

High Jumpers

By Stephen Fraser

These kangaroos live like monkeys. Can they be saved from extinction?

The local people call them the “ghosts of the rain forest.” They live far out of sight, some 30 meters (100 feet) above the ground, their orange-brown fur blending with the moss on the trees. Moving nimbly across the thin branches, they venture to the ground only to gather food.



Tim Laman

These aren't plush toys; they're tree kangaroos. The ones shown here are Matschie's tree kangaroos, which live on the Huon Peninsula of Papua New Guinea.

They're tree kangaroos, among the most elusive animals on Earth. Scientists first learned about them in the 1800s, but their natural habits are still largely a mystery.

Lisa Dabek, a scientist at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, is trying to change that while helping to take the animals off the endangered species list.



Tree Kangaroo Research
Program staff

"It's a very exciting time," she told *Current Science*. "The landowners of Papua New Guinea's Huon Peninsula are helping the rest of the world with participation in their country's first conservation area to protect these animals."

Home Videos

Dabek saw her first tree kangaroo more than 20 years ago at the Woodland Park Zoo. "I thought they were amazing!" she says. Dabek was a graduate student then, doing research on animal behavior. The tree kangaroos fascinated her so much that she dedicated her life's work to them.

Tree kangaroos are very hard to find in their native habitat. After local hunters helped Dabek spot her first wild tree kangaroo, eight years passed before she saw another one. She spotted telltale droppings on the ground and scratches in the bark of trees. A dog barked at something stirring above. Dabek looked up, and there was a tree kangaroo, looking as fuzzy and pink-nosed as a plush animal in a toy shop.



Joel Satore/National Geographic Stock

Dabek returns to Papua New Guinea every year to further the research and conservation work with her team. Thanks to a grant from the National Geographic Society (NGS), she and NGS staff recently began using a *crittercam*, a small video camera that is attached to a collared wild animal. The crittercam has offered glimpses of tree kangaroos scratching, grooming, eating, and cleaning their pouches, plus gorgeous vistas of the lush *canopy* (upper layer of a forest) where they live.

"It was beyond my wildest imagination," she says of the first images broadcast by the crittercam. "It brought tears to my eyes."

Tree To Ground

Like all kangaroos, tree kangaroos are *marsupials* (pouched mammals). Scientists know of ten species in northeastern Australia and on the island of New Guinea. The two landmasses were once connected.

Most kangaroos live on the ground in Australia, hopping around on their hind limbs at about 40 kilometers (25 miles) an hour. Some weigh as much as 90 kilograms (200 pounds) and stand more than 2 meters (6.5 feet) tall. Their *arboreal* (tree-dwelling) cousins are much smaller, about the size of large raccoons.



Joe LeMonnier

Scientists believe that all kangaroos evolved to the ground from a prehistoric tree-dwelling marsupial that looked like an opossum. Some kangaroos then evolved back into the trees. There they move with agility on all fours, using their long front claws to climb and their exceptionally long tails for balance. When they drop to the ground to find food, they free-fall from as high as 100 feet. “The soles of their feet are rubbery, which is good for gripping branches, and they glide down from the canopy, which helps them land without injuring themselves,” says Dabek.

Because there are no wild primates—monkeys or apes—in Australasia, tree kangaroos occupy the niches normally taken by those animals, explains Dabek. “They essentially live like monkeys,” she says.

Social Recluses

Ground kangaroos are mainly *social* animals. They live in groups—called *mobs*—of 10 or more, says Dabek. Tree kangaroos are the opposite. Males and females cohabit only during breeding time. Offspring live with their mothers for up to 18 months. From then on, their existence is solitary. When tree kangaroos do communicate, they make a shushing sound, says Dabek.

The species that Dabek and her colleagues are studying, *Matschie’s tree kangaroo*, lives in only one area of Papua New Guinea, the Huon Peninsula. Its fur is reddish. Its face, ear tips, underbelly, and tail are golden.

The animals are shy around humans, says Dabek. One female—“Trish”—that Dabek has been tracking for four years will barely tolerate humans. Trish

has had three offspring, each about 18 months apart. "Young kangaroos are more curious, and they will peek out of the trees for a good look," she says.

Forest Preserve

Because of overhunting and habitat loss, tree kangaroos are endangered. In 2009, after Dabek and her team spent 10 years working with hunters and landowners on the Huon Peninsula, the community set aside more than 70,000 hectares (173,000 acres) of forest for conservation. It's the first preserve of its kind in the country. People have agreed not to log, mine, or hunt tree kangaroos in the protected area, even though the animals are traditionally part of the local diet.

"I'm incredibly impressed with what the people that I've become close to are doing for conservation," says Dabek. "And pleased that the animals are now safe."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is a marsupial?
 - A a pouched mammal
 - B a kind of tree kangaroo
 - C a type of habitat
 - D a field of science

2. This passage describes the problem of tree kangaroos being endangered. According to the passage, what solution is being adopted?
 - A Tree kangaroos are being captured and cared for in local zoos.
 - B A conservation area has been set aside to protect the animals.
 - C Many of the kangaroos have been taken to the United States.
 - D Several scientists are adopting the kangaroos and raising them.

3. After reading the passage, what can you conclude Lisa Dabek will most likely do next?
 - A She will retire from studying tree kangaroos.
 - B She will continue to return to Papua New Guinea.
 - C She will open a zoo for endangered animals.
 - D She will stop tracking the kangaroo named Trish.

4. Read this sentence from the passage: "They're tree kangaroos, among the most elusive animals on Earth."

In this sentence, the word **elusive** means

 - A easy to catch
 - B dangerous
 - C hard to find
 - D beautiful

5. Which statement best describes the main idea of the passage?
 - A Scientist Lisa Dabek is working to save tree kangaroos from extinction.
 - B Tree kangaroos are tree-dwelling animals that look like plush toys.
 - C Lisa Dabek and her staff are using a crittercam to watch tree kangaroos.
 - D The tree kangaroo species that Dabek is studying lives in the Huon Peninsula.

6. In what part of the world do tree kangaroos live?

7. Why might the local people call tree kangaroos the "ghosts of the rain forest"?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

_____ most kangaroos live on the ground in Australia, tree kangaroos live in trees 100 feet above the ground.

- A Before
- B While
- C Because
- D However

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Each year, Lisa Dabek travels to Papua New Guinea to continue her research on tree kangaroos.

Who? Lisa Dabek

(does) What? _____

When? _____

Where? _____

Why? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** offspring: the young of a person or animal.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
