

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

April 2009

Easter bilby – the Australian equivalent of the Easter bunny.

Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary

Why have I received **Oxford Australia Word of the Month**?

You are receiving this email because you are a valued customer of Oxford University Press.

You can unsubscribe at any time by sending an email to **wordofthemonth.au@oup.com** with 'Unsubscribe WOTM' in the subject line.

How do I subscribe?

If you have a colleague or a friend who you think would like to receive Oxford Australia Word of the Month, all they need to do is email **wordofthemonth.au@oup.com** with 'Subscribe WOTM' in the subject line.

Where can I learn more about the **Australian National Dictionary Centre**?

Visit: www.anu.edu.au/ANDC

Where can I learn more about **Oxford University Press**?

Visit: www.oup.com.au



• **Word of the Month: The Full Story**

• **Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary**

Please direct all media enquiries to:

Betty Hew

Phone:
(03) 9934 9131

Email:
betty.hew@oup.com

easter bilby

The story behind the Word of the Month

The earliest term for *Easter egg* in English is *pasch egg* or *pace egg* (from *pasch* referring to the Passover and then to Easter), first recorded in the later sixteenth century. These *pasch* eggs were coloured hard-boiled eggs given as Easter gifts, and were symbols of the resurrection and new life. The association of a rabbit or bunny with these eggs seems to have begun in Germany. The earliest uses of the term **Easter bunny** in English appear in the early twentieth century. Thereafter, the **Easter bunny** played the role of a 'paschal' Father Christmas, leaving gifts of chocolate for children and others on Easter morning.

In Australia, the **Easter bunny** hopped along merrily with other northern hemisphere seasonal traditions, until it became strongly linked with the pestiferous rabbit, which had been destroying the Australian landscape. Enter the **Easter bilby**. A **bilby** is a small burrowing marsupial of woodlands and plains of drier parts of mainland Australia. The word is from the Yuwaalaraay Aboriginal language of New South Wales. We have records of two species. The first, *Macrotis leucura*, is extinct, and was last recorded in the 1960s. Its decline was exacerbated by introduced rabbits, foxes, and feral cats. The second, *Macrotis lagotis*, is now rare. At some stage the idea arose that the **bilby** might be an appropriate replacement for the bunny, and that in Australia the **Easter bilby** should replace the **Easter bunny**.

It has been suggested that the **Easter bilby** tradition goes back to the 1970s:

The origin of the **Easter bilby** is unknown, but one plausible story is that the concept was invented sometime in the late 1970s by a Melbourne Field

Naturalist Club with officials delivering chocolates from the **Easter bilby** to participants at one of their bush camping trips. The Anti Rabbit Research Fund of Australia approached three South Australian confectioners—Haigh's, Melba and Cottage Box chocolates—to design and produce Australia's first chocolate bilbies in 1993 as a way of highlighting the damage caused to the environment by the introduced rabbit. *Canberra Times*, 7 April 2004.

The first reference we have been able to find to the **Easter bilby** is in the *Adelaide Advertiser* on 1 October 1991, where it is put forward as one of several possible bunny replacements:

We should promote one of our native marsupials to take over from **Easter Bunny**. Indeed, what is wrong with having an Easter Potoroo, Easter Wallaby, **Easter Bilby** or Easter Bandicoot to do the job? Why continue the traditions from another country which popularise an animal that hasn't anything to do with Australia's flora or fauna?

Two months later, again in the *Adelaide Advertiser* (27 November), it is clear that it is the **bilby** that has won the Easter egg-giving race:

Easter Bunny beware, the **Easter Bilby** is out to burrow its way into Australian hearts. The proposed National Rabbit Foundation plans to focus the attention of Australian children on the endangered **bilby**, at the expense of the pest.

The term **Easter bilby** had arrived in Australian English!

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
karrack
glycaemic
burka
index
barbecue stopper
senior moment
Sudoku
hornbag
dishlicker
witlof
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
yakitori
Bioterrorism