

FAUNA RECORDS

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Few people fully realize just how meagre our information on fauna really is. Many interested persons living on farms, or in forestry or mill settlements, possess or acquire potentially valuable knowledge about the fauna in their area. Very few, however, report observations, or even worse they fail to send in valuable specimens when they get hold of them. The tendency is to think that they had known that species was there and to imagine that somehow it was general knowledge, and therefore unimportant. However, very rarely is it general knowledge, and it is always important.

A number of facts should be realized with regard to reporting 'animal sightings' and sending in specimens. Firstly, the only real, lasting record of an animal is a museum record. If an animal's occurrence in an area is not recorded in the museum records, that information will be lost for ever. For example, however common brush-tailed possums may be in a particular area, if no specimen skin or skull is lodged at the museum and the species disappears from the area, that information is irretrievably lost. There are countless stories concerning the abundance of various species in the south-west earlier this century; few, however, can be substantiated with specimens.

This situation makes any work on animal species very difficult. The information that can be gained from good museum specimens with reliable collectors' notes would surprise most people. For example, if many specimens of a particular animal are available, information as to its distribution will be reliable. The type of habitat it lives in can also be deduced from notes on where it was found. Measurements of size and weight are more accurate if many specimens are available. Other important information, such as the breeding season and the number of young they have, can also be gained from cutting up specimens. Food data can be obtained from examination of the gut contents. These are just a few of the more obvious things; much more information on the internal organs, diseases, parasites etc is obtainable from a good museum collection. Much of the published data have been obtained from examination of museum specimens.

As an example of just how little information is available about animals in forest areas, I have chosen the western native cat or chuditch (Dasyurus geoffroii). It is an animal which has at least been heard of by most people and also one which

is undoubtedly present throughout most of the forest area. Furthermore, it is an animal which is sufficiently interesting to prompt people to take an interest in it. Despite these facts, the number of museum specimens received since 1896 is extremely limited (see map and list following previous article by F. Batini). Most of the specimens have been sent in from near settled areas, for example the Perth vicinity and farms close to forest areas. This indicates the distribution of people rather than the distribution of the animal and is a pattern with museum specimens.

How many people have had in their possession, seen or had access to specimens of this animal during the last 80 years and not sent them in? And to how many other species does this situation apply?

Since the Department started work on the forest fauna we have had many specimens sent in which we have forwarded to the museum. But I strongly suspect that many more are still being discarded and lost. It takes a little effort but if anyone should come across, get hold of, or otherwise acquire or hear of any specimens, please forward these to the Manjimup Research office. Alternatively, give us a ring and we then have the opportunity to decide whether or not a particular specimen is valuable. Most specimens are worthwhile and for rare species we are willing to travel hundreds of miles! All specimens will be forwarded to the Western Australian Museum with due acknowledgements, after we have recorded the find in our own Departmental records. The museum catalogues each specimen and it is preserved in their collection for all time.

Small specimens can be preserved in alcohol, methylated spirits or 4% formalin. The stomach wall should be cut open to allow the preservative to get to the stomach contents. With larger specimens, the head or skull is generally the most important and can be similarly preserved. If in doubt, ring us for advice. Information regarding collector, area of collection, forest type, date etc. should accompany any specimen.

The forests cover a vast area, which is surprisingly little known, even to-day. The Department's, and indeed the State's records depend on the co-operation of everyone in forwarding material. We can cover selected areas but it will take years before we are able to search everywhere thoroughly.

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