



Bare-nosed Wombat (*Vombatus Ursinus*)

Have you ever been outside at night on the back lawn or in the paddock and heard the continuous, almost machine like, “chomp chomp” sound or maybe been out in the bush and heard some hissing or a low deep growl which brings you to a sudden stop. More than likely you had encountered a wombat.

Wombats which are found in our area are the Bare-nosed Wombat or Common Wombat. A less technical name is the “bulldozer of the bush” because they are quite heavy and strong animals who when they encounter an obstacle will try to push through it rather than go around it. My one metre wire mesh tree guards have well and truly demonstrated this behaviour many times to the extent of being completely flattened on occasions.

Wombats are marsupials which carry their young in a pouch. When born the young are very small, about the size of a jelly bean. They are blind and have no hearing but have a good sense of smell which allows them to find their way into the mother’s pouch and find the mother’s teat. The pouch is backward facing hence to avoid falling out as the mother moves about the young attach themselves to the mother’s teat which swells up in the baby’s mouth and prevents it from falling out. The baby stays in the pouch up to approximately 8 months and will not leave the pouch entirely until approximately 12 months old. The young will stay with their mother for up to 2 years before becoming independent.

Wombats are generally nocturnal. They will stay in their burrows during the day and venture out at night to feed. However I have often seen wombats in the bush during the day especially during the cooler months. Wombats are herbivorous animals. They feed on grasses and tussocks with the occasional feast of fungi and moss and even the occasional farmed vegetable! They will also eat plant roots especially when grasses are not available. They are small feeders eating about one third of what a kangaroo eats by comparable size and as their diet is nutritionally low they conserve their energy by limiting their activity and spending up to eighteen hours a day sleeping or resting in their burrow.



Some interesting facts ;

- Baby wombats are called Joeys
- Wombats range in length between 70 cm and 130 cm and in weight from 22 kg to 39 kg
- Wombats are the world’s largest burrowing animals

- They will travel up to 3 km a night whilst grazing.
- Their feeding area ranges from 5 to 27 hectares.
- The name “Wombat” is derived from the aboriginal word “vomat” or “wombach”.
- The wombat is the second largest marsupial (the Kangaroos being the largest).
- The bare-nosed wombat is able to use its front paws as “hands” in pulling up plants and feeding itself.
- Wombats have quite large and strong claws giving them the ability to be very strong and fast diggers and can out dig a man using a shovel (only the man uses the shovel!).
- They are very strong swimmers .
- Despite their heavy body and relatively short legs they can run up to 40 km/hr for short distances.
- Their gestation period is 20 to 22 days and usually only 1 joey is born –occasionally they have twins.
- They have continuously growing teeth. So as they wear or break they regrow.
- Wombats often sleep on their back with their legs stretched skywards.
- Its pre historic cousin the Diprotodon was 4.27 metres long and weighed 3 tonne. A complete diprotodon skeleton was recently found in Queensland.

The wombat’s is generally a solitary animal. However it has been shown that they share burrows within their feeding area. A burrow is usually only occupied by one wombat at any one time except when a young is still mother dependant. Their burrows often have more than one entrance and are sloped to ensure drainage to prevent flooding although I have seen many burrows with openings facing uphill which make great water collectors!

Wombats usually leave their droppings on raised surfaces such as rocks or branches. I often tell visitors it’s because they don’t like the grass tickling their bum! But it is probably part of their scent trail which they leave when marking their territory. Their droppings are usually cubed shaped. It is also known that females “on heat” will display their droppings in prominent locations to indicate to males that she is ready to mate.



I took the photograph on the left to record where a wombat has scratched the bark from some stringy bark trees and carried (most of) it down the burrow – presumably to line the burrow sleeping area. I have noticed this at other holes on my property but it does not appear to be a regular activity. Maybe it is only a practice of pregnant wombats.

Wombats have very few predators. Dingoes and dogs being their main threat apart from ourselves.

Man is the biggest threat to wombats. Unfortunately in Victoria the bare-nosed wombat is considered vermin and hence not protected consequently many wombats are shot unnecessarily. A large percentage also become victims of road kill. Despite the “damage” they do to farm land with their burrows the damage is quite minimal and the only real area where they may be considered a problem is where farms grow vegetable crops but adequate physical barriers have proven to be a deterrent in this instance. Continuing loss of forested areas is also limiting their natural habitat and hence causing a decline in the population.

With wombats only breeding approximately every 3 years and only having one offspring we need to protect these creatures to ensure they don't reach the endangered list as is the case with their cousins.

The other threat to wombats is the Sarcoptic mange. This results from a parasitic infestation by a mite introduced into Australia, possibly on foxes. The parasites are spread by the wombats themselves and also by dogs and foxes. Wombats generally die a slow agonising death as a result of this mange. Treatment is available which can cure this problem so if you see a wombat with mangy fur or areas of bare skin contact Parks Victoria or the nearest wildlife shelter so that they may be rescued. The Wombat Protection Society of Australia is researching Sarcoptic mange and are confident that it can be eventually eradicated.

Refer to Wombat Protection Society of Australia www.wombatprotection.org.au for further information.

Other wombats are the Southern Hairy nosed wombat found along the South Australian coast and the Northern Hairy Wombat which is only found in a small area in central Queensland where they exist in very small numbers and are under threat of becoming extinct. Although the Hairy nosed wombat and the bare-nosed wombat are related science has shown that they have been genetically separated for 4-5 million years.

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, September 2012)