



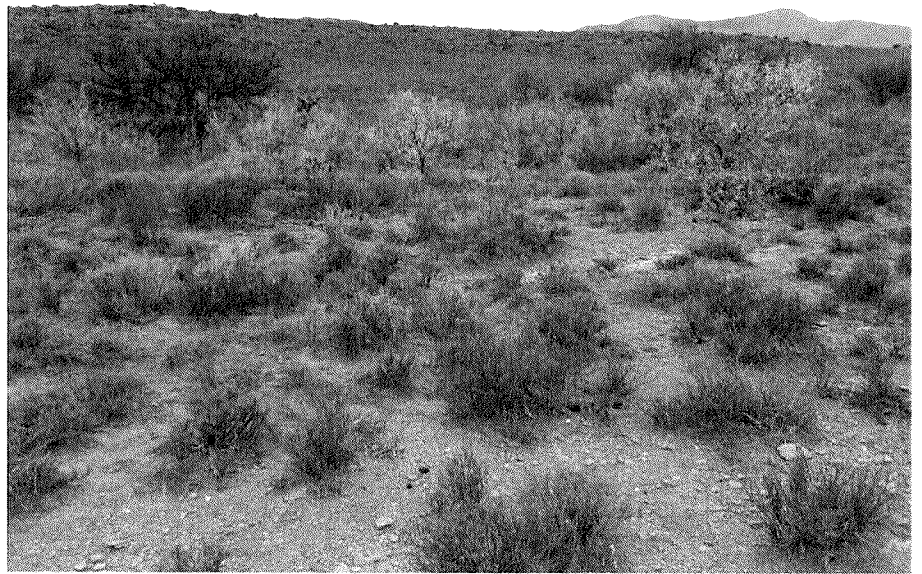
Liu Yi (Gina) Yang, NMU Nature Conservation intern based at Renu-Karoo veld Restoration in Prince Albert

What are the Habitat Needs of the Critically Endangered Riverine Rabbit?

Gina Yang

The Riverine Rabbit or *Rivierkonyn* (*Bunolagus monticularis*) is one of the most threatened indigenous species in the semi-arid karoo faunal kingdom. Unlike hares, rabbit babies are helpless, naked and blind and need the protection of the burrow. This behaviour together with habitat-specific distribution are considered the major reasons for this species being endangered. In theory, most of the habitat-dependent species are sensitive to environmental change and anthropological disturbances.

In the past the Riverine Rabbit was known only from riverbeds on the Karoo plateau, but in recent years, this rare species has been seen by researchers, farmers and tourists in lower-lying parts of the Karoo. Riverine Rabbit can be distinguished from hare and other rabbits by its large and broad ears, a reddish, brown body colour and a dark streak running from lower jaw across its head. Unlike hares, these rabbits do not run for safety until the potential danger is approaching very close to them; they will rather sit in silence and unnoticed, wait for the danger to pass. This rabbit species is specifically restricted to the Renosterveld and succulent Karoo shrublands and is well known as a gifted hider in the bush. However, it is vulnerable to drought and land degradation such as



Renosterveld survey areas at Baviaanskloof. Photos: Gina Yang.

vegetation clearing and over-grazing. As the result of adaptation, the rabbits give birth to only 1-2 kittens (babies) per litter. When European settlers colonised the Karoo some 250 years ago, the Riverine Rabbit became vulnerable due to wheat production, sheep farming and predation by domestic dogs.

Because of its rareness, alertness and soft hairy feet, it is difficult to track the Riverine Rabbit. The Endangered Wildlife trust (EWT) has for many years been exploring the distribution of the Riverine Rabbit using motion-activated cameras (trap cameras). In mid-September 2019 the EWT with the assistance of Cape Nature, Sanbona Wildlife Reserve and Renu-Karoo Veld Restoration set out to describe the habitats used by Riverine Rabbits. To do this they visited 27 sites where trap cameras had indicated the presence or absence of the rabbit near Touwsrivier and in the Baviaanskloof to describe the potential habitat of rabbits. In theory, a suitable habitat should provide vegetation that has reached a certain height and density, has soils suitable for burrowing and includes food plants. The compactness of plant material, type of vegetation and geology were surveyed to test this theory. It may be possible to work out a hypothetical database which indicates the extent of surviving suitable habitat for Riverine Rabbits. This knowledge could lead to an improved strategy for conservation of natural veld in the Western Cape. ■



Bonnie Schumann, researcher of the EWT Riverine Rabbit project and Drylands Conservation Programme - Nama Karoo Coordinator.
Email: bonnies@ewt.org.za