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BOOK REVIEW

The Wombat : Common Wombats in Australia

By Barbara Triggs, illustrated by Ross Goldingay.

Published by NSW University Press

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Reviewed by D.G. Hird

In south-eastern Australia wombats are well known to many people who regularly traverse bushland areas. Unfortunately this may often be due to road casualties, although fleeting glimpses at night or around campsites are also not

uncommon. To the initiated their prominently placed cuboid scats are tell-tale calling cards. In Tasmania most broad habitat types from coastal scrub and woodland through lowland forests of most types to button grass plains and highland areas all provide habitat for this adaptable marsupial, the largest extant burrowing mammal. The life of the wombat has nonetheless remained somewhat cryptic to naturalists and scientists alike, as evidenced by this book being the first to be dedicated to its topic.

The Platypus and *The Koala*, previous volumes on mammals in this NSW University Press *Australian Natural History* series, could, given their high almost glamorous profiles, be regarded as hard acts to follow, but the clear layout and attractive illustrations make an initial impression of quality of design and production. Topics from phylogeny and relationships of modern wombats through general biology including behaviour are covered in a clear narrative style, with a reference list to each. A useful supplement provides clear advice on the hand-rearing of orphan wombats. Much of the original information included derives from the author's patient and sustained field observation of a free-living population of wombats in eastern Victoria. Wombats are notoriously difficult to study and, although somewhat anecdotal, fascinating insights into, for example, some behavioural patterns such as sleeping and feeding are provided. An example of the latter is the characteristic way in which wombats feed on their 'delicacy' of leaf bases of cutting-grass (*Gahnia spp.*).

Unfortunately this volume is not without production errors. On page one the extinct Marsupial Lion genus *Thylacoleo* is misspelt. Plates are unnumbered and some indexed references are misplaced. On page 127 the citation of some references are confused. These detract in a minor way from a generally attractive book.

For anyone who has harboured curiosity about wombats, this volume will answer some questions while probably raising many more. Local issues would include which elements of button-grass communities do wombats use, and, given that these frequently occur on water-logged soils, is proximity to suitable burrow sites at least sometimes a limiting factor in this situation? While it is no fault of the author that many questions about wombats remain unanswered, some of the elements of basic wombat biology could have been further elaborated, even if as challenges to be answered. One example would be on population dynamics — it would be of considerable interest to determine age-specific mortality patterns; perhaps some of Tasmania's 'diurnal' wombat populations (as at Asbestos Range National Park) could help resolve this issue.

Many passages in *The Wombat* bear testimony to the author's dedication and stamina in her study. These deserve wide appreciation; this book is thoroughly recommended.