

# Standard Operating Procedure

## SC22-16 CARE OF EJECTED POUCH YOUNG

Animal welfare is the responsibility of all personnel involved in the care and use of animals for scientific purposes.

Personnel involved in an Animal Ethics Committee approved project should read and understand their obligations under the *Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes*.

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\* Previously called Care of Evicted Pouch Young

**Approvals: Version 1.2**

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 Chair, Animal Ethics Committee  
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# 1 Acknowledgements

This standard operating procedure was originally developed by Christine Freegard and Vanessa Richter, with contributions from Peter Orell, Peter Mawson and Stephanie Hill.

## 2 Purpose

Ejecting pouch young is common in some members of the Macropodidae, Potoroidae and Peramelidae families (particularly woylies *Bettongia penicillata ogilbyi*, boodies *Bettongia lesueur*, and quenda *Isoodon fusciventer*). Any joey caught with an adult female should never be released by itself.

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) outlines procedures for four options for dealing with the situation of a pouch young being ejected from its mother's pouch: taping, soft release, keeping and euthanasing.

## 3 Scope

This SOP has been written specifically for scientific and education purposes, and endorsed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions' (DBCA) Animal Ethics Committee (AEC). However, this SOP may also be appropriate for other situations.

This SOP applies to all fauna survey and monitoring activities undertaken across Western Australia by DBCA (hereafter department) personnel. It may also be used to guide fauna related activities undertaken by Natural Resource Management groups, consultants, researchers and any other individuals or organisations. All department personnel involved in fauna research and management should be familiar with the content of this document.

Projects involving wildlife may require a licence/authorisation under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. Personnel should consult the department's Wildlife Licensing Section and Animal Ethics Committee Executive Officer for further guidance. In Western Australia any person using animals for scientific purposes must also be covered by a licence issued under the *Animal Welfare Act 2002*, which is administered by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. This SOP complements the *Australian code of practice for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes* (The Code). The Code contains an introduction to the ethical use of animals in wildlife studies and should be referred to for all AEC approved projects. A copy of the code may be viewed by visiting the National Health and Medical Research Council website (<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>).

## 4 Animal Welfare Considerations

To reduce the level of impact of ejected pouch young on the welfare of animals, personnel must consider, address and plan for the range of welfare impacts that may be encountered. Strategies to reduce impacts should be identified during the planning stage to ensure that they can be readily implemented during animal handling and contingencies for managing welfare issues have been identified. Ensure that all handlers and volunteers involved in the project are aware of the range of issues that they may encounter, the options that are available for reducing impacts and improving animal welfare, and the process for managing adverse events.

Department projects involving animal handling will require approval from the department's AEC. Key animal welfare considerations that should be considered are listed below and highlighted throughout the document.

## 4.1 Injury and unexpected deaths

If adverse events including injury, unexpected deaths or unplanned requirement for euthanasia occur then it is essential to consider the possible causes and take action to prevent further issues. Adhering to the guidance in this SOP will assist in minimising the likelihood of adverse events. For projects approved by the department's Animal Ethics Committee, adverse events must be reported in writing to the AEC Executive Officer as soon as possible after the event by completing an *Adverse Events Form*. Guidance on field euthanasia procedures is described in the department SOP for *Euthanasia of Animals Under Field Conditions*. Where disease may be suspected, refer to the department SOP for *Managing Disease Risk in Wildlife Management* for further guidance.

## 4.2 Level of impact

The intention of this procedure is to have a beneficial positive impact on the welfare of animals involved. Inappropriate care of pouch young can have a high impact on the welfare of animals (e.g. if the young develop hypothermia, dehydration etc.). Euthanasia is a possible end point of this procedure if considered the best outcome for the animals involved.

# 5 Procedure Outline

## 5.1 Equipment

If undertaking a project where the ejection of pouch young is likely, at least one 'joey kit' should be kept in each vehicle. The number of joey kits carried should be proportional to the expected risk. The joey kit should comprise the following:

- a well-ventilated box with a lid
- a heat pack or hot-water-bottle and thermos of hot water
- makeshift pouches (e.g. beanies or purpose-made)

## 5.2 What to do immediately after the pouch young is ejected

The most common time for pouch young to be ejected is when the mother becomes aware of someone approaching the trap. Occasionally young are ejected whilst inside a handling bag or on release. It is important to be efficient at separating the mother and young, however it is also important to take care not to rush as this can lead to the mother escaping and leaving an orphan. Place each in a separate bag as soon as possible to reduce the chance of the young being injured.

Ejected young should be immediately placed somewhere warm. This is usually inside someone's clothing, preferably against skin for maximum heat transfer. Human body temperature is too cool for pouch young so this is only a temporary solution. The joey should be transferred to makeshift pouch and be kept warm with a heat pack or hot-water-bottle inside appropriate containment until it is reunited with its mother, delivered to a licenced wildlife rehabilitator or euthanased.

**ANIMAL WELFARE:** Records need to be kept on ejected pouch young, their care and fate for annual reporting requirements of projects approved by the department's Animal Ethics Committee.

### 5.3 Taping in pouch young

Taping is the preferred option for ejected pouch young and should be used wherever possible.

#### 5.3.1 When to tape

Tape in small pouch young that have been ejected or are likely to be ejected when their mother is released. Only tape in those pouch young that are small enough to fit back into the pouch such that the opening of the pouch can be completely closed. Hairless or lightly furred pouch young are never too large to reinsert into their mother's pouch (and should never be left with the mother out of the pouch). Generally, woylies smaller than 200 g (fully haired, eyes open) should be taped in (pouch young up to 260 g have been successfully taped in and released).

Before inserting larger joeys, check the pouch for any hairless infants. If there are any infants present in the pouch, the larger joey has already permanently emerged from the pouch (i.e. should not be taped in) but probably is still dependent on the mother and therefore should be 'bagged'.

#### 5.3.2 How to tape

- (a) Pouch young insertion is a lot easier when the mother is not struggling and not completely stretched out. Her back should be slightly curved and legs not completely stretched back. At least two people are required: one to hold the mother and the other to insert the pouch young.
- (b) Open the pouch and then place the pouch young in the pouch opening, allowing it to pull itself in while guiding it into position: head first, upside down with its back to its mother's stomach, pouch lifted out and forward. Ensure the pouch lining is not pulled out when opening as this reduces the size of the pouch available for the joey to climb back into.
- (c) Once the pouch young is in the pouch it should be allowed to settle and rest with its side flush against the body wall of the mother. Hind legs and tail should be inside the pouch and not protruding through the pouch opening.

**ANIMAL WELFARE:** Be gentle when tucking tails and legs into the pouch; they are fragile.

- (d) Use a piece of Fixomull® (adhesive surgical tape) longitudinally to close the mouth of the pouch, keeping clear of the cloaca and placed no higher than the lower edge of the mother's rib cage.

Ensure the hind legs and their ranges of movement are not impeded by the tape.

Take particular care in positioning tape on bandicoots because the pouch opening and cloaca are close together. A 'V' shape may be cut out of one end of the tape to assist placing the tape with sufficient adherence without blocking the cloaca.



- (e) Massage the tape into the fur by gently pinching and rolling the tape and fur/skin between fingers to ensure good adhesion.
- (f) If the first piece of tape is narrow and there is some doubt about the tape holding (e.g. if the pouch young is large), another piece of tape may be placed across the belly over the top of the existing tape covering the pouch opening.

The tape should extend no further than the laterals (sides) of the animal (i.e. not onto the back).

Extending further than the laterals may cause the tape to remain attached to the mother longer than is desirable and threaten the survival of the joey. If the tape is too long where the ends join over the back, it will result in the death of the joey and is debilitating and potentially lethal for the mother.

- (g) Be patient and take the time to secure the pouch young.



Figure 1 A woylie joey taped into its mother's pouch Photo: Christine Freegard/DBCA.

## 5.4 Releasing mother and joey

There are different options for releasing the mother depending on whether the joey has been taped into the pouch and depending on the mother's stress level. The options are to either release immediately after taping the joey in, or to conduct a soft release.

### 5.4.1 Immediate release

- (a) When releasing the mother with a taped pouch, plan and ensure an exit from the bag which is clear of ALL obstructions including field kits and people, and logs and trees within at least 2 m. Ensure all is quiet and people are behind the release point.
- (b) With the mother still in the handling bag, place her feet on the ground before carefully removing the bag. This will help ensure that the mother does not kick or scratch the tape off during release or before she has found refuge.

Alternatively, place the bag on the ground and allow the animal to settle down close to the mouth of the bag in a way that will allow a clean release, and then quietly fold the bag off the eyes of the animal. Allow the animal to leave on its own terms and in its own

time. **CAUTION:** If the mother has struggled in the bag after you have released your grip she may have kicked the tape off. Check and re-tape if necessary.

- (c) Observe the animal as it moves away to make sure that the tape stays on. Keep quiet and listen out for the calls (a hissing noise) of an ejected pouch young. If in doubt trace the path of the mother and look and listen for abandoned young. If the mother has ejected the pouch young and the pouch young is found, refer to Section 4.4.
- (d) Check that there is no pouch young in the bag. If the pouch young is left in the bag, refer to Section 4.4.

#### 5.4.2 Soft release

A soft release is when the mother and joey (whether or not it is taped in) are left in an untied bag in a sheltered location, allowing them to leave the bag on their own terms. This bag should be heavy weight with a dense weave (e.g. dark cotton drill or fleece) and should ideally be the bag the mother is initially restrained in after she has exited the trap. Transferring an animal from one bag to another prior to soft release is likely to cause stress and increase the risk of the mother kicking the tape off or leaving without her joey.

Soft release should be considered if the pouch young is particularly large, attempts to return the pouch young to the pouch have not succeeded, or if a young-at-heel is still present and a new born infant is also present in the pouch. Soft release should also be considered if the pouch young has been successfully taped in but the mother is highly stressed/agitated.

If the pouch young is unfurred and the initial attempt to reinsert has failed, it will be necessary to leave the mother in the bag in a quiet and secure place to settle down and then re-attempt to reinsert the pouch young into the pouch rather than conduct a soft release.

*Note: When conducting a soft release, personnel MUST be able to return to the release site the next day to check that the bag has been vacated.*

- (a) Find a well contained and sheltered position to leave the animals. Any sheltered depressions are ideal (e.g. under logs, rocky outcrops, dense bushes or in burnt out stumps). Consider how the shade will move during the day to ensure that the position will not be exposed to direct sunlight.
- (b) Mark the location with flagging tape and label the tape with the day's date. Ensure this mark is visible from the reference point/road.
- (c) Clearly record the location of the bag in relation to a particular trap point on the data sheet.
- (d) Ensure equipment is packed away, all is quiet and all other people are at a distance.

**ANIMAL WELFARE:** If the joey is not taped in, do not introduce the joey to the bag with its mother until you are situated at the soft release site.

- (e) Carefully lay out the bag in the sheltered position and allow the mother to settle. If possible, secure a rear corner of the bag to reduce the risk of the animal getting tangled in the bag when exiting, or from hopping away in the bag.
- (f) If the joey is not taped in, introduce the joey into the bag and place as close to the mother as possible without aggravating the mother. **CAUTION:** Take care to ensure the

mother does not see an escape route as this will increase the risk of her escaping and leaving her joey.

- (g) Twist or fold the mouth of the bag in a way that will allow the mother and joey to exit from the bag with moderate ease. Ensure the positioning of the bag does not hinder their exit.
- (h) Allow the mother and joey to settle whilst lightly securing the bag opening and then retreat slowly and quietly (e.g. avoid crunching leaf litter and rubbing of wet weather gear). The first couple of minutes after your retreat are the most crucial as the mother may still be agitated.
- (i) Later that afternoon, you can return to the release site and observe the bag from a distance to check if the animals have already left. Note: you must do this with considerable caution to avoid the risk of disturbing the animals and causing the mother to bolt. Often both the mother and joey will still be in the bag and will likely leave in the evening. If the bag appears to be empty, approach the bag quietly as you sometimes may find that the mother has left but the joey is still in the bag. Refer to Section 4.4 for guidance on what to do if only the joey is left in the bag.
- (j) If the bag appeared to have both mother and joey in it in the afternoon, you must return again the following morning to check whether the mother and joey have left. Approach the bag quietly as sometimes you may find the mother and joey are still in the bag. If just the joey is still in the bag, refer to Section 4.4. If they are both still in the bag, quietly gather the mouth of the bag in one hand and then make sure that they are still alive by softly placing a hand on the animal on the outside of the bag.

If the mother and joey are still in the bag and alive, you will need to assess the situation and make some decisions:

- If the joey was taped in, check on the taping and consider immediate release if the taping is still secure and/or the mother has significantly calmed down.
- If mother and joey appear to be fine, consider providing them with a bait ball/food and leaving them in the bag for another day. Check to make sure the exit from the bag is not too difficult. Repeat steps (h) to (j).

**ANIMAL WELFARE:** Some peanut butters have begun using xylitol as a sugar substitute. There are no data available regarding the toxicity of xylitol to Australian wildlife, but xylitol is toxic to dogs. If using universal bait, please check the ingredient list on the peanut butter and avoid brands containing xylitol.

- Depending on the situation, you may need to consider taking the mother and joey into care, euthanasing the joey or euthanasing both the mother and joey.

## 5.5 Reuniting, keeping or euthanasing joeys

### 5.5.1 Reuniting joeys

If there is a possibility of the mother being recaptured on the grid or transect, then it may be possible to reunite the mother with its joey. If the joey is furred, and is not looking lethargic or dehydrated, keep it warm in a joey kit. Electrolytes can be fed instead of joey formula for up to 24 hours – this reduces chances of diarrhoea and rejection of mothers milk when

reunited. The joey can be cared for and accompany the trapping team to the original capture location until such a time as the mother can be recaptured. **CAUTION:** Once a mother and pouch young are separated, the mother's milk supply starts reducing and therefore this option should only be attempted for 1-2 days.

**ANIMAL WELFARE:** It is important to keep track of ejected pouch young to ensure that they are returned to the correct mother and trap location.

An animal handler needs to be allocated responsibility for the care of the joey. If the mother is recaptured, conduct another soft release to give them another chance to reunite. If the mother and joey cannot be reunited, then the animal handler will need to arrange euthanasia or co-ordinate/organise rehabilitation of the joey (see Sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3 for further guidance)

The following is general advice on temporarily caring for joeys:

- (a) The first priority in caring for pouch young is to keep them warm. The pouch young should be placed under clothing against skin until they are transferred to a joey kit. A joey placed against skin will not keep the joey sufficiently warm for extended periods because the warmth does not surround the joey as it would in a pouch. It is recommended that the joey is placed in a warm cloth or knitted pouch, on or next to a hot water bottle. Note: be mindful not to overheat larger, fully furred joeys.
- (b) Joey milk, electrolytes and equipment should be located where accessible.
- (c) Keep the animal dry and out of the sun and begin appropriate feeding as soon as possible.
- (d) Record the date, mother's ID, and place of capture on flagging tape tied to the joey pouch. Make sure that the incident is clearly noted on the trapping data sheet (e.g. 'Joey ejected & abandoned, UNDER CARE').

### 5.5.2 Keeping joeys

A decision to keep or euthanase a joey must take into consideration:

- The chances of the animal's survival: This will depend on levels of stress, injury and the stage of development and elapsed time since separation from mother. Unfurred pouch young have a low chance of survival and practically no chance if cold and/or severely bruised.
- The time required to reach appropriate care: If care cannot be given within 6 hours, the joey's chances of survival are significantly reduced and the amount of suffering increases.
- The likely fate of the animal if taken into care: Rehabilitation of dependent offspring must only be considered if consistent with the department guidelines *Making Decisions on the Fate of Rehabilitated Fauna* and the department *Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia*. As outlined in the Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia, wildlife must be promptly euthanased when:
  - it is necessary to alleviate unreasonable and/or incurable pain, distress, trauma, sickness or injury;

- further treatment is not practical, including where extensive veterinary intervention is likely to be required for the animal to be rehabilitated;
- recovery is not expected such that the animal can be successfully released to the wild; or
- an animal requires an extended period in captivity which is likely to be detrimental to its future release

Joeys should only be kept alive if the animal has a good chance of survival, appropriate care can be given within six hours and the animal can be successfully rehabilitated back into the wild.

It is preferable to screen and select an appropriate wildlife rehabilitator prior to the survey or monitoring activity, ensuring that they have experience with the specific species and capacity to provide care. The Wildcare Helpline can be reached on (08) 9474 9055 to assist with locating an appropriate licenced wildlife rehabilitator. Go to <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/wildcare-helpline> for more information.

*Note: The Chief Investigator is responsible for the fate of the animal after rehabilitation, and must ensure the animal is released back to the capture site or elsewhere in consultation with the Species and Communities Program Principal Zoologist. This is particularly important for threatened species.*

Keeping track of the ultimate fate of the joey is also important for annual reporting requirements for projects approved by the department's Animal Ethics Committee.

### **5.5.3 Euthanasing joeys**

Pouch young are sometimes ejected from the pouch long before the trap is checked and these young, particularly when unfurred, lose heat rapidly which greatly reduces their chances of survival. Ejected pouch young may also be trampled by their mother, inflicting injuries such as scratches, punctures and bruising. Pouch young that are very cold and/or injured have a poor chance of survival and the most humane option is to euthanase.

Refer to the department SOP for *Euthanasia of Animals Under Field Conditions* for further guidance. Euthanasia should only be conducted by experienced personnel.

## **6 Competencies**

A person who is competent has the knowledge, skills, and experiences that allow them to capture and handle animals successfully, and appropriately manage adverse events as required. Department personnel, and other external parties covered by the department's Animal Ethics Committee, undertaking projects involving trapping of species that may eject pouch young require approval from the committee and will need to satisfy the competency requirements detailed in Table 1. Other groups, organisations or individuals using this SOP to guide their decision making in relation to ejected pouch young are encouraged to also meet these competency requirements as well as their animal welfare legislative obligations.

It should be noted that sampling design details such as intensity and scope of the project being undertaken will determine the level of competency required and Table 1 provides

advice for standard monitoring only.

*Table 1 Competency requirements for Animal Handlers of projects that may involve the care of ejected pouch young*

Competency category	Competency requirement	Competency assessment
<b>Knowledge</b>	Broad understanding the framework governing the use of animals in research and environmental studies in Western Australia	Training (e.g. DBCA Fauna Management Course or equivalent training). In applications, provide details on the course provider, course name and year.
	Understanding species biology and ecology	Personnel should be familiar with the behaviour of species prone to ejecting pouch young and be aware of ways to reduce the stress of these species. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and consultation of field guides and other literature.
<b>Animal handling and processing skills/experience required</b>	Experience handling marsupials	Personnel should be experienced in handling and restraint of species prone to ejecting pouch young. This experience is best obtained under supervision of more experienced personnel. In applications, provide details on experience relating to the expected species or species groups.
	Experience managing disease risk in wildlife management	Personnel should be familiar with hygiene procedures. This knowledge may be gained through sufficient field experience and consultation of literature.

In conjunction with possessing the required understanding and knowledge of ejected pouch young care procedures and animal welfare requirements, a guide to the experience and skill requirements for an animal handler to be considered competent to care for ejected pouch young is as follows: (noting that some personnel with experience may still require initial supervision in unfamiliar locations or with species that they have not encountered previously):

- Minimum 30 individuals of similar species handled.
- Minimum 6 successful joey interventions (taping of pouch young and soft release).
- Recency of time in field: within the past 5 years.

## 7 Approvals

A licence or authorisation may be required under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (examples below). Contact the department's Wildlife Licensing Section for more

information. It is your responsibility to ensure you comply with the requirements of all applicable legislation.

- Fauna taking (scientific or other purposes) licence (Reg 25)
- Fauna taking (biological assessment) licence (Reg 27)
- Fauna taking (relocation) licence (Reg 28)
- Section 40 Ministerial Authorisation to take or disturb threatened species.

If a pouch young is taken into care, the rehabilitator must comply with the requirements of Regulation 35 of the *Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2018*.

## 8 Occupational Health and Safety

The following departmental SOPs for wildlife survey and monitoring activities are relevant to occupational health and safety:

- *SOP Managing Disease Risk in Wildlife Management*
- *SOP Hand Restraint of Wildlife*

Departmental personnel, contractors and volunteers have duties and responsibilities under the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984 and Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 1996 to ensure the health and safety of all involved. Fieldwork is to be undertaken in line with the department's corporate guidelines, policies and standard operating procedures, including but not limited to, risk management and job safety analyses. Further information can be found at <https://dpaw.sharepoint.com/Divisions/corporate/people-services/HS/SitePages/SOPs.aspx>

If department personnel or volunteers are injured, please refer to the departmental Health, Safety and Wellbeing Section's 'Reporting Hazards, Near-misses and Incidents' intranet page, which can be found at

<https://dpaw.sharepoint.com/Divisions/corporate/people-services/HS/SitePages/Reporting-Hazards,-Near-Misses-and-Incidents.aspx>

## 9 Further Reading

The following SOPs have been mentioned in this advice and it is recommended that they are consulted when proposing to handle and restrain animals using soft containment:

- Department SOP *First Aid for Animals*
- Department SOP *Managing Disease Risk in Wildlife Management*
- Department SOP *Euthanasia of Animals Under Field Conditions*

For further advice refer also to:

National Health and Medical Research Council (2013) *Australian code for the care and use of animals for scientific purposes*, 8th edition. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council.

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (2019) *Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia*, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, Perth. [Code of Practice for Wildlife Rehabilitation in Western Australia \(dpaw.wa.gov.au\)](https://dpaw.wa.gov.au)

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (2020). Western Australian Wildlife Rehabilitation Standards and Guidelines – Making decisions on the fate of rehabilitated fauna. [Wildlife Rehabilitation Standards and Guidelines - Making decisions on the fate of rehabilitated fauna \(dpaw.wa.gov.au\)](https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/wildlife-rehabilitation-standards-and-guidelines-making-decisions-on-the-fate-of-rehabilitated-fauna)

## 10 Glossary of Terms

**Animal handler:** A person listed on an application to the department’s Animal Ethics Committee who will be responsible for handling animals during the project.

**Joey:** A dependant juvenile marsupial encompassing both ‘pouch young’ and ‘young-at-heel’.

**Pouch young:** Offspring of a marsupial residing within the mother’s pouch.

**Soft release:** Procedure where an animal is left inside an open bag to self-release.

**Taping:** Procedure where a pouch young is returned to its mother’s pouch and adhesive tape applied to the opening to temporarily prevent the mother ejecting the young.

**Young-at-heel:** A fully developed and furred dependant offspring living outside the pouch but still drinking its mother’s milk.