Stripe-faced Dunnart: icon threatened species

Scientific name: Sminthopsis macroura
Other common names: Darling Downs Dunnart, Striped-headed Sminthopsis, Larapinta
Conservation status: Vulnerable in NSW

How do I recognise it?
The Stripe-faced Dunnart is a small, nocturnal, “marsupial mouse” with a head and body length of 7-10cm and a tail length 8-11cm. Pale grey-brown above, it has grey-white underparts and feet, as well as large eyes and ears. It has a slender, pointed muzzle and, as indicated by its common name, can be distinguished by a distinct dark stripe down the centre of the face and an often fattened carrot-shaped tail.

Lots of small, sharp teeth distinguish the Stripe-faced Dunnart from the House Mouse which has two large front teeth. While the Stripe-faced Dunnart can be distinguished from the Common Dunnart and Fat-tailed Dunnart, that occur in the Border Rivers Gwydir Catchment, by the length of its tail, which is generally 1.25 times longer than its head and body.

What does it eat?
Stripe-faced Dunnarts are carnivorous, foraging on the ground for a wide range of invertebrates (including termites and spiders) and small reptiles. Fat is stored in the tail when food is plentiful and used as an energy reserve during times of food shortage. Stripe-faced Dunnarts are not dependent on drinking water.

Where does it live?
The Stripe-faced Dunnart occurs in grasslands on clay, sandy or stony soils (including Mitchell Grass, and Spinifex grasslands), as well as in low chenopod shrublands (dominated by saltbush, bluebush and/or Sclerolaena) and often along drainage lines. Sheltering during the day in soil cracks, in grass tussocks and under rocks and logs, they are active at night.

Stripe-faced Dunnarts inhabit grasslands and low chenopod shrublands (Photo: DLWC)
Why is it threatened?

Always widespread though sparse through inland Australia, from central and northern NSW, western Qld, NT, SA and WA, the Stripe-faced Dunnart is now rare on the Central West and North West Slopes and Plains of NSW.

The decline of the Stripe-faced Dunnart is attributed to clearing for cultivation and predation by introduced foxes and cats. Little of its preferred grassland and low chenopod shrubland habitat remains intact. What habitat remains is fragmented and continues to be degraded by; inappropriate grazing, trampling by stock, pasture improvement, removal of leaf litter and fallen timber debris (“tidying up”) and frequent fire.

Why is our catchment important?

The most recent easterly sightings of this species have been within the Border Rivers-Gwydir Catchment at Mungindi, Moree, Warialda and Ashford.

What can I do?

- Retain and improve stands of remnant grassland and low shrubland.
- Control grazing within remnants to encourage regeneration of native groundcover and accumulation of leaf litter.
- Avoid “tidying up” ie removing fallen dead timber.
- Connect isolated habitat patches by planting corridors of local native plant species.
- Control foxes and feral cats in remnant areas.
- Desex domestic cats and keep indoors at night.
- Regulate burning activities in grasslands and low shrublands to retain areas of leaf-litter and fallen dead timber.
- Report all sightings of Stripe-faced Dunnart to the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

But wait there’s more......

By protecting and improving habitat for the Stripe-faced Dunnart, you will also be protecting and improving habitat for a whole suite of other threatened and declining plants and animals dependent upon grassland and low shrubland ecosystems. These species include: Bush Stone-curlew, Bustard, Five-clawed Worm Skink, Lined Earless Dragon, *Swainsona murrayana* and *Desmodium campylocaulon*.

References


