

Expedition to Bernier Island

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Soldiers in training were able to help with the protection of rare wildlife on Bernier Island in Western Australia, by shooting out feral goats. The author, of the 2nd Keo Goorkhas, suggests that similar projects should be possible in other parts of the world.

In June 1971, my battalion went to Western Australia for a month's training. While there, we were able to send a small party to Bernier Island, in Shark Bay, to help reduce the wild goat population.

The idea for this expedition came from reading Dr W.D.L. Ride's excellent book on the native mammals of Australia (reviewed in *Oryx*, May 1971), from which I learned that the islands in Shark Bay held some extremely rare native mammals that were either extinct or nearly so on the mainland. I offered to help with any field projects, and this offer was taken up, via the Western Australian Museum, by the Western Australian Department of Fisheries and Fauna.

The islands of Shark Bay, although uninhabited and lacking any fresh water, have a long history of contact with European expeditions, and elements of their flora and fauna have been known and recorded for longer than those of almost any other part of Australia.

The two main islands, Dorre (19 miles by 2) and Bernier (16½ miles by 1¾), are both now protected reserves. Amongst the rare species, once more widespread but now probably found only on these islands, are the banded hare-wallaby *Lagostrophus fasciatus*, the western hare-wallaby *Lagochestes hirsutus*, Lesueur's rat-kangaroo, or boodie, *Bettongia lesueuri*, the little marl or barred bandicoot *Perameles bougainvillei*, all in the *Red Data Book*, the ashy-grey mouse *Gyomys albocinereus*, and the Shark Bay mouse *Thetomys praeconis*.

Our party was accompanied by Dr Andrew Burbidge, from the Department, and consisted of two British officers, nineteen Gurkha soldiers and three Australian soldiers. We drove the 600 miles to Carnarvon and crossed to the island, a four-hour journey, by fishing boat, skippered by Mr Victor Lombardo. The soldiers could only be away for seven days and so had only four days on the island; three days were devoted to controlled shooting of the wild goats. Two aerial surveys were flown by Mr Brian Soo, and all goats spotted were located and shot. The party accounted for twenty-two kills and three captures which, although less than the expected population, was one more than the aerial survey revealed. The verdict was that the wild goat population had been culled sufficiently to cause no further problems to the habitat for a few years to come.

All in all it was an interesting expedition which provided plenty of scope for exercising military skills as well as helping a conservation scheme of the Western Australian Government. Although no one would claim that it had any outstanding biological or ecological result, it was a contribution to the controlled conservation of rare species, achieved at

minimum cost. The soldiers were all legitimately on duty, and the Department had only to provide the means of transport to and from the island, and arrange for aerial surveys. Local press publicity was good, and the soldiers certainly enjoyed themselves – not least because goat meat is the meat most favoured by Gurkhas.

On reflection, I wonder whether there are not more opportunities for joint ventures between the Services and conservationist organisations? It is not perhaps well known that there are at least forty training exercises every year in which men and equipment are flown to various parts of the world. There are also Service funds available under the general heading of Adventure Training for helping to mount or finance smaller expeditions 'of an arduous nature'. There are many projects for which the Services might be able to offer help, and there would certainly be no lack of enthusiasm on the part of individuals to take part once they knew how worthwhile it would be.

Houbara in Pakistan

The houbara bustard has decreased drastically in Pakistan, where it is not protected apart from a bag limit for hunting parties. In a recent paper in *The Outdoorsman*, Tom Roberts and Christopher Savage pointed to the huge numbers accounted for by hunting parties – 2000 by one party in 1971. In Jordan, where the bird is re-establishing itself after near-extirmination, it is now protected. In Iran it has been totally protected for seven years, apart from special permits to visiting rulers, and even this quota has been reduced to 30 birds a year. In India the Rajasthan government has banned all hunting of the houbara, and Gujarat is following suit. FPS funds in Pakistan are being used for a houbara survey – see page 226 – and a project for captive breeding is being considered by IUCN and WWF.

Indian Bustard's Decline

The great Indian bustard is a much harried and declining bird according to the first report of a WWF survey, by R.S. Dharmakumarsinhji, which it is hoped will lead to the establishment of sanctuaries (much needed) for the bird. Even in the best areas he found the birds were being displaced by cultivation and overgrazing and reduced by poaching, some of it by police officers and landlords. In Shahpura, in Rajasthan, he also noted that the formerly abundant chinkara gazelles and blackbuck had almost disappeared.

WAPT's New Look

A major reorganisation of WAPT – the Wild Animal Propagation Trust – in the USA has turned it into a consortium of zoos and similar institutions for the purpose of captive breeding of rare and endangered species. Each member zoo will put its entire breeding stocks of certain species at the disposal of specialist committees, and each will provide facilities for a breeding centre for one or more species. Moreover each member zoo will pay a contribution to WAPT (which hitherto has had no income) graded according to its income – those with budgets over a million dollars paying \$1000 – which will make it possible to have a salaried executive. A few zoos have already indicated their willingness to donate breeding stock to WAPT outright.