

Lending a Hand

Reducing the threats to Red-tailed Phascogales

CASE STUDY

REDUCING THE THREATS TO RED-TAILED PHASCOGALES



ABOVE: Monitoring measuring techniques for RTP (photo: Julie Palmer)

TOP: RTP in habitat in a remnant, North Kukerin (photo: Julie Palmer)

PROJECT TITLE

Lending a Hand,
Reducing Predators to aid the
Persistence of Red-tailed Phascogales

PROJECT LEADER

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PROJECT MANAGER

Julie Palmer, SWCC

PROJECT DURATION

May 2012 to June 2013

PROJECT

"Building the Toolibin, Dongolocking,
Tarin Rock Ecobridge"

PARTNERSHIPS

Wagin Woodanilling and
Dumbleyung Landcare Zone

BENEFICIARIES

The Red-tailed Phascogale was the main beneficiary, but the natural diversity of the Wheatbelt region ecosystems, the general public and future generations also benefit



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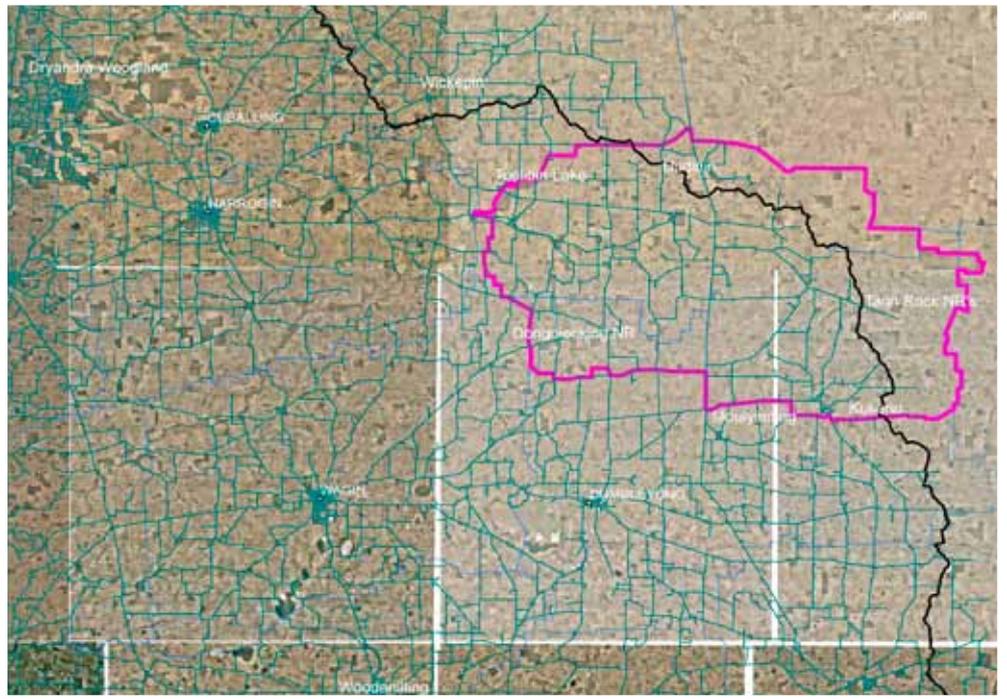


This project is supported by the South West Catchments Council, through funding from the Australian Government's Program, Caring for Our Country and the Government of Western Australia.

A number of SWCC-funded projects in the broad-acre agricultural region of the South West have been implemented to protect the Red-tailed Phascogale. This Phascogale is a small, arboreal, carnivorous marsupial listed nationally as endangered. Which means that it faces a very high risk of extinction in the wild. The primary threats to its survival are loss of habitat through land clearing and predation by foxes and cats.

The Wagin Woodanilling Landcare Zone (WWLZ) began working with researchers, private landholders, local governments and other NRM organisations including the South West Catchments Council (SWCC) in 2006 to protect the Red-tailed Phascogale. Between 2007 and 2009, trapping confirmed that the species occurred in areas outside their typical Wandoo woodland habitat.

All actions were targeted at addressing key threats to the Red-tailed Phascogale particularly loss of habitat and predation by foxes and feral cats, while increasing the understanding of their range and habitat requirements, raising awareness among local landholders and supporting them to protect, buffer and expand the habitat values of their farms.



Further monitoring has shown that the Red-tailed Phascogale has a wider habitat preference than initially thought, including vegetation communities east of their known range dominated by mallee species and red morrel.

Feral cats are recognised as a key threat to the Phascogale and Local Government Shire managed waste management facilities are a prime breeding ground for them. A key project activity was therefore to work with Shire staff to manage the populations of feral cats at 9 such facilities. This concurrently supports the goals of the updated WA Cat Act that comes into full effect in 2013, according to which all cats must be

de-sexed, registered and micro-chipped. Over 2012-13 experienced consultants, Wildlife Research and Management were contracted to monitor Red-tailed Phascogale.

The project also monitored Phascogale numbers in 36 priority patches of remnant bushland and worked with landholders and the community to promote the importance of managing foxes and feral cats, and of restoring habitat and creating wildlife corridors on farms through revegetation and placement of nest boxes in areas where there are few or no suitable mature trees with nesting hollows.



ABOVE: Eco-bridge RTP Predator Map of Area
 RIGHT: Mycock family learning about RTP
 FAR RIGHT: RTP habitat North Kukerin (all photos: Julie Palmer)



LEFT: Up close and personal, a Red-tailed Phascogale (photo: Andrew Hide)

BELOW: John Ingram from Wildlife Research and Management happily checking mammal traps (photo: Julie Palmer)



A key issue was that the project had to be designed to take into account the potential response in the community to a program aimed at eliminating a species that is traditionally regarded as a family pet. The strict adherence to animal welfare legislation and the codes of practice for humane control of feral cats combined with steps to avoid capture of domestic animals was designed to achieve this. Thankfully, community support for the project was positive as many residents are keen to see feral cat populations reduced.

In all, 36 patches of remnant bushland were monitored and 128 Red-tailed Phascogales recorded at 25 of these sites. Eight nestboxes were installed and 6.4ha revegetated establishing 3.7kms of vegetation corridors that connect over 670 ha of existing remnant vegetation. The supporting feral cat control program trapped and destroyed 142 feral cats at Shire-managed tip sites.

The "Ecobridge" project has also increased awareness amongst local farmers that the species exists on so many properties and that Phascogales are locally common.

Farmers had often caught glimpses of them in the past, but just thought they were some species of vermin. Now farmers realise that it is an endangered native species and several have contacted SWCC to enquire about funding to fence off remnant bushland. And at least one plans to remove all cats from their property!

The project has also had other positive spin-offs. Firstly, it has been shown that native animals such as phascogales are sometimes more common and more resilient than previously thought, adapting to changing conditions despite the pressures applied to them. Targeting such an iconic species as an "incentive" to engage the community in bushland conservation and regeneration has also proved to be a successful tactic. Indeed, the community as a whole is supportive of feral cat population management. And as a final note – trapping for feral cats at one tip site resulted in zero captures, showing that improved tip management supplemented by community trapping for feral cats had successfully reduced cat numbers at this site.

Further reading

Hide, A and J Short 2008 *Recovery Plan actions for Red-tailed Phascogale – A final report to Wagin Woodanilling Landcare Zone*. Wildlife Research and Management Pty Ltd, Perth, WA.

Short, J 2013 *Habitat for the Red-tailed Phascogale*. Western Wildlife Vol 17, Number 2. Department of Environment and Conservation, Perth, WA.



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working together to make a difference today and develop a sustainable environment for tomorrow.