



Interesting facts about Bare-nosed wombats

Distribution

There are three subspecies of wombat -- *Vombatus ursinus hirsutus* which is found on the mainland, *Vombatus ursinus tasmaniensis* which is found in Tasmania and *Vombatus ursinus ursinus* which was once found throughout the Bass Strait islands but is now restricted to Flinders Island. The Bare Nosed Wombat was once found throughout south eastern Australia but now, partly as a result of European settlement, is restricted further to the south. It occupies Tasmania, eastern New South Wales and eastern Victoria with scattered populations in south-eastern South Australia. There are two other species of wombat, both found on mainland Australia - the southern hairy-nosed wombat and the threatened northern hairy-nosed wombat.

Description

It is a fairly large, solidly built animal with a squat, round, bearlike body, small ears and eyes, and a large naked nose. Its thick, coarse fur varies in colour from sandy brown to grey and black and is sometimes flecked with fawn. Often their true colour is obscured by the colour of the dirt or clay in which they have been digging.

On the mainland they average 1 metre in length and 27 kg in weight yet can reach up to 1.2 metres in length and weights of up to 35 kg. The Tasmanian Wombat is not as large or bulky, averaging 85 cm in length and 20 kg in weight, while the Flinders Island wombat is smaller still at only 75 cm in length.

They have short legs, large paws and long, strong claws which are used in the excavation of burrows. The forepaws are used for digging: after pushing the dirt to one side, the wombat will back out, moving the loose dirt with both the front and back paws.

It differs from all other marsupials by having a single pair of upper and lower incisors (front teeth). These teeth are never ground away as they are both rootless and never stop growing, which is just as well as the wombat often uses them for cutting through obstructions, much like a beaver! Being marsupials, female wombats have a pouch that in their case opens backward to prevent dirt and debris entering while burrowing.

Habitat

In Tasmania and other states, the wombat is widespread and found from sea level to alpine areas but shows preference for heathland, coastal scrub and open forest where soils favour their burrowing habits. Wombats often dig their burrows in the areas above creek and gullies. Some burrows can be up to 20 metres long and more than 2 metres below the ground and can have numerous connecting tunnels with more than one sleeping compartment. Bare Nosed wombat's burrows usually only have one entrance.



Typical Bare Nosed wombat burrow

Lifestyle

Wombats are mostly nocturnal, usually coming out at night to graze when temperatures are lower. However, in cold periods they may sometimes be seen about during the day either grazing or basking in the sun. They graze for between 3 and 8 hours a night, during which time they may travel many kilometres and visit up to four burrows within their home range to rest or tidy up the burrow. Although they are solitary animals, with only one wombat inhabiting any one burrow, the overlap of home ranges does occasionally result in a number of wombats using the same burrow but usually not at the same time.

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To avoid the overlap of feeding areas they use scent-marking, vocalisations, and aggressive displays. Wombats not only leave their burrow to graze but will also spend time rubbing themselves against logs or branches. If used often enough, these rubbing posts may be recognised by their worn or polished appearance.

The distinctive cube shaped dung of the wombat is a useful indication of its comings and goings. Any new object within a home range is a prime target for marking with dung, particularly if it is elevated. Fallen trees, fresh mushrooms, rocks and even an upright stick have been found with scats precariously placed on top! The cube shape means the scats are less likely to roll off such objects. The rump of the wombat is covered by a very tough, thick skin. If threatened, a wombat will dive into a nearby burrow or hollow log, using its rump as protection from the teeth and claws of its attacker. The wombat is also capable of crushing attackers against the burrow roof.





Bare-nosed wombat at entrance to burrow

Breeding

Although the wombat may breed at any time of the year, mating most often occurs during winter. The female has 2 teats in her pouch, yet despite this, 30 days after mating, only one young is born. The juvenile remains in the pouch for 6 months, after which it stays with the female until it is 18 months old. From the time the juvenile leaves the pouch, it begins to substitute increasing amounts of plant material for milk until, when about 15 months old, it stops suckling altogether. Sexual maturity is reached at 2 years of age and wombats can live in excess of 10 years in the wild.

Due to the long period of time that the young are dependent on the mother, it is likely that females only rear one young every two years. However, if the young dies early, or if conditions are good enough for it to leave the pouch early, she may raise another.

Diet

The diet of the wombat is composed entirely of plant material. Its main food is native grasses, but shrubs, roots, sedges, bark and herbs are also eaten, while moss seems to be a particular delicacy.



At times of food shortages, they may dig up sections of dead grass to get at the roots. When feeding, the front feet of wombats are surprisingly dextrous -- they can pick up vegetation with one foot and 'hand' it to the mouth!

Status

The Bare-nosed wombat is still thought to be common, however, since settlement, they have faced resentment from farmers as their burrows can be hazards to stock, and thousands were killed for this reason alone. With the ongoing spread of mange, which is thought to be prevalent in 93% of areas where wombats are found and which is a death sentence if not treated, along with the clearing of land. and roadkill the future of the wombat is not is not assured.

Dogs, indiscriminate shooters and vehicles also take their toll. At long last now in 2020 the Bare-nosed wombat is protected in all States!

How you can help

- Contain dogs at night to prevent them roaming, particularly in areas where wombats are known to live.
- If wombats are causing damage to fences, heavy hinged gates can be installed which will allow wombats to push through but prevent less powerful animals from entering. See the *Mitigation Page* on our website.
- Drive carefully in 'wombat country' -- apart from killing or injuring them, wombats can damage cars.
- Occasionally young wombats become orphaned and require nurturing. It is illegal to hand raise wombats without a special licence so it is important they are surrendered to a registered wildlife carer. Contact info@wombatprotection.org.au for details.

