

**AUSTRALIA COULD BE FACING  
ITS FIRST MAMMAL EXTINCTION  
IN 50 YEARS.**

**STORY: GEORGIE OAKESHOTT**

# Edge of **EXTINCT**



**LAST CHANCE:** *Christmas Island pipistrelles are facing extinction. Photo: Australasian Bat Society*

**O**ne of Australia's rarest and tiniest species of bat is losing its fight for survival and could become extinct in a matter of weeks.

Weighing just three grams – the same weight as three one dollar coins – the Christmas Island pipistrelle is a species in serious danger. Its numbers are continuing to decline rapidly, and no-one knows why or how to stop it.

If the tiny pipistrelle does become extinct, it will be the first mammal extinction in this country in 50 years. It will also be one of the most closely observed extinctions ever.

For the past 10 years, numerous surveys have documented the decline of the pipistrelles on this remote island off the coast of Western Australia, it's only habitat in the world.

Once common and widespread, a marked reduction in their numbers was noticed in the 1990s. In 2006 the Christmas Island pipistrelle was added to the critically endangered list.

Since then, its numbers have continued to fall, with detector surveys at key foraging sites recording a decline in activity of 98 per cent.

President of the Australasian Bat Society, Michael Pennay, says there could be less than 20 Christmas Island pipistrelles alive today.

"We are gravely concerned about the future of this small bat," Mr Pennay says. "The bat's numbers have been declining rapidly over the last 15 years. Sadly we've now reached a point where these are the very last days, weeks or months for an entire species."

There is now only one known roost on the far west of the island and its colony of pipistrelles has fallen from 54 bats three years ago to just four bats recorded earlier this year.

Whether these four are still alive today is unknown. But if they are, the bat society is convinced their best chance for survival depends on a drastic rescue plan.

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Describing it as a last ditch effort, bat society member and zoologist David Gee says catching the remaining bats could be the only way to save them.

“With so few animals left, any animals caught will severely affect the wild population. However, with no knowledge of what is causing the extinction in the wild it is the only action left,” he says.

“If – and it is a big if – a captive population can be established this will buy time so that the environmental attributes that are causing extinction can be identified and hopefully corrected so that captive bred individuals can be released back on Christmas Island to re-establish a wild population.”

Pipistrelle researcher Lindy Lumsden has spent years travelling backwards and forwards to Christmas Island sampling sites and monitoring their numbers.

In January she said the rescue plan needed to be in place by March because leaving it any longer would risk there being so few animals left it would not be possible to catch them.

But that deadline has come and gone, and the plan has stayed a plan, because the government has been warned it’s too risky.

According to the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, which is advising the government, the risks associated with captive breeding are too high with so few left on the island. The committee says the bat is also very difficult to catch and no-one knows how to keep them alive for breeding.

Insisting the government is acting on the most up to date scientific advice from the nation’s top scientific experts, Environment Minister Peter Garrett says he will only give the green light to a captive breeding program on Christmas Island if a captive breeding trial of a closely related species is successful on the mainland.

This has left Michael Pennay bewildered: “There is very clear scientific advice and evidence from around the world, including from Australia’s leading bat researchers, saying that the rescue program is entirely possible.

“Managing captive bats is not difficult, it has been done many times before, even with very closely related species.

“We believe it would be better to try to catch the last remaining bats for breeding, to at least try and maybe fail, than to do nothing and definitely fail.

“The vast majority of our bat experts are in favour of the rescue action. It actually has a reasonably good chance of success. Yes there are risks, but at least we could say we tried.”

Taking his frustrations a step further, David Gee is calling it “extinction by committee”.

“My concern as a zoologist is that the time taken to deliberate on the animal’s fate by a committee is using up valuable time,” he says. “We do not have time to deliberate.

“Yes species do become extinct, it is a sad reality of our ever-changing environment. However, it is even sadder when there has been no effort made to prevent the extinction, or delays as an extinction occurs, particularly in an environmentally enlightened country like Australia.”

**“We should all care, because when a species becomes extinct there is no going back.”**

In March, Mr Gee’s federal MP, Sussan Ley (Member for Farrer, NSW), took the plight of the pipistrelle to the House of Representatives, supporting the bat society’s calls for action.

She told the House the Australasian Bat Society is proposing a three-stage program, involving an emergency rescue program aimed at catching the few remaining animals and establishing a captive colony; a long-term captive breeding program in a purpose-built facility on Christmas Island with experienced staff to run it; and targeted research to determine the cause of the decline so mitigation actions can be undertaken.

“In the big picture, people may say ‘who cares?’ but we should all care, because when a species becomes extinct there is no going back,” Ms Ley told parliament.

“If action can be taken to prevent extinction, we would all be better human beings for having taken it. If we do not succeed, we can say we tried.”

In the meantime, as the extinction of the Christmas Island pipistrelle draws inevitably nearer, Australia’s bat experts are still hoping for a miracle. •