

# Australian Threatened Species

**Dibbler** *Parantechinus apicalis*

## CONSERVATION STATUS

**COMMONWEALTH:** Endangered

*(Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999)*

**WESTERN AUSTRALIA:** Endangered *(Wildlife Conservation Act 1950)*

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The Dibbler is a small marsupial mouse. It has a very distinct white ring around each large eye and a hairy, tapering tail. The fur is brownish-grey and freckled with white on the upper body, and grey-white tinged with yellow on the lower body.

## WHERE DOES IT LIVE?

Dibblers were once found across most of the southwest of Western Australia (WA). They have been severely affected by the introduction of foxes, changed fire practices, and loss of habitat. As a result the species was presumed extinct by 1904.

But in 1967 a Dibbler was captured at Cheyne Beach near Albany, on WA's south coast. Then in 1985 the species was discovered living on Boullanger and Whitlock Islands off the state's west coast. Today wild Dibblers survive at Fitzgerald River National Park near Albany and on Boullanger & Whitlock Islands. Translocation projects are helping establish further populations with animals bred in captivity at Perth Zoo.

Mainland Dibblers usually live in dense heath and mallee-heath areas. Their island habitat however is very different to that of the mainland and is made up of low, dense coastal vegetation.

## WHAT DOES IT EAT?

The Dibbler is a carnivore and uses its strong jaws and sharp teeth to devour insects, spiders and small reptiles. The dibbler occasionally feeds on berries and flower nectar.

## DID YOU KNOW...

- Dibblers only weigh between 40 and 100 grams
- Female Dibblers can carry as many as eight young in their pouch at a time
- Males sometimes die after breeding. This phenomenon, however, does not occur every mating season.



Photo: Vanessa Harris

# PHYTOPHTHORA DIEBACK: A MAJOR THREAT!



*Phytophthora dieback* (pronounced Fy – tof – thora, meaning ‘plant killer’ in Greek, *Phytophthora cinnamomi*) is a water mould that attacks the roots of susceptible plants, devastating eucalypt forests, woodlands and heathlands. It was introduced to Australia following European settlement in the soil around the roots of live plants.

## WHY IS DIEBACK A PROBLEM IN AUSTRALIA?

Dieback attacks the roots of plants, limiting their uptake of water and nutrients and eventually killing them. Jarrah, banksias, grasstrees and Zamia palms are all highly susceptible to the pathogen. In WA’s southwest there are a particularly large number of plants dying from *Phytophthora dieback*, with approximately 30 per cent of plant species in the region affected.

## WHY IS IT A THREAT TO DIBBLERS?

Many habitats on WA’s south coast where Dibblers have been recorded contain plants susceptible to *Phytophthora dieback*. When ecological communities are affected it then affects species that rely on the habitat for survival. As local plants die, insects reduce in numbers and hence food resources become limited for carnivorous species like the Dibbler. This pressure can be devastating to a species already under threat.



Dieback in banksia woodland, WA.  
Photo: John Hicks

## WHAT’S BEING DONE?

WA’s Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has a ‘Western Shield Program’ that aims to protect the diversity of the state’s plants and animals, including the Dibbler. The Program does this by controlling introduced predators like foxes, protecting important habitat, and re-introducing captive-bred species into the wild.

The Australian Government has provided Natural Heritage Trust funding to support a CALM and Perth Zoo breeding project. These Dibblers are released by CALM in suitable habitat under the Western Shield Program - in 2005 the Perth Zoo had released more than 200 Dibblers into the wild.

As a result of this work new Dibbler populations were successfully established at Escape Island, near Boullanger & Whitlock Islands and at Peniup on WA’s south coast.

The Australian Government is investing in research to better understand the spread of and controls that can be used against *Phytophthora dieback*.

The Threatened Species Network is working with the Dieback Working Group to raise awareness about how individuals can help to slow the spread of *Phytophthora dieback*.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Dibblers are rarely seen in the wild. If you think you have found one contact your local CALM office to report the sighting
- Be a responsible pet owner: keep pets inside at night, walk dogs on a lead when in bushland and attach a bell to your cat’s collar
- Take care not to start bushfires
- Follow dieback hygiene procedures and keep off tracks that are closed to prevent its spread
- Land managers can help by removing feral cats and foxes and protecting remnant plant communities.

### CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

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You can also find out more information about Australia’s threatened species by visiting [www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened](http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened) or contacting the Department of the Environment and Heritage Community Information Unit on free-call 1800 803 772.

- Strahan R (1995) Complete Book of Australian Mammals. The Australian Museum. Reed Books, Chatswood
- Friend, T. (2004), Dibbler (*Parantechinus apicalis*) Recovery Plan, available at: [http://www.calm.wa.gov.au/plants\\_animals/watscu/pdf/frps/dibbler\\_wmp38.pdf](http://www.calm.wa.gov.au/plants_animals/watscu/pdf/frps/dibbler_wmp38.pdf)
- Department of Conservation and Land Management website: <http://www.calm.wa.gov.au>

