

GILBERT'S POTOROO (NGILKAT)

POTOROUS GILBERTII

STATUS: CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

ESTIMATED WILD POPULATION: FEWER THAN 150 INDIVIDUALS

A BIT ABOUT THE GILBERT'S POTOROO

The Gilbert's Potoroo, known to the Noongar people as Ngilkat, is a small (~1kg), nocturnal marsupial that was thought to be extinct for over a century. It was rediscovered in 1994 at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve on the south coast of Western Australia, surprising the scientific community. With soft grey-brown fur, a pointed snout, and long hind feet, Ngilkat is an elusive and unique species that plays a crucial role in its ecosystem by dispersing spores of underground fungi, which make up 90% of its diet. These potoroos live in small colonies of between three to eight individuals and have a longevity of over seven years in the wild.

WHERE DOES IT LIVE?

Ngilkat are extremely habitat-specific. They rely on dense, undisturbed coastal heathland, particularly areas dominated by long-unburnt vegetation with thick ground cover. Their habitat needs are tightly linked to their food source—underground fungi—which grow in nutrient-poor, well-drained soils. Currently, Ngilkat is known from only four locations in the South Coast Region of Western Australia, including a natural population at Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve, and three translocated populations: one in a fenced enclosure at Waychinicup National Park, and two at island sites.

HOW RARE IS IT?

Ngilkat is one of the world's rarest mammals, with fewer than 150 individuals known to survive in the wild. It is listed as Critically Endangered under both WA and national legislation, and holds the same status on the IUCN Red List. Only one natural population remains in its natural habitat, while three additional populations have been established as insurance populations through carefully managed translocations. The extremely limited population size of the species leaves the species highly vulnerable to genetic bottlenecks and environmental catastrophes like fire.

WHAT ARE ITS MAIN THREATS?

Ngilkat faces a range of severe threats, including:

- Frequent or intense bushfires, which can rapidly destroy their habitat and wipe out local populations, as nearly happened to the last natural population.
- Introduced predators such as foxes and feral cats, which pose a constant threat to this ground-dwelling, relatively slow-moving marsupial.
- Historical habitat loss and fragmentation which has cleared critical habitat for the species.
- Limited genetic diversity, which increases vulnerability to disease and environmental change.
- Climate change, including increasing temperatures and reduced rainfall can impact the availability of the underground fungi the species depends on for food.



©Marnie Giroud

HOW HAS IT MADE A COMEBACK?

Guided by the Gilbert's Potoroo Recovery Team, conservationists have worked tirelessly to prevent the extinction of Ngilkat since its rediscovery in 1994. Key recovery actions, led by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in collaboration with project partners, have included:

- The creation of insurance populations through translocations to predator-proof and Island habitats, such as Norman's Enclosure, Bald Island and Middle Island.
- Translocations to maintain the rediscovered population at Two People's Bay Nature Reserve.
- Introduced predator control programs, targeting foxes and feral cats.
- Fire management planning to protect existing habitat from large-scale wildfires.
- Protection of existing habitat through access control measures and dieback hygiene protocols.
- Trial of captive breeding programs.
- Research focused on the biology and ecology of the species to support its conservation and monitoring.
- Population monitoring to track changes in abundance and distribution over time.

WHAT DOES IT NEED NEXT?

To secure the future of Ngilkat, ongoing and enhanced efforts are essential, including:

- Continued protection of current and potential future habitat.
- Ongoing and intensified predator control for feral cats and foxes in both known and potential habitats.
- Further translocations to establish additional populations at suitable sites.
- Expanded monitoring and research to better understand population status, population health, genetics, and ecological needs.
- Increased community awareness and involvement to promote conservation actions and reduce human impacts.

INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED IN NGILKAT RECOVERY WORK?

Check out the Gilbert's Potoroo Action Group website: www.potoroo.org and contact Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions: albany@dbca.wa.gov.au

This fact sheet was supported by the Australian Government Natural Heritage Trust and is delivered by South Coast NRM, a member of the Commonwealth Regional Delivery Partners Panel, in partnership with local conservation organisations.