

CLEARING HOUSE

REARING YOUNG MARSUPIALS

Accidents happen, even in the best regulated families. Sometimes it happens in the animal world too.

Our native marsupials - kangaroos, possums, wombats and others - get hit by cars or killed in other ways. Then when the body is examined, it is sometimes found that there is a baby in the pouch. The question then is, what is to be done to save the young animal.

We asked the Wildlife Research Officer, Bob Warneke, who has prepared the following notes for us.

It should be remembered that, with the exception of the wombat, all marsupials are protected, and to have them in your possession is illegal. Apart from this aspect, members of the public who come across orphan marsupials would be well advised to contact the Wildlife Laboratory at the Department if they wish the animal to have a chance of survival. - Ed.

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Feeding - Many people claim that cow's milk is completely unsuitable for rearing the young of other animals. While it may not be the best substitute, it can be used with success, as we have shown in the Wildlife Laboratory on many occasions. We use diluted milk, usually two parts of milk to one of water or a three and one mixture, at first, and then gradually change to undiluted milk. A little glucose and a drop of Pentavite is added. The mixture must be warmed to blood heat. Scouring can be controlled by the use of Kaomagma (obtainable at chemists, or by burnt flour or charcoal as alternatives) As a rule the young orphan should be fed at three or four hour intervals. *(handwritten: have temp to about 30°C liquid)*

There are considerable differences in response to artificial feeding in young marsupials. For instance, young wombats are quite hardy and do not appear to develop digestive upsets as readily as do young kangaroos. The formula fed to a young wombat being reared in the Laboratory at the present time is the cream off ordinary pasteurized cow's milk, a little glucose and a drop of "Pentavite": this is a very rich mixture, but she is thriving on it. At the beginning she was started off on straight cow's milk.

Feeding Apparatus - When milk feeding an orphan marsupial, one must try to simulate the mother's nipple, which in most marsupials is long and thin. The nearest approximation to this is a length of valve rubber, but even this is too large

for the very small species, such as the Feather-tailed Glider, and the best one can do is to use a fine eye-dropper. Small kangaroos learn to suck at a calf teat very readily. Rubber teats used for human babies are an impossible shape.

Weaning - The change over to adult fare should not be too sudden. The presence of teeth does not necessarily mean that solids are required. However, when the young one starts to explore its surroundings, and becomes adventuresome, it should be given the opportunity to feed on adult fare. With kangaroos, for instance, it is quite a good idea to include grass with the bedding and the baby can then start to nibble if it feels inclined. Given the opportunity and a little help, many young animals will pass through this stage quite easily, but for some species weaning is a specialised process. With the koala for example, the female parent provides pre-digested leaves for its young during the period of transition to adult diet. Rearing an unweaned koala would be a very difficult job indeed.

Kangaroos and the common species of possum are easy to please. Many of the small or less common marsupials are often difficult to provide for. So little has been written on the diet of our native animals, that most people cannot be expected to know what a particular species eats. Our tiny bats, perhaps more than other native mammals, suffer through this lack of knowledge. Biscuit, bread and fruit are a complete waste of time, and although exclusively insect feeders just any insect will not do. Suffice to say that the food items offered a young animal approaching weaning must be the normal adult fare or as near a substitute as possible.

Warmth is absolutely essential. Because of the difficulty in maintaining a constant temperature using hot water bottles, the nuisance of refilling during the night and probability that this chore may be forgotten at times, it is better to use a screened pilot light globe of about 15 watts as a heat source. We use a strong cardboard box with the globe mounted beneath a false bottom. The young marsupial is placed in the upper compartment where the temperature should be about 90 deg.F. This can be regulated by using more or less padding in the box or by moving the globe nearer to or further from the false bottom.

Oiling - The skin of unfurred young and of those where the fur is just beginning to show, is very fine and delicate. In the mother's pouch it is kept in a moist condition but in the open air it will dry quickly, crack and flake. The young one should be oiled probably each time it is fed. Olive oil is suitable, baby oil even better.

Wrapping Cloth - The young marsupial should be kept wrapped in a soft, clean cloth but while the skin is tender, wool or harshfibred material must be avoided because these may irritate. For very small pouch young, oiled silk as the first wrapping has been used with success. Young marsupials prefer to be firmly wrapped but care should be taken to avoid smothering. Young kangaroos that are well furred are usually quite happy in a hessian bag hung up in a suitable place and slit across the front to simulate the mother's pouch. A few clean rags in the bottom of the sack make them quite at home.

"Tender, Loving Care" - Finally, the point must be made that the amount of attention given to an orphan marsupial is very important. There appears to be a need of it, possibly because there is a close physical contact between mother and young during the period of dependence. This need for contact is easily demonstrated. For example, if a young dependent Ring-tailed Possum is removed from the mother, it will utter cries of distress, but if picked up and enclosed in one's hands it will cease to "cry" and lie still.

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This rough outline is drawn from the experiences of a number of people as well as those in our own laboratory. Many people who have come into the possession of a young marsupial and have accepted the challenge, and used both care and commonsense, have often been very successful. However, if the young one has been hurt or is in shock or has been neglected for a period, it will often die despite all efforts. Again, seemingly thriving young will die without warning. There is usually no simple explanation for this.

(Fur, Feathers & Fins

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REPORT ON FISHING INDUSTRY IN S.W.A.

The presence of white fish and the value of catches off the shores of South West Africa are discussed in a White Paper on the activities of the different branches of the South West Africa Administration which was tabled recently in the Legislative Assembly in Windhoek by the Administrator, Mr. D.T. du P. Viljoen.

The White Paper states: "As in the past the white fish industry of South West Africa has had to cope with many problems and as always its products have had a limited sale in the Territory.