

Media Release:

21.10.11

Searching for the Elusive Central Rock-Rat

Twelve months since the rare and elusive central rock-rat (*Zyomys pendunculatus*) was found near Mt Sonder in the West MacDonnell National Park, a team from the Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport (NRETAS) has returned to the area to discover another breeding population of this nationally Endangered species on nearby Mt Giles.

NRETAS Biodiversity Conservation technical officer Peter McDonald said this was an exciting discovery as the central rock-rat is now found only in the MacDonnell Ranges.

“Mt Giles had not been surveyed before, so finding a small population with pregnant mothers and juveniles is incredibly good news for the species,” Mr McDonald said.

“While no central rock-rats were found on Mt Sonder during this survey, its apparent disappearance from that site and then the discovery of another population at Mt Giles demonstrates a known trait of the species.

“The species goes through big boom-and-bust cycles and will appear and disappear from areas somewhat erratically, largely due to the availability of food resources.

“Mt Sonder and Mt Giles are both high-altitude rugged quartzite peaks with relatively low densities of mammal predators like cats and dingos and may act as long-term refuges for this species. Hopefully we can confirm this when we return to for repeat surveys in four years time.”

The central rock-rat was once found across much of the Territory’s south but has undergone a massive range contraction over the last 100 years, probably due to a combination of factors such as predation by cats and foxes, as well as changed fire regimes.

These surveys marked the first of a series across the West MacDonnell National Park by NRETAS scientists, Parks and Wildlife Service rangers and Traditional Owners to document plant and animal diversity across the Park and to investigate the impacts of environmental weeds and fire.

“This is the start of one of the most intensive flora and fauna monitoring programs ever undertaken in Australia’s arid zone, with more than 150 sites across the West MacDonnell National Park, Finke Gorge National Park and Watarrka National Park to be surveyed over the next 4 years,” Mr McDonald said.

“This monitoring program will assist us to detect changes in species populations, and this will guide our management of threats to the Territory’s native flora and fauna.

“The Central Australian environment has experienced some extremes of climate over the past 18 months with heavy rainfall early in the year and the recent intense and wide-spread bushfires.

“Thankfully places like Mt Sonder and Mt Giles were well protected from these recent wildfires and therefore there won’t be impacts on the central rock-rat and other flora and fauna in this part of the West MacDonnell National Park.”

Ends

Media Note – for more information contact Peter McDonald on 8951 8281.

Images – the Central rock-rat and Rangers survey on Mt Sonder

Issued: 9am Friday, 21 October 2011