

Numbat *Myrmecobius fasciatus*

Conservation Status: Endangered

Identification

The numbat *Myrmecobius fasciatus* is a small marsupial with a distinctive striped appearance, and because of its specialised diet, it is the sole animal placed in the family Myrmecobiidae. The numbat has a long, narrow face with a pointed nose, and an exceptionally long tongue that can extend to at least 5cm beyond the tip of its nose.

It is mostly a reddish brown colour with an off-white coloured belly. There is a distinct horizontal black stripe through the eye, and the tail is covered in long brown hairs tipped with white. There are white stripes across the body that get stronger towards the rump, further accentuated by dark bands. The number of white bands varies between four to eleven, and their distinct patterning can be used to identify individuals.

Head and Body Length: 20-25cm

Tail Length: 15-18cm

Weight: 700g (male) and 550g (female)

Taxonomy

Family: Myrmecobiidae

Genus: *Myrmecobius*

Species: *fasciatus*

Other Common Names: walpurti

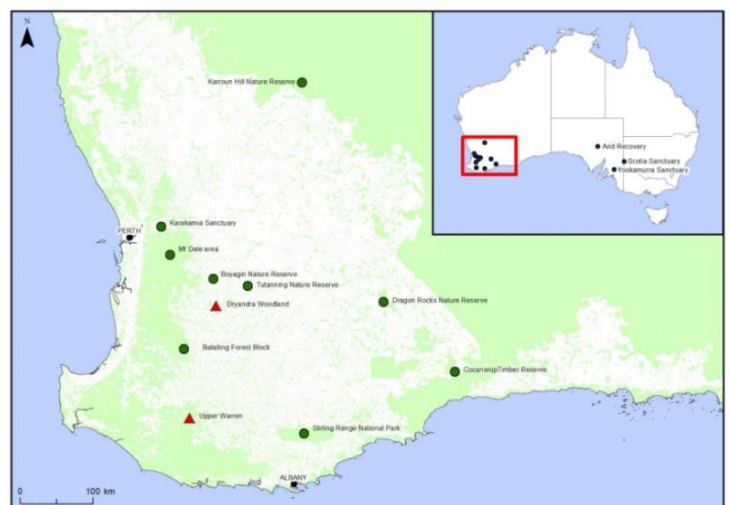
Distribution and Habitat

Anecdotal accounts, Aboriginal knowledge, museum specimens and subfossil remains indicate that historically numbats existed in western New South Wales and south-eastern South Australia, north to the southern border of the Northern Territory and across to the south-west of Western Australia. Since European settlement, with the introduction of foxes, changes in fire regimes, and widespread land-clearing, the numbat's distribution has dramatically declined. Currently, numbats are only known to be surviving in a small area of WA's Jarrah forest and Wheatbelt, notably at Dryandra Woodland and the Upper Warren area. They have been successfully reintroduced to other locations within the Jarrah forest and Wheatbelt, and to sites in South Australia and New South Wales.

The species was previously found to inhabit a wide range of habitats, including Mulga woodland, spinifex sandplains and Eucalypt forests and woodlands. In WA, their habitat is generally woodland dominated by Eucalyptus species, with abundant hollow logs and branches for shelter and termites for food.



Photos: D. Coughran (top left) and T. Wilkes-Jones (top right & bottom)



Numbat subpopulation sites (red triangles), with translocation sites denoted as green circles

For further information regarding the species distribution, please refer to www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au.

Community Involvement

If you think you have seen a chuditch, fill out a [fauna report form](#) and send it to the Department's Species and Communities Branch at fauna@dbca.wa.gov.au. The Department keeps track of the distributions of threatened species to help monitor population trends and inform management decisions.

[Project Numbat](#), a community action group, raises public awareness of the numbat, carries out fund raising to support numbat recovery, and provides volunteers to help with on-ground actions. [Numbat Task Force](#) is another community groups committed to raising awareness and the conservation of the numbat.

The Department runs a variety of volunteer projects across WA including scientific research, community education and manual labour. Further information about these opportunities can be found on the Department's [webpage](#).

Biology and Behaviour

Numbats, unlike most other marsupials, are diurnal, meaning they are active only during the day. They do not emerge from their nests until well after dawn, and return before dark. During winter, they are active from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, and in summer they are active during the morning and in the period before dusk. Their daytime activity corresponds to the availability of their specialised diet of termites (*Isoptera* species).

Numbats spend most of the day searching by scent for termites. They will find the termites by digging them up from the underground galleries or scratching bark and decaying wood rather than directly from termite mounds. Captive animals have been observed consuming up to 20,000 termites each day, corresponding to approximately 10% of their body weight.

Numbats feed near the cover of shrubs, hollows and burrows, which they use as refuges from predators and as a resting place during the day. They also nest at night in the hollows or burrows, and during the daytime they will leave young in the nests when they are too large to be carried around.

In the wild, numbats are known to survive a maximum of five years. Females breed in their first year while males breeding from their second year. In January and February, female numbats give birth to up to four young. Development of the young is relatively slow. The female will carry the young until late July, when they are deposited in a nest. The female returns to the nest each night to suckle them, but by mid-October the young will have begun supplementing the milk with termites that they dig up nearby the nest. Young begin to disperse from the nest between November and December, establishing their own home ranges within a week of leaving the nest.

Conservation Status

The numbat is recognised as a threatened species under State and Commonwealth legislation. In Western Australia the species is listed as fauna that is 'likely to become extinct' in the wild (Specially Protected) under the [Wildlife Conservation Act 1950](#) and has been assigned the threat status ranking of Endangered using [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) criteria. Nationally the species is listed as Vulnerable under the Commonwealth [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#).

The species has experienced a massive contraction in its range from the 1920s onwards. Fox predation is considered to be the main threat responsible for the decline. Other threats include:

- Feral cat predation;
- Loss of habitat due to inappropriate fire regimes;
- Historic widespread land clearing, and ongoing habitat disturbance and fragmentation;
- Disease; and
- Climate change.

Management

Recovery Plan

A [recovery plan](#) has been produced for the numbat, and it outlines the recovery actions required to increase the size of the existing subpopulations and increase the number of subpopulations. Recommended management actions from this plan include:

- Continued fox and feral cat control, and monitor to determine effectiveness.
- Manage fire in numbat habitat to enhance numbat survival.
- Monitor demographic trends.
- Carry out reintroductions to extend the species' current distribution.
- Determine genetic variability and maintain genetic health and diversity.
- Increase community awareness and participation in the species' conservation.

Existing Conservation Measures

The Numbat Recovery Team, led by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, has been assisting with the implementation of recovery actions as outlined in the recovery plan since 1993.

The Department's Western Shield wildlife recovery program conducts feral fox baiting at all known numbat sites in the south-west of WA, with additional feral cat baiting at some sites. Annual population monitoring is carried out at Dryandra by the Department, and various research projects have been undertaken including a study of genetic variation in the remnant populations in the southwest of WA. A predator-proof fence has been built at Dryandra, designed to protect numbats and several other threatened species from predation by foxes and feral cats.

Perth Zoo sustains a breeding colony of numbats, and it is the primary source of animals for reintroductions. Some of the reintroductions undertaken have been to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy's fenced sanctuaries in South Australia and New South Wales.

Citation

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. (2017). *Fauna profile - Numbat Myrmecobius fasciatus*
Retrieved from <http://www.dbca.wa.gov.au/>

Key References and Further Reading

Department of the Environment and Energy. (2016). *SPRAT Profile: Myrmecobius fasciatus – Numbat*. Retrieved from <http://www.environment.gov.au/sprat>

Department of Parks and Wildlife (2015). *Numbat (Myrmecobius fasciatus) Recovery Plan - Wildlife Management Program No. 60*. Perth, WA: Parks and Wildlife. Retrieved from: <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/plants-and-animals/threatened-species-and-communities/threatened-animals>

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Woinarski, J., Burbidge, A. and Harrison, P. (2014). *The Action Plan for Australian Mammals 2012*. Collingwood, VIC: CSIRO Publishing.

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