taronga Conservation Society Australia, the bilbies are set to start a species-led renovation of their [desert](#) ecosystem.

Wongkumara Traditional Owner Cecil Ebsworth celebrated the release of these animals back into the wild: "It is wonderful to see these animals which lived here sustainably with our ancestors being released back into the wild again."

The Wild Deserts project has created one of the largest, feral-animal-free areas in Australia within Sturt National Park, eradicating every last rabbit, cat and fox from two 2000-hectare feral-proof fenced exclosures.

Dr. Rebecca West, UNSW ecologist at Wild Deserts, said: "This is a great day—we've been waiting for it since we built the fences two years ago. What we needed was the drought to break out here so the vegetation could build up for this release to happen."

The Greater Bilbies have been cared for by a specialist team of keepers, ecologists and vets prior to the release and were given a final health check at the Taronga Western Plains Zoo's Wildlife Hospital before traveling to the desert.

Taronga Conservation Society Australia CEO Cameron Kerr said: "To be able to release Greater Bilbies just 11 months after the program commenced in Dubbo is a true testament to the unique combination of skills across animal husbandry, genetics and conservation management at Taronga. I am extremely proud of the role Taronga has played as the engine room in this important project."

Professor Richard Kingsford, leader of the Wild Deserts Project and Director of the UNSW Center for Ecosystem Science, said the team was

looking forward to restoring this desert ecosystem with the Greater Bilbies acting as 'ecosystem engineers'.

"These animals create a whole range of habitats by digging for insects, seeds and plant roots, and helping water and carbon infiltrate the soil—and so helping to restore Sturt National Park's desert ecosystems."

Prof. Kingsford said one of the most exciting parts of the project was the opportunity for the team to link science to management.

"We are taking a strong experimental approach at a grand scale to not only improve Australia's approach to these reintroductions but also to inform the rest of the world. We are doing this through an adaptive management approach—recently described in academic publication *Conservation Science and Practice*. There are great opportunities for implementing this approach in conservation management."

Since the arrival of Europeans, the range of Greater Bilbies has been reduced by around 80 percent, surviving only in parts of central and western Australia. They are a nocturnal marsupial with a characteristic long black and white tail and large rabbit-like ears.



Dr Rebecca West, UNSW ecologist at Wild Deserts, said: "This is a great day – we've been waiting for it since we built the fences two years ago." Credit: University of New South Wales

Via radio tracking, the scientists will be checking in on the animals daily to ensure they're adapting well to their new environment.

NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean said the bilbies, part of a new breeding program at Taronga Western Plains Zoo, will begin the process of returning the area to what it was before feral animals wreaked havoc on our native animals.

"This is one of the country's most important threatened species initiatives. Australia has the worst mammal extinction rate in the world

but we are turning back the tide of extinctions, reintroducing at least 13 mammal species currently listed as extinct in NSW by establishing a network of feral cat and fox-free areas," Mr Kean said.

"With an estimated 9000 mature bilbies left in Australia, the Wild Deserts project at Sturt National Park is planned to increase the population by 17 percent."

In addition to Greater Bilbies, other threatened mammals will also be reintroduced into the Wild Deserts exclosures in future releases, including western quolls, stick-nest rats, western barred bandicoots, and golden bandicoots. Western quolls are natural predators of Greater Bilbies, bringing balance back to these unique desert ecosystems.

More information: Richard T. Kingsford et al. Strategic adaptive management planning—Restoring a desert ecosystem by managing introduced species and native herbivores and reintroducing mammals, *Conservation Science and Practice* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/csp2.268](https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.268)

Provided by University of New South Wales

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