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Plants & Animals

Numbat



Myrmecobius fasciatus

The numbat is WA's mammal emblem, a fact which may have saved the species from extinction. Only a few years ago numbats were critically endangered, but CALM researchers have established new populations and given greater protection to existing populations by baiting for foxes. Numbats are active during the day, and in the few areas where they are found, these delightful creatures are now seen more often.

DESCRIPTION: These termite eaters can be recognised by their slender graceful bodies, which are banded and usually reddish-brown. Their long bush tails resemble a bottlebrush. Numbats have a narrow, pointed snout, used to extract termites from the soil, and a dark stripe across their eyes. Adults are about 42 centimetres long (including the tail). It is difficult to mistake them for anything else, because of their distinctive appearance and because no other mammals of their size are active during the day.

OTHER NAMES: Banded anteater, walpurti.

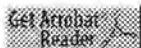
STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION: Numbats are endangered and are now confined to a few small pockets in WA's south-west. They were once found across most of southern Australia, including the desert regions. Predation by the European fox is thought to be the main reason for their decline. Fortunately, the outlook for numbats is gradually improving, as a result of active intervention by CALM. Following fox control, new populations have been established in various nature reserves and forests. Monitoring and regular fox baiting are also carried out to protect existing populations at Perup and Dryandra and numbats are bred in captivity at Perth Zoo. A new colony was recently established in South Australia.



PREFERRED HABITAT: Wandoo woodland is prime habitat. It has the highest concentrations of termites in the south-west and the trees drop many hollow branches, used by numbats as nest sites and refuges. They are also found in nearby powderbark woodland. At Perup, near Manjimup, they live in the jarrah forest, adapting well to areas that have been regenerated after timber harvesting. However, they once inhabited mulga woodland and other habitats, such as spinifex grasslands, in more arid areas.

LIFE HISTORY: Unlike most other Australian marsupials, numbats are active during the day. They feed on termites, consuming up to 20,000 per day, the equivalent of ten per cent of their body weight. These marsupials dig up the insects' galleries in the soil of the forest floor and lick up the occupants with their long, thin tongues. They shelter in hollow logs that are too narrow for most of their predators to enter. If an enemy invades, numbats can use their rumps, which have extremely thick skin, to plug the hollow.

In summer, before the breeding season, male numbats roam a long way from their home range in search of females. Four young are usually born between January and March and stay attached to the teats until they grow fur. When furred, but still unweaned, they are placed in a small underground chamber lined with grass and leaves, at the end of a one to two metre long burrow, while their mother hunts for termites. They are quite active and will play near the nest during her absence. They are able to fend for themselves by October and disperse by the end of the year.



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HOW TO SEE THEM: The best places to see wild numbats are at [Dryandra Woodland](#), near Narrogin, and at Perup Forest near Manjimup.

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