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# THE DINGO



**T**HE DINGO or wild dog (*Canis familiaris*) belongs to the same species as the domestic dog. It possibly evolved from a south east Asian type of wolf such as the Pallid wolf. It seems likely that dingoes were introduced into Australia fairly recently, possibly only 4,000

years ago, accompanying an Aboriginal migration from south east Asia. The name dingo appears to derive from the Aboriginal name for the early European settlers' dogs. The Aboriginal name in central Australia is 'Warrigal'.

**Description:**  
Dingoes are anatomically very similar to domestic dogs. In captivity they will interbreed and produce fertile offspring. Dingoes differ from domestic dogs in their breeding cycle. Female dingoes have only one well defined breeding  
*(continued overleaf)*



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season each year; they come on heat between March and May and whelp between June and August. Litters are rarely born at other times. Sperm production in the male is also subject to seasonal fluctuations; few viable sperm are produced in summer.

Dingoes range in colour from creamy white to red, ginger or black and tan. Sandy red or ginger coloured dingoes are the most common. The feet and tip of the tail of dingoes are usually white.

## **Diet:**

The diet of dingoes is flexible; they eat whatever is available. In most parts of Western Australia, kangaroos and euros are preferred. Analysis of stomach contents has also revealed insects, carrion, rabbits and some relatively rare native species. For most dingoes, sheep are a minor dietary item. However, some dingoes chase and kill many more sheep than they eat. Such attacks and harassment may cause severe losses to pastoralists.

## **Research:**

An extensive research programme into dingo behaviour has been undertaken by the Agriculture Protection Board on the Fortescue River, south of Karratha. Dingoes were trapped in padded leg traps and fitted with collars containing small radio transmitters. The animal could then be tracked and observed from aircraft for many months, without disturbing their natural behaviour. This research provides a better understanding of how dingoes

behave, breed, eat and move. It should improve the efficiency of control measures on the basis of 'know your enemy'.

## **Social Behaviour:**

Dingoes are highly social animals. They live in well defined home ranges in groups of two to ten or more, but all members of the group are seldom seen together. Most of the time they form small flexible subgroups. The home ranges of dingo groups on the Fortescue vary around an average of 80 sq. km, depending mainly on the terrain and local abundance of prey.

There is a high mortality rate among young dingoes; however, those which survive may live to six or seven years. In undisturbed social groups only the dominant females breed each year and this tends to limit numbers. When group hierarchies are disrupted, for example, by control measures, more females may breed, leading to increased juvenile dingo numbers. In the Fortescue study, some individual dingoes moved away from their usual home range, probably due to social pressure as dingo numbers increased. Some dingoes moved into adjacent stocked country. This was followed by a change in hunting behaviour. In unstocked country dingoes killed and ate kangaroos mainly according to need. When they moved into sheep country some of the dingoes harassed, bit and killed sheep in large numbers, often without eating any. This behaviour appears to be a

response to an abundant and panicky prey in flight. (Even kangaroos were sometimes killed for 'fun' under these circumstances.) Rams were usually attacked from the rear, most likely because the dingoes avoided the horns, used by the rams for defence. Sometimes the testicles were bitten off a live ram.

Dingoes sometimes hunt individually but may co-operate when chasing larger and more mobile prey such as kangaroos. Some dingoes when living in station country cause a lot of damage to sheep; others kill sheep only occasionally or not at all.

## **Control:**

Agriculture Protection Board policy is to control dingo numbers in and near sheep stations as far as possible. Techniques include trapping, shooting, and baiting with meat poisoned with 1080 (Sodium fluoroacetate) or strychnine. Control is carried out by the APB on Crown land close to station country. Pastoralists are responsible for dingo control on their own properties. Complete removal of dingoes on stations is aimed at preventing harassment and killing of stock.

Deliberate biological control of dingoes is unlikely to succeed as the main dog diseases such as distemper and mange are already present in the population. No other potentially useful diseases are known. Domestic dogs would be susceptible to any introduced organism.