



AGILE ANTECHINUS

Have you been outside on the verandah or inside the shed or maybe walking in the bush and seen a small, grey-brown creature hop or scurry away and thought 'That was a mouse'. Well it may have been a common house mouse or it may have been an Agile Antechinus.

The Agile Antechinus is about the same size as a mouse, although they can grow to 12 cm long (tip of nose to start of tail) with a tail about the same length as their body. Their fur can be grey just like a mouse but can also be grey-brown in colour with a light coloured stomach. Their eyes are quite dark and large by comparison. They hop and scurry in a similar fashion to a mouse however they are also very good climbers. I have seen them climbing straight up the brick wall of my house just like it was a horizontal surface.

There are 2 easily identifiable characteristics of an antechinus which differentiate them from a house mouse. Their ears have a fold in them and their snout is more slender and pointed with the front of their lower jaw set about 1 cm back from its nose whereas a mouse's lower jaw starts just back from the nose. See photograph below.



I found this poor antechinus on my verandah one morning early before the currawongs came in (to gobble it up). There was no obvious sign of why it had died and as it was in April I doubt it was due to a mating frenzy.

I found one in my bath one day (no, not whilst bathing!). It must have been there for some time as it was quite weak and made very little effort to escape when I picked it up. I placed it in a large jar and put some water in the base of the jar. Within a minute the antechinus was lapping up the water. I then put a teaspoon of honey in the jar and it was not long before it started licking that also. I dropped a few small insects into the jar throughout the day and by evening they were mostly consumed. By this time the antechinus was quite active so I took it out to a bushy area where there are several logs and I had seen antechinus previously. I placed the jar on the ground and slowly tipped it on its side. The antechinus moved to the mouth of the jar looked around then hopped out and over to the base of an old hollowed tree back to its natural environment.

Antechinus are capable of going through torpor. Torpor is a sleep like state in which the body's processes slow down to a fraction of their normal rate. They enter this state during difficult periods caused by cold weather or lack of food. The one I found in my bath may well have been in a torpid state when I found it which would explain its quick recovery.

Antechinus mate annually from mid August to end of August (in Gippsland area). The gestation period is 4 weeks after which 6 to 10 young are born. Research has shown that the young from 1 litter are often fathered by up to 7 different males. The Agile Antechinus does not have a pouch (as do most other antechinus), each young antechinus attaches itself to a nipple of the mother and they are all dragged about as the mother moves around. Ouch!! It has been found that the number of nipples an Agile Antechinus have varies from 6 to 10 (in pairs) and hence a natural weaning occurs when there are more young born than there are nipples available on the mother. When the young are 5 weeks old the mother will leave them in the nest whilst she goes hunting food.

Some interesting facts:

- Antechinus are nocturnal by nature but I have seen them early morning or evening during daylight hours.
- Antechinus build communal nests of dry grass and leaves in hollow logs or tree hollows. Up to 20 families have been recorded in the one nesting community.
- Antechinus eat insects, small invertebrates, spiders, nectar and small berries.
- Following mating the male Antechinus dies and hence they never live longer than 10-11 months (Aahhh. But what a way to go!!)
- Female Antechinus are known to live up to 4-5 years.



Apart from their natural enemies such as goannas, raptors, owls, etc. Antechinus are also threatened by introduced animals such as cats, dogs and foxes.

The Agile Antechinus is not a threatened species, however, leaving hollow trees and fallen logs on your property will ensure that there is habitat available for these wonderful little creatures.

The Dusky Antechinus is also found around our way however they are larger than the Agile species growing up to 18 cm long (tip of nose to start of tail). They are also more thickset and have smaller ears than the Agile species. The Dusky Antechinus is believed to be less frequent in this area.

Landcare is about protecting and restoring our environment to allow all forms of nature (fauna and flora) to survive in harmony and balance. I do not claim to be an expert on Flora and Fauna but have based this article on my own experiences and readings on the subject.

So as part of the Bingi Landcare newsletter, with each publication, I aim to contribute an article on a species of either fauna or flora which is indigenous to our area to stimulate interest in our native flora and fauna.

In addition I also invite everyone to forward their own experiences and photographs so these can be shared with other members by including them in the newsletter.

Your contributions can be emailed direct to me at jd@incitegraphics.com.au or to Kaye Proudley at katbingi@harboursat.com.au

(Author John McClumpha, Hedley Range Road, February 2012)