

BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW***The Secret Life of Wombats***

By James Woodford
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Reviewed by Don Hird

As an undergraduate zoology student in the early 1970s, wombats were the doyen of favoured animals for further study by the few of us would-be marsupial biologists. At that time there were few published studies on common wombats, but neither did the cryptic habits of wombats recommend them for naturalistic research. Three decades after such quixotic days, several scientific treatises have emerged, followed by *Secret Life*.

Rather than restricting itself to science, *Secret Life* deals as much with human interest in wombats and reflects the author's background as a journalist who is also credited with a book documenting the discovery and biology of the Wollemi Pine.

A strength of *Secret Life* is that not only does it summarise scientific studies of wombats but gathers information from wider and more general sources such as vernacular and historical accounts and marsupial palaeontology of wombats. An example of this is Woodford's tracking down of Peter Nicholson, the author of a school-project study of wombats based on crawling into burrows and detailing their architecture and habitation. They retrace the latter's steps to his study area in the foothills of the Victorian alps, even to identifying particular burrows of common wombats more than 30 years after they were originally visited. Quotes from Nicholson's study are used as chapter themes throughout *Secret Life*.

Other chapters are based around excursions to significant sites for wombats and discussions with local experts on wombats. These include visits to the famous fossil site of Riversleigh; Timbertop School with Peter Nicholson; the isolated and forlorn habitat remnant of the Northern hairy-nosed wombat in Queensland; and Narawntapu National Park in northern Tasmania, renowned for its diurnal wombats. Efforts to employ remote controlled and sensing technology, both elaborate and borrowed from cheap toys, to explore burrows are recounted. Photographic plates notably include a juvenile wombat riding on its parent's back in snow.

Secret Life provides a readable ramble across wombat biology and cultural significance. Its shortcomings include a largely anecdotal approach; this has its

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narrative advantages but *Secret Life* includes mistakes of detail like the omission of some of the Victorian populations and the apparent inclusion of Bruny Island in common wombat distribution maps. Citation omissions include John McIlroy's work, *Tasmanian Naturalist* wombat records and the inclusion of references to the discredited "anthropology" of Aldo Massola. The Tasmanian chapter diverts somewhat into devil biology, doesn't mention 1080 targeting of wombats and could easily have included useful information like secondary use of wombat burrows by Eastern quolls. Serious conservationists may prefer more strategic consideration of the issues and less of the "crikey" factor but that's not always what sells books.

Secret Life is nonetheless recommended, not so much for being a comprehensive and thorough account of wombats but as "selected highlights" (and some low points) in human knowledge of the world's largest burrowing animal.