The Butler done it! Rare marsupial caught on Melville Island

Northern Territory wildlife researchers have caught a rare marsupial on Melville Island as part of a collaborative project to increase knowledge of this rare species on the Tiwi Islands.

Environment Minister Marion Scrymgour said that the Butler’s dunnart (Sminthopsis butleri) was targeted because so little is known about the species. It is listed as vulnerable on the Northern Territory and national Threatened Species Lists.

"Dunnarts are unique Australian marsupials, related to quolls and Tasmanian devils, but are small enough to sit in the palm of your hand," Ms Scrymgour said.

"Butler's dunnart is one of Australia's most poorly-known dunnarts, observed from fewer than 20 records and from only two areas (Tiwi islands and the Kimberley).

"They are voracious hunters that come out at night to feed on insects and other small animals, and are not shy of taking prey twice a big as they are.

"Very few of these animals have ever been caught, so this project aims to develop and improve techniques for catching the species and to find out more about their biology.

"This was the third and most successful trip to Melville Island to study this vulnerable species since the project began in 2006."

Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts biodiversity researcher Brydie Hill said the most recent trip to Melville Island had been deemed a success due to the amount of information gathered.

"We caught five dunnarts, which may not seem like very many, but before this project started there had only ever been ten animals captured on the Tiwi islands

"We have discovered improved ways of capturing the animals and have more clues about where they might live.

"One Butler's dunnart caught on the first trip, in May 2006, was observed jumping very high trying to get out of the trap, leading researchers to suspect that in the past they may have been able to jump out of the buckets sunk in the ground used as traps.

"We have improved the trapping technique now by using deeper buckets ensuring that dunnarts remain in the traps until we can record and release them. We also suspected that the major breeding output of Butler's dunnart is timed to coincide with the wet season flush of insects".

The project is a collaborative project between the Biodiversity Conservation section of NRETA, the Tiwi Land Council (working with the Tiwi Land Management team) and Great Southern Limited.

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