

# Low flying dragons need your help

## Save them from extinction

In fairy tales, dragons seem quite capable of looking after themselves; however the reality for Grassland Earless Dragons is quite different. Good farming practices have allowed the Grassland Earless Dragon to survive in a very small number of areas, but overall the tiny dragon is in drastic decline and needs help to avoid extinction. Farmers, landholders or land managers can help save this species from extinction.

## A local treasure

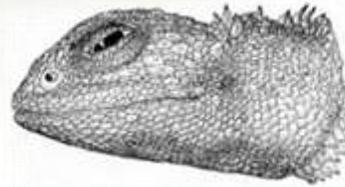
The Grassland Earless Dragon was thought to be extinct in south-eastern Australia until it was rediscovered accidentally near Queanbeyan in 1991. Since then, the Dragon has been discovered in isolated patches of natural grasslands on the Monaro Tablelands of NSW around Cooma and Nimitabel and in the Canberra and Queanbeyan regions.

## A flagship species

The Grassland Earless Dragon is a grassland specialist. It is an endangered species under Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation and is considered a flagship species for grassland conservation. The species is a good indicator of the presence of valuable natural temperate grasslands and good native pasture condition in general.

## Dragons need grasslands

Much of what was natural grassland in the region has been modified through the introduction and spread of invasive exotic species, unsympathetic grazing regimes, ploughing, pasture modification and fertilizer application. This has led to the loss of species diversity and richness in much of the grasslands in south-eastern Australia.



**Name:** Grassland Earless Dragon

**Scientific name:** *Tympanocryptis pinguicolla*

**Status:** Endangered



**Habitat:** Natural grasslands with rocks, invertebrate burrows or cracks in the soil

**Distribution:** On the Monaro Tablelands of NSW around Cooma and Nimitabel, in Canberra and Queanbeyan and in other potential habitat in our local region around Michelago, Bredbo, Berridale, Adaminaby, Dalgety, Bombala, Cathcart, Bungendore, Sutton, Gundaroo, Hall, Murrumbateman and Yass.

*The Grassland Earless Dragon is one of Australia's rarest reptiles*

# Dragon sightings on the Monaro

"I have never felt so good about farming. I'm getting good advice from local environment groups, my paddocks and stock are in good nick and my kids are now interested in the balance between farming and protecting these dragons. I never knew the Monaro had these unique natural values."

*Dennis Cassidy*

Below and right: Monaro farmers keeping an eye out for the Grassland Earless Dragon



## The Cassidy family property

The Cassidy family owns a large cattle farming property on the Monaro Tablelands of New South Wales near Cooma. Approximately 40% of the Cassidy's property comprises unimproved natural grasslands. After several suspected sightings of a dragon lizard, Mr. Cassidy decided to follow up his sightings with a local environment group and state government environment officers. A quick inspection by an expert confirmed that the endangered Grassland Earless Dragon occurred on his property.

## How did the Cassidys help?

The Cassidys decided that they had a rare opportunity to play a role in protecting the Grassland Earless Dragon and preserve a critically endangered ecological community that had been significantly reduced since European Settlement. So with the help of local environment groups and government agencies the Cassidys put in place a few simple best practices (see below) that didn't compromise their agricultural pursuits but helped conserve the Grassland Earless Dragon.

## Best practices

- Retaining their areas of native pasture and increasing their extent, condition and connectedness
- Managing the weeds on their property
- Installing some additional fencing, and
- Managing stocking rates and timing to maintain grassland and habitat condition
- Refraining from removing rock from their paddocks
- Limiting vehicle access and frequency in their paddocks with natural grassland
- Being aware of and avoiding activities that might disturb the dragons during their breeding season (Nov – Mar).

*Grazing and Grassland Earless Dragon conservation are compatible*

## Dragon facts

- **Earless** - unlike other dragon lizards, it lacks an external ear opening
- **Cryptic** - it is well camouflaged being chocolate brown like the soil and has white line markings on its back like a grassland tussock
- **Size** - it has a head to tail length generally less than 15 cm and only weighs between 1-9 grams
- **Amazing** - it withstands our cold winters sleeping beneath rocks, in the burrows of wolf spiders and crickets and within cracks in the soil
- **Predator** - it is a sit and wait predator feeding on grassland arthropods like ants and beetles
- **Vulnerable** - it is short lived, usually living only a year and breeding only once
- **Sensitive** - it lays its clutch of eggs in the very surface layer of the soil making it sensitive to over-grazing, ploughing, drought conditions and weeds which alter its habitat
- **Specialist** - well developed tussocks of native grasses provide important shelter from predators and overnight shelter during the summer
- **Cool** - males display a bright orange and yellow throat flush during the breeding season
- **Friendly** - it can't hurt you!

## Dragon habitat

A good indicator of natural grasslands and habitat for the Grassland Earless Dragon can often be characterised by the presence of Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda australis*), Wallaby grasses (*Rytidosperma* species), Snow grasses (*Poa* species) or Spear grasses (*Austrostipa* species). The presence of surface rocks and arthropod burrows is also a good indicator of habitat for the dragon as these provide important refuge sites.

Not only is it endangered, it has lots of character!



**Cryptic!** A Grassland Earless Dragon hiding in a crevice beneath a surface rock



Natural Temperate Grassland -habitat for the endangered Grassland Earless Dragon



In Latin *Tympanocryptis* means hidden ear drum and *pinguicolla* means fat neck

# PROJECT DRAGON

## Home for other rare reptiles

Natural temperate grasslands in south-eastern Australia are home to a diversity of reptiles, a number of which, like the Grassland Earless Dragon, are protected under Federal, State and Territory environmental laws. These include reptiles like the Striped Legless Lizard (*Delma impar*), the Little Whip Snake (*Suta flagellum*) and the Pink-tailed Worm Lizard (*Aprasia parapulchella*).

## About Project Dragon

Project Dragon is a collaborative effort by the Kosciuszko to Coast partnership, ACT Herpetological Association, Friends of Grasslands, NSW Office of Environment and Heritage and the University of Canberra's Institute for Applied Ecology to inform private landholders of the existence of the natural and rare values of grasslands in the region and promote their protection and management so that generations to come can have the thrill of seeing a Grassland Earless Dragon!

## More information

To pass on information or get advice about the Grassland Earless Dragon you can email:

[grasslandearlessdragon@gmail.com](mailto:grasslandearlessdragon@gmail.com)

To discover more about grasslands and reptiles you can visit the following websites:

The K2C website: [www.k2c.org.au](http://www.k2c.org.au)

The ACTHA website: [www.actha.org.au](http://www.actha.org.au)

The FOG website: [www.fog.org.au](http://www.fog.org.au)

The NSW OEH website:

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10817>

The Striped Legless Lizard is a cryptic reptile which also relies on grasslands.



The Little Whip Snake is another threatened reptile which relies on grasslands.



Friends of  
Grasslands



**Kosciuszko2Coast**  
LANDHOLDERS - LINKS - LANDSCAPES



Office of  
Environment  
& Heritage

Spotted a Grassland Earless Dragon? Email: [grasslandearlessdragon@gmail.com](mailto:grasslandearlessdragon@gmail.com)