The numbat

What is a numbat?
A numbat is a small marsupial found only in Australia. It has pale fur below and coarse reddish-brown fur above which is darkest on the rump. There are four to eleven prominent white stripes across the back between the shoulders and tail. The stripes are an effective camouflage allowing the numbat to blend into its surroundings. The head is narrow with a pointed snout and large ears that stand high on the head. The head also has a dark eye-stripe that runs from the nose to the ear on either side of the snout, accentuated by a white eyebrow above and a white stripe immediately below. It has a long bushy tail that has a characteristic ‘bottle-brush’ appearance. The tail is approximately 200 millimetres in length; almost as long as the combined head–body length of approximately 270 millimetres. An adult numbat weighs 500–700 grams and life expectancy is two to three years but can be as much as five years. The numbat is strictly diurnal, which means it is only active during the day. This is one characteristic that sets it apart from most other Australian marsupials that are predominantly nocturnal in nature. It is the only member of the family Myrmecobiidae, one of the three families belonging to the order Dasyuromorphia. The numbat’s classification in its own family means that there are no closely related extant marsupials so it is truly unique.

What are the traditional Aboriginal names of the numbat?
Noombat, wioo (Noongar – south-west Western Australia)
Walpurti, karritjiti, mutjurarranypa, parrtjilaranypa (central desert Aboriginal dialects).

The common name, numbat, originated from the mispronunciation of the Noongar name, noombat.

What are the other common names of the numbat?
Banded anteater

What is the scientific name of the numbat?
*Myrmecobius fasciatus*
Where do numbats live?
Numbats used to exist in semi-arid and arid regions across much of southern Australia, from south-west Western Australia through South Australia and southern Northern Territory to western New South Wales. By the 1980s they were restricted to just two reserves in south-west Western Australia, Dryandra Woodland near Narrogin and Perup Nature Reserve near Manjimup. At that stage these two populations comprised as few as 300 individuals and there were serious concerns the numbat was on the verge of extinction. The reduction in population size and distribution has been attributed to the introduction of the European red fox *Vulpes vulpes*, land clearing and changed fire regimes. Since the 1980s, numbat populations have been re-established in six conservation areas in south-west Western Australia and two fenced sanctuaries in other states, all within the numbat’s former range.

The single most important habitat requirement for numbats is an abundance of subterranean termites. Current habitat includes eucalypt forests and woodlands that have an open understorey, such as those dominated by Jarrah *Eucalyptus marginata*, Wandoo *E. wandoo* and Marri *Corymbia calophylla*. They also inhabit Brown Mallet *E. astringens* plantations in Dryandra Woodland.

Numbat habitat at Tutanning Nature Reserve

Numbats are solitary and territorial and inhabit territories of approximately 25–50 hectares. Territories are exclusive of numbats of the same sex. Male territories can overlap with female territories and males often roam over a much larger area at the onset of breeding season in search of females to mate with. Each territory contains numerous hollow logs and burrows which are used as refuges from predators and for resting.
Females also use burrows to deposit their young. Burrows tend to be lined with nesting material such as bark and leaves, which is collected and carried to the burrow in the numbat’s mouth.

**What do they eat?**
Numbats feed exclusively on termites, although they are known to consume ants incidentally. They have long, thin tongues, approximately 100 millimetres in length and 50–52 teeth, more than any other land mammal. The teeth are, however, poorly developed, do not usually protrude above the level of the gums, and are not used for eating. Numbats spend a lot of the day feeding, with each numbat consuming between 15,000 and 20,000 termites a day.
Numbat claws are not strong enough to penetrate concrete-like termite mounds, so they are restricted to foraging when termites are active and near the ground surface. They use their well-developed sense of smell to locate the shallow underground feeding galleries of termites, and dig shallow excavations into which they flick their tongue in and out so that termites adhere to the saliva-coated tongue. They also expose termites by searching around in bark and leaf litter and by scratching bark from logs and stumps. In winter numbats forage from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, while in summer they forage in the morning and late afternoon and are inactive during the middle of the day when the hot midday temperatures drive termites deeper underground.

**At what time of the year are numbat young born?**

Male numbats start to roam in search of females in oestrus during December and January. The male scent gland becomes active at this time and creates a very obvious reddish stain on the throat. Female oestrus usually occurs once a year during January and females only have a short period of 48 hours in which to conceive. Females can breed in their first year, while males are not sexually mature until their second year.

Numbat young are born in late January to early February after a short gestation period of 14 days. The female has an open pouch with four teats to which the young attach their mouths. Further attachment is facilitated by the young entwining their tiny forelimbs with the female’s belly hairs. Early development is slow and it takes six months before the young can be deposited in a burrow. They grow from less than 20 millimetres to 75 millimetres in that time. In late July to early August they are deposited in a nesting chamber at the end of a burrow, where they continue to develop. At this time the female feeds during the day and suckles the young when she returns to the burrow at night.

During late September the juvenile numbats begin to emerge from the burrow. At first they do not venture far, but play and bask in the sun, staying near the burrow entrance for safety and disappearing down the burrow at the first sign of danger. During October they start to venture further from the burrow. They stay within their mother’s home range but begin feeding on termites and learning to fend for themselves while they are gradually weaned. During late November to early December the juvenile numbats start to disperse and find territories of their own. Juvenile dispersal movements have been recorded up to 11 kilometres.
How many young does a female numbat have?
A female numbat typically gives birth to four pink, hairless young, so all four teats in her open pouch are occupied.

Why have I not seen a numbat yet?
Numbats are often not seen as they live at low densities and their size and appearance enable them to blend into their surroundings. Numbats also inhabit areas littered with logs which they dart into at the first sign of danger, including human presence.

What is being done to help numbats?
The numbat was adopted as Western Australia’s mammal emblem in 1973. This was a somewhat timely move given that in the early 1980s as few as 300 individuals existed in the wild. Since that time, numbat numbers have fluctuated and its IUCN Red List conservation status has changed from Endangered to Vulnerable and back to Endangered again in 2005. There are estimated to be less than 1000 mature individuals existing in the wild at present, and there is evidence of a long-term population decline at Dryandra, one of the two original populations. This is of considerable concern as the Dryandra population is the most genetically diverse and thus the most valuable. The decline has been attributed to an increase in the feral cat population.

The Numbat Recovery Team headed by a Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) research scientist oversees the implementation of recovery measures which to date have included an intensive research program; predator control using 1080 poison baits as part of the Western Shield program; management of existing habitat and populations including translocation of numbats between conservation areas; and a breeding program at Perth Zoo to produce groups of captive bred numbats for release into the wild.
These recovery efforts have seen an appreciable increase in numbers and successful re-introductions into six conservation areas and two fenced sanctuaries, but the numbat will most likely remain at risk of extinction until the feral cat problem is addressed.

Current recovery efforts include captive breeding for release; regular fox control at all WA numbat sites under the Western Shield program; translocation of both wild and captive bred numbats to the current translocation site at Cocanarup Timber Reserve near Ravensthorpe; periodic monitoring of numbats fitted with radio tracking collars in both Dryandra Woodland and Cocanarup; an annual driving survey in Dryandra and an annual radio tracking project in Dryandra.

The radio tracking project was initiated in 2006 and requires a family of numbats (mother and up to four young) to be caught and fitted with radio tracking collars. Four fixed radio tracking towers are then erected in the mother's home range and simultaneous directional bearings are taken on each collared numbat at twenty-minute intervals between 6.00am and 7.00pm each day over a two-week period. The data is entered into a computer program to provide a map of each individual numbat’s movements throughout each day. The information collected provides new insights into the development of numbat behaviour and the longer-term monitoring of the young animals provides important information on their dispersal and survival. Driving surveys are another key aspect of the project. As many numbats as possible are found, caught and fitted with radio tracking collars so they can be periodically monitored throughout their lives to gain further information on breeding and survival. Some of these collared numbats are re-caught at later stages and moved to new locations such as Cocanarup, while others are re-caught to supplement the captive breeding program at Perth Zoo.
**Where can I see a numbat?**

Finding numbats in the wild can be difficult due to their small size and cryptic colouring which enables them to blend into their surroundings. The best way to see a numbat is to drive at a slow speed and look for sudden movement on or near the road’s edge. Possibly the best place to see a numbat in the wild is at Dryandra Woodland near Narrogin in Western Australia. Other places where numbats exist in the wild are the Tone-Perup Nature Reserve and surrounding areas, Batalling Forest, Boyagin Nature Reserve, Tutanning Nature Reserve, Dragon Rocks Nature Reserve, Cocanarup Timber Reserve and Stirling Range National Park.

Numbats can also be found at two Australian Wildlife Conservancy sanctuaries, Yookamurra in South Australia and Scotia in New South Wales. There is no public access to Scotia, but Yookamurra has a Visitors’ Program (school educational program). Numbats can also be seen on display at Perth Zoo.

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**References used:**


