

## Members' Page

### A WAMBENGER STORY

Peter Vickridge

Late in October last year Carol and I received four baby wambengers (brush-tailed phascogales, *Phascogale tapoatafa*) into care. They had been found by DEC staff who were falling a dangerous tree at Hester Block near Bridgetown.

There were three males and one female in the group, each weighing in at around 30 grams. The three males all had some injuries, assessed as not serious by the vet in Donnybrook, and the female was uninjured. They were all promptly given "W" names – Walter, Wayne, William and Winona. They were housed together in a covered rat cage with a heat pad, later into a re-wired rabbit hutch and lastly in an aviary. Although difficult to feed at first, they were quick to recognise a syringe and plastic tube as food and took their milk substitute, at first Divetelact and later Wombaroo. At first they sucked and chewed at the tube but quickly started lapping, which made feeding easier and definitely less messy. Although various insects and Wombaroo Insectivore was offered repeatedly, none of the wambengers showed any real interest until early December when daddy longlegs and huntsman spiders and mealworms were all



taken. From then on Wombaroo milk and mealworms, cockroaches, earwigs and spiders were included in their diet and water was taken regularly, particularly on hot days. The three males' injuries healed rapidly and all showed complete mobility and agility.

Weights were regularly measured with rapid increases recorded, in a period of only 57 days the average weight went from 32 grams to 113 grams, an amazing 253 per cent increase in weight, or 4.5 per cent per day!

Wambengers are clearly intelligent and masters of escape and learn quickly how things work. Incredibly, they worked out how to turn the swivel toggle on the rabbit hutch door by tapping with their forelegs on the toggle through the

wire on the hutch door to release themselves. The first time we discovered them roaming the house we thought the toggle had been left down, but on returning them to their cage they quickly repeated their escape.

In early January the chest scent glands on all three males became noticeable with staining, so the decision was made to move their rabbit hutch outdoors into an aviary fitted out with hollow logs and branches, to permit a soft release.

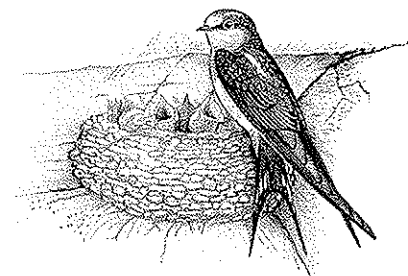
At the end of January a panel in the cage was opened to allow the wambengers to leave when they were ready. The males all left fairly quickly and did not return, but the female continued to return to the cage by morning for over a week before finally moving on.

The three months we had with these four wambengers in our care was extremely rewarding, and made us realise what an exquisite little animal they really are. It is a shame that so few Australians are even aware of their existence in our forests.

*Peter Vickridge has a property at Kirup.*

### Did you know ...?

that a nesting pair of swallows consume some 900 insects a day to feed their young? That's 27,000 insects in a month! Swallows are especially efficient at collecting mosquitoes at dusk. Considering the number of human diseases such as Ross River virus (and now Dengue fever in Queensland) that are spread



Welcome swallow at nest (M. Thompson)  
From: *Western Australian Birds: Vol II.*  
Johnstone & Storr. WA Museum.

by mosquitoes, it may well be worth adding a small wooden ledge in the eaves for the birds to build on, especially if you live near a wetland where mosquitos breed. Sure, a swallow's nest under the eaves of a house or shed is a bit messy, but think of the enormous natural pest control they are contributing to your environment.