

Our Wildlife

FACTSHEET

Department of
Sustainability and
Environment

Short-beaked Echidna

Introduction

There are only three known egg laying mammals (monotremes) in the world. These are two species of Echidna (one is only found in New Guinea) and the other is the Platypus.

Scientific name

Tachyglossus aculeatus

Did you know?

Each spine of the Echidna is formed from a single hair.

The Echidna uses all four feet to dig.

When the Echidna is disturbed or threatened it will roll into a ball or burrow into the ground so that only its spines are exposed.

A baby Echidna is called a 'puggle'.

The Short-beaked Echidna is featured on the Australian 5c piece.

Description

The Echidna ranges from 35-52cm in length. It can weigh up to 6kg, but the females are usually smaller than the males.

Echidnas are covered with a fur that can range in colour from reddish to dark brown. The spines on the backs of Echidnas are modified hairs that vary in colour from cream to black. Their spines can reach up to 50mm in length. The proportion of hair to spines varies according to climate, so Echidnas from cold areas have more and denser hair than Echidnas from the warmer north-west of Victoria.

The Echidna's snout is 7-8cm long and is used to poke into rotten logs and termite mounds that have been broken into with the Echidna's feet. The mouth is positioned right at the end of the snout. The Echidna's tongue is very long and sticky enabling it to collect large numbers of ants and termites when feeding.

The front feet of the Echidna have five flattened claws which are designed for digging burrows and tearing open logs and termite mounds. Their hind feet point backwards so the soil can be pushed away when the Echidna is burrowing. They also commonly use their back claws for grooming.

The tail of the Echidna is very short and hairless underneath.



Short-beaked Echidna © I. McCann DSE 2009

Diet

Echidnas feed mainly on ants and termites though they have been known to eat other invertebrates. They feed generally during morning and evening which are the cooler periods of the day.

They have a very acute sense of smell which they rely on to detect food. Once the food is located they then use their long sticky tongue to catch their prey. Echidnas have no teeth so instead they grind their food between the tongue and the roof of their mouth.

Habitat

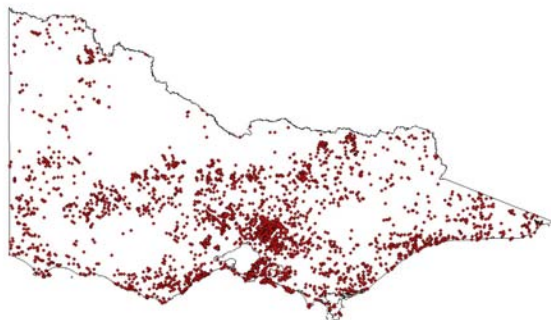
The Echidna is usually found in open heathland, forests, woodlands, scrublands and grasslands, among vegetation or in hollow logs. In poor weather, they will often shelter under bushes or burrow into the soil.

You will most likely see an Echidna during early morning or late evening as they avoid extreme temperatures.

The Echidna does not defend a territory, but will instead wander over its large home range.

Distribution

The Short-beaked Echidna can be found throughout Victoria.



Recorded occurrences in Victoria

[Data Source: 'VBA_FAUNA25' and 'VBA_FAUNA100', August 2010 © The State of Victoria, Department of Sustainability and Environment]

Breeding

The breeding season is from June to September. During the season both the males and females will emit a strong odour, which allows males to locate the females.

During courtship many males may follow one female for up to four weeks in an effort to mate with her.

Two weeks after successful mating the female will lay a single rubbery egg directly into her small backward facing pouch. After 10 days the egg will hatch producing a jellybean sized young known as a puggle.

The puggle is carried around in the mother's pouch for around three months. On occasion, the mother will leave the young in a burrow covered in leaf litter or soil to go foraging.

The puggle suckles from specialised pores inside the mother's pouch as she does not have nipples.

When the puggle leaves the pouch it will have already started to develop spines, yet it will not be fully weaned until it is 12 months old.

The Echidna's life span can range from 15-40 years yet usually averages around 10 years in the wild.

What you can do to help!

The main threat to the Echidna is predation by feral dogs and foxes. They are also vulnerable to habitat loss from land clearing and development.

The Echidna is a frequent casualty on roads, so be aware when driving in bush areas and keep an eye out for Echidnas and other wildlife.

It is illegal to pick up or move an Echidna from its natural surroundings. Sometimes an Echidna will appear in a back yard. In this case, keep dogs away and leave the Echidna to find its own way out again. It is likely that the back yard is next to habitat where the Echidna belongs.

Report any illegal mistreatment of the Echidna to the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

All wildlife is protected in Victoria. Visit the DSE website for more information regarding protected wildlife www.dse.vic.gov.au



Short-beaked Echidna © I. McCann DSE

Further reading

Menkhorst, P.W. (ed), (1995), *Mammals of Victoria*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Strahan, R. (ed.), (1995), *The mammals of Australia*, Reed Books, Australia.