

Numbat

Myrmecobius fasciatus (Waterhouse, 1836)

Size

Head and body length
200–274 (239) mm in males
200–272 (240) mm in females

Tail Length

164–210 (170) mm in males
161–195 (177) mm in females

Weight

0.3–0.7 (0.4) kg in males
0.3–0.7 (0.5) kg in females

Subspecies

None recognised



Photo: Babs & Bert Wells/Department of Conservation and Land Management

Description

Small marsupial with a squirrel-like tail. Body with red-brown fur above, paler below. The rump is darker than upper back, often jet black, with prominent, white, transverse bars. The number of white bars varies from four to eleven. The numbat has a narrow head with a pointed snout and a conspicuous dark horizontal eye-stripe. The jaw has between 50 and 52 teeth, the largest number recorded in any Australian land mammal. The teeth are poorly developed, and many do not protrude above the level of the animal's gums. The tongue is exceptionally long. The fur is very coarse and the long tail hairs are often erected to give a 'bottle-brush' appearance.

Other common names

Banded anteater



Key To Map: Black = present distribution;
Grey = historic (> 30 years)

Distribution

Formerly widespread across southern semi-arid and arid Australia, from western New South Wales through South Australia and southern Northern Territory to the south-west of Western Australia.

Populations presently occur at Dryandra and Perup/Kingston area east of Manjimup. Populations have been reintroduced by translocation to Boyagin Nature Reserve, Tutanning Nature Reserve, Karroun Hill Nature Reserve, Batalling Forest, Hills Forest, Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve, Karakamia Sanctuary WA, and Yookamurra Sanctuary SA.

Habitat

The numbat's distribution once encompassed a number of habitat types, including eucalypt forest, eucalypt woodland, *Acacia* woodland and *Triodia* grasslands. Current populations occupy several different habitat types: upland Jarrah forest, open eucalypt woodland, banksia woodland and tall closed shrubland. At Dryandra, numbats inhabit brown mallet (*Eucalyptus astringens*) plantations. Habitats usually have an abundance of termites in the soil, hollow logs and branches for shelter.

Behaviour

Numbats use hollow logs (and sometimes hollows in trees) and burrows as refuges and den sites, but may also dig burrows where they construct nests and sleep.

Numbats are strictly diurnal (day-active), and spend much of the day feeding. They do not emerge from their refuges until well after dawn, and return to one of their nests before dusk. In summer, numbats are active throughout the morning, but there is a period of inactivity between midday and late afternoon, followed by an active period before dusk. In winter, there is an active period from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. This pattern of activity corresponds closely to the availability of termites in the upper soil layers, as these insects respond to the temperature of their environment. Numbats feed in open areas near the cover of shrubs or within reach of hollow logs.

Numbats are solitary and territorial. Home ranges are exclusive of other individuals of the same sex, with male home ranges overlapping female home ranges. Home range sizes vary from 25 to 50 hectares, but males roam in search of females over a larger area prior to the onset of breeding. Juvenile dispersal movements of more than 15 kilometres have been recorded. Once a juvenile has established its home range after dispersal, that animal remains in or close to that area for the rest of its life. Densities can be approximately one pair of established adults per 50 hectares of high-quality habitat.

Diet

Consists almost exclusively of termites. Numbats make characteristic small shallow excavations in the soil to reach underground termite galleries and then extract termites with the aid of their sticky tongue. No preference for any particular species of termite is shown.

Breeding

Numbats reach peak condition in summer prior to breeding. Breeding is a highly synchronised event. Mating occurs in January when females come into oestrus, and all young are born during this month or in early February. If mating does not occur within 48 hours of oestrus, young are not produced. The gestation period is 14 days, after which four young are born pink and hairless, and attach themselves to the four teats of the open pouch. Young are deposited in a nest (usually in a burrow) in late July, and by September they begin to become active and venture from the burrow. Males start to move outside their winter home ranges from September. By mid-October, young numbats are supplementing their mother's milk with termites that they dig up for themselves, and moving up to 100 metres from their mother's nest. In late November or early December, all young leave their maternal home range and disperse. By January the males are ranging widely and traverse the home ranges of several females. Females breed in their first year, whereas males do not become sexually mature until their second year.

Threatening processes

Some of the reasons for the severe decline in numbat populations include predation by foxes, changed fire regimes, and clearing of bush for agriculture.

Conservation status

2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species	Vulnerable
Western Australian Wildlife Conservation Act	Threatened
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act	Threatened (Vulnerable)

Management

- Exotic predator control.
- Habitat management research. Spring burning in wheatbelt woodland may lead to an overall loss of hollow logs.
- Management of existing populations and habitat.
- Genetic survey of existing populations.
- Captive breeding for supplemented translocations and display animals.
- Disease survey and health monitoring of all populations.

Other interesting facts

- Numbats can live up to five years in the wild, but generally only live two to three years.
- The numbat's diet of termites is so specialised that it is placed in a family of its own.
- Unlike most other marsupials that are nocturnal, the numbat is active during the day.
- The unique status of the numbat was recognised by its declaration as the mammal emblem of Western Australia in 1973.

Selected references

Connell, G. W. and Friend, J. A. (1985). Searching for Numbats. *LANDSCOPE* 1(2): 21.

Friend, J. A. (1990). Numbat dawn. *LANDSCOPE* 5(4): 15.

Friend, J.A. (1995). Numbat. In R. Strahan (Ed.) *The Mammals of Australia*. Australian Museum and Reed Books. Chatswood, NSW.

Maxwell S., Burbidge A.A, Morris K. (Eds) (1996). *The 1996 Action plan for Australian Marsupials and Monotremes*. Wildlife Australia, Canberra.

Website links

http://www.naturebase.net/projects/west_shield.html

<http://www.perthzoo.wa.gov.au/numbat.html>

<http://www.ea.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/action/marsupials/19.html>

<http://www.westernwildlife.com.au/western/mammals/numbat.htm>