



## Short-beaked Echidna *Tachyglossus aculeatus* (Shaw, 1792)



Photo: Christine Groom (DEC)

### Size

Head and body length

300-450 mm

### Weight

2-7 kg

### Subspecies

Five subspecies are recognised based upon their degree of hairiness and length of the claw on digit II of the hind foot:

- *Tachyglossus aculeatus acanthion* (Western Australia, Northern Territory, arid zones of all mainland sites)
- *Tachyglossus aculeatus aculaetus* (coasts and dividing range slopes of southern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia)
- *Tachyglossus aculeatus lawesii* (Papua New Guinea)
- *Tachyglossus aculeatus multiaculeatus* (Kangaroo Island)
- *Tachyglossus aculeatus setosus* (Tasmania)

### Description

Dorsal surface of body covered with spines, with fur present between them. The belly is only covered with hair. Its spines are light yellow with black tips and may be over 6 cm long. Teeth are absent and the tongue is long, capable of extending well beyond the end of the snout. The male has a spur on each ankle.

### Other Common Names

Short-beaked Echidna, Spiny Anteater

### Distribution

The Short-beaked Echidna is distributed throughout most of Australia, but is absent from some northern islands.

For further information regarding the distribution of this species please refer to [www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au](http://www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au)

### Habitat

Short-beaked Echidnas occur in a variety of habitat, from regions experiencing winter snow to deserts. They usually shelter under thick bushes, in hollow logs, under piles of debris, or occasionally in burrows.

### Behaviour

The Short-beaked Echidna is a solitary animal and does not have a fixed nest site but home ranges (area of occupancy) frequently overlap. Self constructed burrows are usually only used by females incubating and suckling young which the mother will often leave for several days in order to forage.

In arid regions the Short-beaked Echidna will seek shelter in caves or crevices to avoid high daytime temperatures, activity being restricted to the night. In other areas activity is determined by air temperature. Short-beaked Echidnas found in eastern Australia have been shown to hibernate.

When disturbed or threatened, the Short-beaked Echidna rolls into a ball of spines. If it is on soil it may dig itself below the surface while remaining horizontal. It can also hide in rock crevices or hollow logs by extending its spines and limbs and wedging itself in securely.

## Diet

The Short-beaked Echidna is an insectivore. The only specific requirement of the Short-beaked Echidna is its diet of ants and termites. The Short-beaked Echidna is toothless and breaks into a termite nest with its forelegs or snout and uses its long, sticky tongue to catch the termites. Termites are preferred in arid areas, and this preference is believed to reflect higher water content in the termite (80%) than the ant (64%). They occasionally feed on earthworms, scarab larvae and moth larvae.

## Breeding

Mating occurs in July and August. A single female may mate with up to 6 males. Two weeks later a single soft-shelled egg is laid directly into the pouch of the female and hatches ten days later. The young sucks up milk secreted by mammary glands. Pouch young are left behind in the burrow by the female when they are approximately three months of age. The female leaves the young Echidna in a safe place while she hunts for food, returning to suckle it. Juveniles tend to be first seen when about one year old and weigh 1-2 kg.

## Threatening processes

Adults have no significant predators although they may occasionally be eaten by dingoes, foxes, and young may be eaten by goannas. Motor vehicles are also a known cause of mortality.

## Conservation status

IUCN Red List of Threatened Species

Least Concern (Version 3.1)

## Management in Western Australia

- No management actions exist for the Short-beaked Echidna, although records of road-killed animals along main roads are monitored.

## Other Interesting Facts

- A Short-beaked Echidna's spiny coat provides excellent defence when threatened.
- The name *Tachyglossus* is ancient Greek for 'quick tongue', and refers to the speed with which its tongue can catch ants and termites.
- Short-beaked Echidnas are one of three species of egg-laying mammals.
- They do not have teats, but secrete milk through several pores in the belly.
- The Short-beaked Echidna is one of only two mammals in Australia that feeds predominantly on ants.
- The Short-beaked Echidna can swim.
- Scientists believe that the Short-beaked Echidna may possess electroreceptors in its snout that can detect electrical signals given off by the insects it feeds on.
- Some Short-beaked Echidnas have lived for over 50 years in captivity.

## Selected references

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## Further information

Contact your local office of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

See the department's website for the latest information: [www.dec.wa.gov.au](http://www.dec.wa.gov.au).

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