

FAUNA

LIVING NEXT DOOR TO BOYAGIN

Avril Baxter and Tony Friend

In 2003, Chris and Sheina Murphy bought themselves a weekend retreat next to Boyagin Nature Reserve. They needed some time to get away from the city and observe nature. Initially they were rewarded by the sounds of birds in the morning and evening, but their greatest thrill came when they observed a numbat making use of their wood pile.

Numbats are unique to Australia and were originally found across the southern half of the continent from western NSW through to the south-west of WA. Unusual for an Australian mammal in that they are active during the day, they are naturally at risk from predation by carpet pythons and raptors, however burgeoning fox numbers nearly sent this species into extinction. By the mid-1980s less than 500 individuals remained at only two sites, Dryandra Woodland near Narrogin and Perup Forest near Tonebridge.

Numbats are specialised creatures that consume about 20,000 termites per day. They find these by sniffing the woodland floor and turning over small sticks and leaves looking for termite galleries near the surface. Once the shallow galleries are detected, their extremely long sticky worm-like tongue gobbles up the feast – moving faster than is visible to the human eye.

They are solitary creatures. Each animal has a home range of 25-50 ha, preferring to live in woodland with open areas for feeding and shrubs and hollow logs for cover. Given

its total area of 28,000 hectares, Dryandra Woodland can support up to 500 animals. Dryandra was one of the sites where an experiment to measure the beneficial effect of

were moved in 1985, nine in 1986 and nine in 1987. Within six weeks of the first release, surviving animals had established their home ranges.

Monthly fox control was carried out at Boyagin Nature Reserve in the early years of this experimental translocation by DEC science staff from Woodvale. In 1989 DEC Narrogin District took over responsibility for fox control in both Dryandra and Boyagin and has maintained monthly baiting ever since. Monitoring by driven surveys and searches for diggings and scats was carried out annually by science staff.

By 1993 the numbat population in the east block of Boyagin had exceeded its carrying capacity and numbers crashed to a more sustainable level. However, part of this success story is that a few numbats made their way across one kilometre of

open farmland and started to colonise the western block. By 1994 there was estimated to be at least 100 numbats within the reserve. Three numbats bred at Perth Zoo from Dryandra animals were released by DEC at Boyagin in 2005 to provide extra genetic diversity.

So what was the numbat doing in the Murphy's wood heap? Numbats give birth to usually four young in January. The mother does not have a pouch but carries the young on her teats until late July when they are deposited in one of her burrows.

The photograph above was taken on the 28th July. The animal was first observed late in the morning



Photo: Sheina Murphy

fox control for threatened mammals was run. Scientists commenced monthly fox control using '1080' baits in part of Dryandra in 1982, and by 1985, numbat numbers in the baited area had risen dramatically, while numbers in an unbaited area had not changed.

Using individuals taken from this growing wild population, numbats were translocated to the eastern block of Boyagin Nature Reserve near Brookton, between 1985 and 1987. This area was chosen for the first numbat reintroduction as it was close to Dryandra and provided the same habitat. Seventeen numbats

continued from page 10

Living next door to Boyagin

and then in the afternoon with a piece of paperbark in its mouth extracted from the woodpile. It posed for the photograph before skipping across the firebreak into the reserve.

The numbat was probably lining a burrow chamber to provide a warm home where she could leave her young. In the jarrah forests this often consists of shredded bark and in the wandoo woodlands, grass and other soft insulating material. At Boyagin, paperbark and soft dryandra flowers have been found in numbat nests.

In early September, the young first emerge from the nest with their mother. They are weaned in late October, and by November and December leave home to find their own home range. Animals can move more than 15 km in search of a new place to live.

Other *Land for Wildlife* members have reported seeing numbats east of Dryandra along the Hotham River.

As part of the Numbat Recovery Plan animals have been released in other conservation areas in Western Australia, including Dragon Rocks, Tutanning, and Karroun Hill Nature Reserves, Batalling Forest, Hills

Forest, Stirling Range National Park and Cocanarup Timber Reserve near Ravensthorpe. Through collaboration between DEC and the former Earth Sanctuaries Limited, two other populations have been set up in fenced sanctuaries in South Australia and New South Wales. As a result, the numbat's status has improved from Endangered in 1985 to Vulnerable today. Even so, there are less than 2000 animals in existence.

So if you see a numbat we'd love to hear from you. Please give Avril a call on 9881 9218 or email her at avril.baxter@dec.wa.gov.au