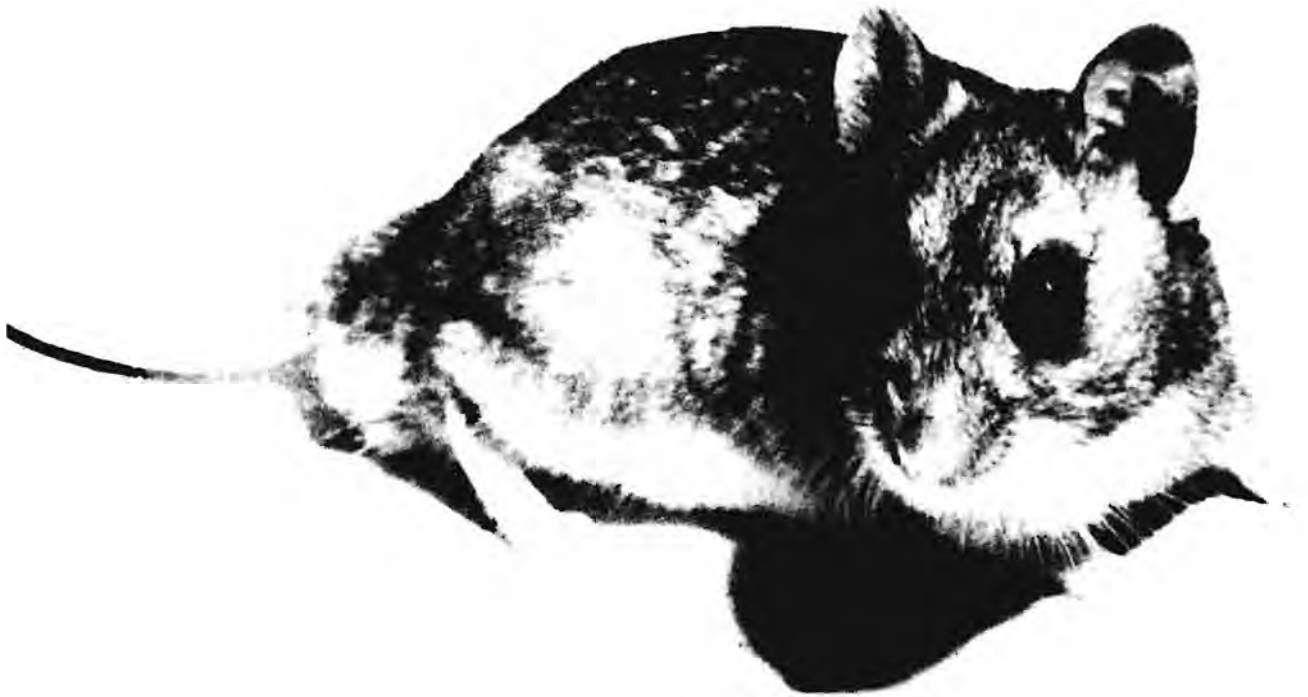


THE WHITE-TAILED MOUSE — VULNERABLE, BUT SO WHAT!

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White-tailed mouse, a vulnerable species.

Of the 243 species of terrestrial wild mammals known to occur in the Republic of South Africa, the White-tailed mouse, *Mystromys albicaudatus*, is one of 14 mammals considered vulnerable.

The White-tailed mouse is a small rodent, about 200 mm from head to tail with a mass of *c.* 70 g. It was first described in 1834 from the Albany district near Grahamstown in the eastern Cape Province. It occurs in the Orange Free State and is also sparsely distributed in the other provinces but is restricted to South Africa. It is the only

hamster, *i.e.* member of the subfamily Cricetinae, on the continent of Africa.

According to the South African Red Data Book the White-tailed mouse is likely to eventually move into the endangered category and be in danger of extinction if causal factors such as extensive destruction or degradation of its habitat or other environmental disturbances continue.

But so what? Why do scientists at museums study and collect information on such mammals



Habitat degradation: Once savanna grassland?

and of what concern and consequence is such a small, inconspicuous, nocturnal rodent to man? It has no tourist value, besides, any envisaged protective measures are unlikely to be practical. Is it important and will it really matter if White-tailed mice no longer exist and the statistics show only 242 species of mammals to occur in South Africa or 4 169 in the world?

To most, probably not. However, what no one can ignore and of vital importance to all are the causal factors responsible for such a possible extinction. Habitat degradation affects everyone — poor land makes poor people. The dilemma of the White-tailed mouse together with the many other vulnerable and endangered species can possibly be likened to an iceberg. The greater submerged (unknown) part of the berg representing the causal factors responsible for their status and the visible tip representing the (known) consequences.

Are these species, such as the White-tailed mouse, perhaps indicators signalling a warning, similar to the caged canary miners employ to warn them against lethal gasses? Is the White-tailed mouse warning us that something is amiss in the environment of which we are a part? Is it perhaps indicating that we have disregarded the intricate organisation of living things? Are we failing to comprehend man's impact on the environment?

Let us not forget that when a life phenomenon appears simple, there is reason to suspect the explainers thereof. Wildlife must be studied

because we did not make the rules of the game and we are only beginning to know what the rules are. Many (especially museums) are putting together the story of the earth and of its life and workings; and what we are to do with it depends to a large extent on organisations such as conservation agencies, agricultural and forestry departments.

Davis, in the latest *Museums Journal* (London) **86(3)**, says 'We in Museums must make people aware of such changes. We must record and monitor what biological resources we have in order to aid their protection'. Research and education is the key to conservation. It is therefore important for museum scientists to study and collect information on *inter alia* inconspicuous species such as the White-tailed mouse. However, it is equally important that such findings are not shelved to gather dust but used by all authorities concerned with landuse.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Currently, 243 species of wild mammals are known to occur in the Republic of South Africa.
 - 42 of these may be considered as exposed to some level of threat of extinction namely:
 - ✿ 3 species are considered to be **Endangered**.
 - ✿ 14 species are considered to be **Vulnerable**.
 - ✿ 25 species are considered as **Rare**.
- In addition 45 species are so inadequately known that they are relegated to the **Indeterminate** category.

- Our natural world is disappearing fast. In 1985:
- 20 million hectares of rain forest were destroyed
 - famine engulfed much of Africa
 - 1 500 minke whales were killed
 - the world population grew to 5 million