

HOW MANY SPINES DOES A TASMANIAN ECHIDNA *TACHYGLOSSUS ACULEATUS SETOSUS* HAVE?

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Have you ever wondered how many spines an echidna has? I found an echidna road-kill at Sorell Creek in December 2007. The echidna was of ‘average’ size and of unknown sex; the body was fairly intact and there was no damage to the spines. I collected the echidna, put it in a safe place in the garden and waited for it to decompose. I haven’t always collected ‘dead things’ but since working with Parks and Wildlife as a Discovery Ranger since 2004, I’ve become even more curious about the world around me.

Once decomposed and every single spine collected and washed, I was ready for the big count. It was a one and a half hour process to count the spines and my final tally was 1757. I also measured some spines (n=50) and they ranged from 26 mm to 72 mm in length and from less than 0.5 mm to 4 mm in width. The smallest and finest of the spines lacked dark colouration at the tip but still retained ‘spine characteristics’ of being relatively sharp and pointy.

On its own, the fact that one echidna has 1757 spines is simply a fact and of no great ecological significance. I have found one reference which states that the spines on Tasmania’s echidnas are ‘relatively short and few’ (Augee *et al.* 2006) which makes me wonder just how many spines do mainland echidnas have and how long are they? I have failed to find any reference to the actual number and size of spines on echidnas elsewhere.

Our echidnas are known to have thicker and longer fur than their mainland cousins and this is obviously useful in our cooler climate. I wonder if our echidnas have fewer spines than their cousins to make room for more fur to keep them warm. Alternatively, maybe our echidnas have a similar number of spines to their mainland cousins but the dense fur which obscures them, makes them look shorter and fewer.

Clearly, next time I’ve got nothing better to do, I may just have to collect the next unfortunate echidna road-kill I see and find out if all Tasmanian echidnas have 1757 spines.

REFERENCE

Augee, M., Gooden, B. & Musser, A. (2006). *Echidna: Extraordinary Egg-laying Mammal*. CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood.