



Common Wombat

Vombatus ursinus

The wombat is the largest burrowing mammal in Australia. It is such an accomplished burrower that early settlers called it a 'badger'. Its closest relative is the koala. With its short tail and legs, characteristic waddle, and 'cuddly' appearance, the wombat is one of the most endearing of Australia's native animals.

Distribution

The common wombat was once found throughout southeastern Australia but is now, partly as a result of European settlement, restricted further to the south. It occupies Tasmania, eastern New South Wales and eastern Victoria with scattered populations in southeastern South Australia and southwestern Victoria.

There are three subspecies of common 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.

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 m in length and 27 kg in weight yet can reach up to 1.2 m in length with 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 and, 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 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.

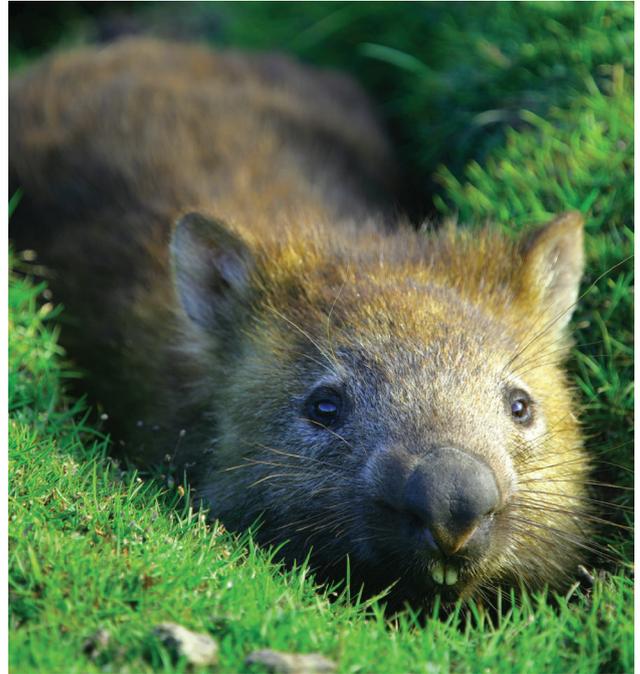


Photo: Joe Shemesh

Habitat

In Tasmania the wombat is widespread and found from sea level to alpine areas but shows a preference for heathland, coastal scrub and open forest, where soils favour their burrowing habits. Wombats often dig their burrows in the areas above creeks and gullies. Burrows can be up to 20 m long and more than 2 m below the ground, and have numerous connecting tunnels and entrances. There may also be more than one nest in the burrow, which they make from sticks, leaves and grasses.

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 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. 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 dung on top! The cube shape means that dung is 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. Their natural enemies are Tasmanian devils and eagles, while no doubt the thylacine once preyed upon them.

Breeding

Although the wombat may breed at any time of the year, mating most often occurs during winter. The female has two teats in her pouch yet despite this, 30 days after mating only one young is born. The juvenile remains in the pouch for six 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 two years of age and wombats live for in excess of five years in the wild. Due to the long period of time that the young is dependant 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 wombat is common in Tasmania, particularly in the northeast of the state. However, since settlement, they have faced resentment from farmers as their burrows can be hazardous to stock, and thousands were killed for this reason alone.

Although common at present, the clearing of land for agriculture is reducing their range. Wombats are killed by poison such as ‘1080’ used in baits intended to reduce rabbit or wallaby numbers. Dogs, indiscriminate shooters and vehicles also take their toll.

If the fox was to become established in Tasmania the wombat would be at risk.

It is protected in all states although in parts of eastern Victoria it is treated as a pest and has no protection — mainly due to its damage to rabbit-proof fences.

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.
- 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 important that specialist advice is obtained on their rearing and release as they can become very boisterous if not treated correctly.

Further Information

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