

Fidel
The Splendid Wombat

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Dedicated to my dear brother-in-law

David Somerset

who in his lifetime always encouraged me with my endeavours which spurred
me on to write this account of raising Fidel

Introduction

Back in the late 1990s Larry and I used to visit his sister's bush property This is where we first saw wild free-living wombats. We were enthralled by these animals as we hadn't seen anything like them.

We bought the property next door in 1998. Larry spent a lot of time at our property building a residence and aviaries. We had help from relatives and friends along the way who we thank. And a thank you for ongoing financial contributions from Bunny Horne and Brian Russell.

Larry & I lived in Sydney before moving to the property and had both been members of WIRES for some years. We rescued and rehabilitated a variety of injured animals between us but we felt we wanted to do more to help with conservation. The property known as 'Peach Tree Flat' has the Goulburn River National Park on three borders. In 2008 it was proclaimed by then Governor Marie Bashir, and the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment, Verity Firth MP, as 'Peach Tree Flat Wildlife Refuge'. This status means that all flora and fauna are protected by law. We refer to the property as 'Wombat Creek'.

We believe we have an obligation to treat wombats on our property that are inflicted with mange. We know of other people who agree and treat wombats on their properties who have mange. Unfortunately, there is no law that says it is mandatory for landowners to treat the wombats on their property. Many wombats live on private land so their health and wellbeing is solely dependent on the concern of the landowner.

Caring for orphaned baby wombat 'Fidel' took over most of the hours in my day and night.

December 2013 Larry and I were driving through the Goulburn River National Park, NSW, when we came across what had been a magnificent adult wombat. She was approximately 45-kilos and looked to be in fantastic condition before a fatal car collision. She had trauma to the head and had died sometime within the past 24 hrs. The baby in her pouch was still alive. I had a small shoulder pouch with me, so I emptied the contents and refilled it with a tiny wombat. I then tucked the pouch under my jumper for warmth for the journey home. Once I weighed him I could estimate his age as just over three months. His ears had stood up and I could see his eyes had formed even though they were shut. If he had been a bit younger with ears still lying flat and sealed eyelids I would have had a difficult time keeping him alive. In circumstances where the lips are also partially sealed I think it would be virtually impossible to hand raise

pic 1/ Dec 2013



tiny Fidel / 290 grams



Fidel had to be fed every four hours with a small wombat teat attached to a 10-ml syringe. He soon settled down and begun growing well. I looked forward to him getting his fur through at about 900 grams. At the rate he was growing it wouldn't take too long.

Fortunately, my sister Helen and niece Annaliese, both animal lovers, were visiting for Christmas. I knew they would be happy to have a turn at feeding him, bliss, I might be able to get a full night sleep! Fidel couldn't be left unsupervised for long as it was very important that he be kept at a certain temperature, between 28-30 degrees. Along with warming him up when necessary, he also had to be cooled down when the days got too hot. I knew the temperature issue would be easier once he got a bit bigger, furred, thermo-regulating and gobbling down his milk from a bottle.

I am forever grateful to my sister Helen who helped me when Fidel first came into my care - keeping the correct temperature always which included putting ice packs around him in the heat of the day. We weren't sure if Fidel would be O.K. with a different person feeding

him as well. Wild baby animals that come into care get used to their carer and get nervous and upset when handled by a stranger. Fidel was fine with Helen and we think that maybe siblings have a hereditary smell.

pic 2 Helen feeding Fidel



pic 3 / Helen reading "The Secret Life of Wombats"

I wished a few times during the next couple of months that Helen would come back and stay till he was ensconced in his large pen, fully emerged and in his burrow. Raising two wombats together is better because they keep each other company. Having one meant I had to spend a lot of time with him. In normal circumstances he would be with his mum all the time, never alone, until he was bigger, when she would have left him in the burrow at night while she went grazing.

My faithful friend Bunny could always be relied on to wombat-sit when I would need to go into town to shop. I would take Fidel in his first makeshift burrow, to Bunny's house in town. Bunny was diligent, kept him safe and made sure the temperature was always correct.

pic 4/ 1st burrow



pic 5/ Fidel inside pouch

pic 6/ contented baby tired carer*pic 7/sleeping beauty inside 1st burrow*

By the end of January 2014 Fidel weighed 1190-grams and was drinking stronger milk formula, a natural occurrence in the wild with mum. Growing bigger he needed a larger space. Larry built him a lovely new burrow (box) which was dark and cool. Now he was on a schedule of four feeds every 24 hours, rather than six, and in the next couple of days he went down to three feeds every 24 hours. I also started to putting grass in his pouch and around for him to munch on, which he obligingly did. Sometimes I would find him out of the pouch moving around interested in his surroundings. He was drinking well, eating some grass and steadily putting on weight.

*pic 8 / 2nd burrow**pic 9 / a ball of muscle**pic 10/ weigh in Feb 2014*

The bond between a mother wombat and her baby is very strong. I was told that I should keep myself distant but I found this impossibility. Raising a baby wombat is such a pleasure. One must constantly keep in mind that wombats end up large strong animals which is why they are sometimes described as “Sherman tanks”. It is not a good idea to allow a wombat the run of the house or keep them in areas you later want to keep them out of. I was willing to adapt to being outdoors with him a lot. I had previously raised Bozo, a grey kangaroo, and had a bed outside that I would sleep in so he could graze at night with ‘mum’ close by.

I am pleased that I did spend so much time outdoors with Fidel, as I learnt after he was eventually released to the wild, that he could smell me out if the wind is blows in his direction. Since he was never allowed to roam the house, or access the doors to get in and out, I did not have the problem that I have heard from other people—that a wombat will barge straight through walls and doors to get where it wants to go!

While raising Fidel I was also in the midst of raising a grey kangaroo ‘Billy’ who also had claim on my heart. Billy had been with me since Oct 2013. Billy and I often slept outside. Billy grazed at night with rests in-between, lying on ‘mum’s’ bed. In the morning with Fidel in his pouch we would sit on the bed while he had his morning milk. As he finished he would drift into a peaceful sleep so I would lay him under the blanket while I did my morning chores. Sometimes Billy would be on the bed also. Fidel and Billy became good friends. When Billy left home a female wallaroo who I called Pretty Britty came along. Britty was found in a paddock in Merriwa wandering around with no mum. Fidel and Britty also became friends.

pic 11 / grazing with Billy



pic 12/ Billy on wombat guard duty – Fidel’s 3rd burrow



pic 13/ inside 3rd burrow “what’s going on out there?”

At 3-kilos Fidel could graze outside from dusk till dark in a temporary enclosure for safety. This enclosure had a shade cloth covered roof keeping him safe from predators.

A large bird of prey can swoop down and take a small wombat or macropod if they are exposed. The temporary pen had been a nursery Larry built for our first kangaroo Bozo and the others who followed. Fidel liked this space, especially when 'mum' was with him. The enclosure had a sheltered area with a tin roof, a large hollow log for Fidel, and his pouch hanging opposite my chair. It was a comfortable space for me to sit and read. Under the shade cloth roof I had a rug and pillow that I could lie on. There was plenty of room to lie about on the ground playing Fidel games. I was to find out much later that playing rough and tumble with little Fidel was fun, but little Fidel would be able to overpower 'mum' at a later stage! Mother wombats let their offspring get away with playing rough but when they get too rough they soon nip them into line. Mother humans are not able to shell out this type of discipline or overpower a large wombat.

The temporary pen had some grass growing but we would also pick grass while in town, bringing a couple of bags home. Grass is most nutritious when it is about 10-cm long and grazed from the ground. The roots are good, but often it's just not possible to supply enough in enclosures. It seemed that Fidel instinctively knew that and would always graze when possible rather than eat cut grass, not that he minded eating copious quantities of that either. There are substitute foods, such as gum nuts, oaten chaff, roo pellets, carrots and sweet potato but I always preferred to keep Fidel on a natural grass diet using some cut grass and allowing him to graze on the natural vegetation.

The pen was about 4 x 9 meters in total. I would take Fidel up to the pen at about 5pm, feed him, stay for a couple of hours, then leave him until about 9pm when I would find he had fallen asleep in his pouch. I would then bring him down to the burrow on our veranda. During the night Fidel would wake up to eat grass intermittently. After he got used to the pen I started leaving him there overnight.



pic 14 / the temporary grazing pen, thanks Bozo- pic 15/ inspecting the furnishings - large hollow log March 2014

pic 16/ also mum's table and mum's chair although why would you have a chair when you can dig a burrow!!



pic 17 / Fidel's digging claws in Dec 2013, still a tiny baby!

The urge to dig is very strong for a wombat and Fidel dug a burrow. He knew inherently what to do.



pic 18/ dug first burrow almost immediately once in grazing pen

I debated taking away the pouch and leaving him to sleep in his burrow. The manuals I had read said it was the norm to keep them in a pouch in a manmade burrow until they are approximately 5500-grams. We know mother wombats leave their babies in the burrow while they go off grazing nearby, but it is not known exactly at what weight this happens—it may happen at different times for different babies. Fidel was alone in his third manmade burrow, which was on the back verandah outside our bedroom. He would be in his hanging pouch sleeping, or would emerge to eat fresh grass and roots that I would leave for him each night. By the end of March, he weighed 3184-grams.

Many people in wildlife groups who raise baby wombats must pass them on to a person who has a suitable property for release. Where possible wombats should be released back into the area they were found, easier said than done!

I cannot say what would have transpired if I had taken away his pouch before moving him to his permanent pen. He may have got distressed leaving his burrow. He had to stay in the protected pen until his weight was heavy enough to deter predators. He used his burrow, but still used his pouch a lot. Since it was his pouch that I carried him around in and feed him in I think it gave him a sense of being with 'mum' and therefore a feeling of security. Looking back, since I had the facilities to give Fidel a more natural surrounding I probably would not have bothered with the third manmade burrow as he dug a burrow in his nursing pen. I realise now that ideally the temporary pen should be attached the permanent pen with an adjoining gate which can be opened once the wombat is big enough to no longer need the safety of roof cover.

The burrow in the nursing pen Fidel dug extended out beyond the wall of the pen so we had to put heavy concrete blocks on the outside perimeter of the pen. This was to keep Fidel busy for a while longer, while Larry built the final pen where he would live till release.



pic 19 / concrete blocks to give Fidel further to dig to stop him digging out while Larry built a permanent pen

I also had an old water tank cut in half in the front yard that had good grass growing inside. I would put Fidel in there to graze, leaving him for a while, knowing he would be safe. He was not so keen on this arrangement, preferring to be free to roam with me following him, not the other way around, as it should be! The water tank was very useful at times.

Fidel was growing well and looking very beautiful. He loved to play. Some people say young wombats don't play but I believe all young animals play. I read a lot about wombats and tried to contact people who would know more about the subject than me. I heard that people had trouble finding suitable release sites for wombats. I knew that having another wombat for Fidel to grow up alongside would be ideal, rather than just having me.

While raising Fidel I mainly used the rescue and rehabilitation manual written Helen George, which I found precise and easy to follow. Helen is a veteran wombat carer and one of the early members of WIRES. Her wombat manual was written back in 1995, and even though I have read more recent manuals I have not found anything that compares to her guide regarding wombat care overall.

I contacted other people known for wombat rescue and rehabilitation, but unfortunately I found they were not that willing to exchange ideas or give me guidance.

Helen was always willing to take a phone call and answer any questions to help a novice like me. A dedicated carer for about 35 years it is clear Helen's concerns are always first and foremost for the best care of the animal. I thank her for taking the time. It was a privilege to learn from her.

Between the following three books I had a wealth of useful information while caring for Fidel: Helen George's manual; Barbara Triggs "The Wombat" UNSW Press Australian Natural History Series; and James Woodford "The Secret Life of Wombats" featuring fantastic research done by Peter Nicholson when he was just a school boy.

The wombat pen Larry built needed to be approximately 12 x 8 meters, as Fidel would reside in there while he grew from approximately 5 to 15 kilos. Our friend Bunny paid for all the materials needed to build the pen and Larry supplied the labor.

pic 20 / Thankyou Bunny



Pic 21/ Larry at work on the trench digger

The pen had wrought iron around the base that extended over a meter into the ground. We hired a trench-digger to dig deep trenches to insert the iron. We chose an area that was not too rocky and had wombat burrows nearby.

When Larry started to build the pen there was healthy grass growing but unfortunately, like any building site, the ground got so disrupted we ended up with virtually no grass remaining. It took Larry a couple of weeks to get the entire project completed. At this stage Fidel would go for short walks, staying quite close to me. I wanted him to know his way around the property.

pic 22 / Work in progress*pic 23 / the flash pen ready to be used May 2014*

Fidel was around 5.2-kilos when I weighed him a few days before the pen was finished in May 2014. It was time to introduce him to his new home. At first I would take him into his new pen for an hour in the evenings. He seemed to like it there. I did this for a week, increasing the amount of time daily, before moving him in permanently. The routine of feeding Fidel his milk and taking him on a walk to graze in the evenings became much easier now that he was installed in the pen.

We were hoping the next stage would be Fidel digging a burrow in the pen so he could start using it during the daylight hours. In the far back corner there was a protected area from the weather that was 'our corner'. A large hollow log, a chair, and a milk crate attached to wall for me to store things in and high enough so Fidel couldn't get to them.

We placed half of an old water tank in the center of the pen. We started digging a hole inside the water tank hoping it would give Fidel an incentive to make a burrow. At the back in 'our corner' Larry dug another hole, straddling half a large log over it—the idea being that if Fidel dug from each side he could eventually join up his burrows.

pic 24/ wombat toys

Fidel took up a lot of my time, time that I gave willingly and really enjoyed. Hygiene is very important, so every day I would clean away the old feces and cut grass in the pen. He

preferred to start grazing up in the hills around 5pm. He would have had me stay there all night if he could. He would take time out from grazing to play 'jump over and nip mum'.

Having two wombats grow up together is ideal if there is no mum. I tried to get another wombat from various people, but no one was willing to hand one over. Some people I contacted told me that since I had never done a wombat course I wasn't qualified to raise one. The fact that I live with wombats around me and am observing their behavior constantly didn't seem to count. Since my wombat setup is good this was a disappointment. People like to care for wombats when they are small, but once they reach about 8-kilos having them inside a regular house is not advisable. You would think a person who has a wombat pen and a marvelous area for release straight from the pen would be a desirable person to pass on a wombat to.

Larry & I have been members of WIRES since 1998. We rescued and rehabilitated a wide variety of native animals in Sydney over a span of fifteen years. This included brushtail and ringtail possums, different reptiles and many different bird species including water birds and birds of prey. We were both authorized raptor rescuers and carers. Larry was a snake handler and was called out too many snake rescues and relocations in Sydney. When we moved to our property we found that living amongst and observing the animals daily, plus all the good reading material available these days, was better training than any formal course. Our finances are very limited and travelling miles and paying to listen to people - often with less experience than us - to get a piece of paper saying we had completed a course was not our top priority. As Wires does not have a branch in Merriwa or Muswellbrook we did not qualify for any financial assistance even though we are paid up members. We kept our membership but didn't pay to take any courses as we decided our money was better spent operating 'Wombat Creek Native Wildlife Refuge' building pens and aviaries and buying food supplies.

Mature wombats are solitary animals, but the mothers are usually with their offspring for about two years before she sends them off when they grow to about 18-kilos. On cold evenings we often see up to three wombats grazing in the same area. They mind their own business but are obviously aware of each other.

Wombat expert Helen George also thought it was a shame that no one would hand a young wombat over to me. She suggested I go into the pen to give Fidel his bottle then leave so he would not continue to bond with me. I know this is very sensible advice since the aim is to successfully release a wild animal, and therefore wild animals should not be bonded to a human. However, I felt it was cruel to leave Fidel alone all the time. It was a great disappointment to me that we could not have a wombat companion for Fidel.

He would take delight in leaping, gentle nipping, and rolling downhill like an out of control soccer ball. I could imagine what a great time two young wombats would have together. I gave him a cushion about his size for this rolling game. He got very attached to his cushion and would sleep with it after a good playing session.

Fidel did dig his burrow, but continued to sleep in his hanging pouch some of the time. Occasionally he would drag his cushion or one of my old t-shirts into the burrow entrance.

pic 25/ burrow entrance*pic 26 / Fidel's cushion*

It is true that care must be taken to ensure that wombats don't get used to people if they are to be released successfully. I removed Fidel's sleeping pouch after he had been in the pen for a few weeks as it was important that the burrow became his home. He started digging immediately once he was in the pen, but I think he wanted me in the burrow as well. I slept outside with the young roos once they needed to graze at night so they felt more secure. Having the stars overhead at night has compensations but I did draw the line at going underground!

Pic 27/ our corner - Fidel's hanging pouch and bag he liked going into which was great for transporting him also

I took Fidel to different areas of the property at dawn and dusk so he could get to know his territory. I would often give him a lift in an animal carrycase to the outskirts since he was becoming very cheeky and could quickly disappear into areas that were not easily accessible for me. One of the things he figured out quickly when we were out and about was that if he nicked into a wombat hole I couldn't get him. I just hoped he wasn't going to encounter a very angry aggressive male wombat down one of the holes.

If a male wombat is released when they are between 15-18 kilos and encounters a 35-kilo male wombat that is not pleased to see him a lot of damage could be inflicted. I think that a wombat with mum for a couple of years in her territory has a far greater chance of survival

than a wombat released into a foreign territory. I have often wondered how wombats fare that are released and unable to be observed. Because mange is such a big threat, along with all the other dangers, I wonder how many survive and for how long.

Pic 28 / eating copious amounts of cut grass



yum yum



I got enormous pleasure spending time with Fidel and in the morning had no problem getting up at 5am and setting off to the pen with my thermos of tea and Fidel's morning milk. We would go for an early morning stroll and Fidel would graze. Once the sun was up we would return to the pen. Fidel would have his milk and snuggle up for a sleep. I would have my tea and read for a while. Fidel would eventually trundle off into his burrow for the day. He often seemed to sense when I was leaving and emerge from his burrow to see. Sometimes I would sneak back and peer over the fence to see if he had resettled but he was very smart and had such a good sense of smell he would look out for me so I had to refrain. I would return for his early evening milk feed about 6pm and stroll and graze and read using my headlamp. Around 8pm he would be locked in his pen with a pile of cut grass which he would eat up by the morning. The grass did start growing again in the pen but not enough to sustain him, so pulling grass for overnight feeding was a constant chore for quite some time.

My sister Andriani and her husband David visited Wombat Creek for a couple of days in 2012. David had a great love of nature - in his younger days in New Zealand he was a mountaineer, and was a fervent bushwalker throughout his life. He was very interested in the Australian outback and enjoyed his visit to Wombat Creek, encouraging Larry and me in our endeavors.



pic 29 / David & Andriani visit – July 2013

I sent David 'The Secret Life of Wombats' and after reading it he said what **splendid** creatures he thought they were. I think it may have been the last book of many thousands he read during his lifetime. In August 2014 he became very ill. I wanted to see him, as it seemed his life was ending. He died while I was in New Zealand and I was grateful that I had some time with him.

While I was away in New Zealand for four weeks Larry cared for Fidel. During this time Larry did not let him out of the pen as he knew Fidel was being a rascal with me and was worried Fidel would take off on him. As well as giving him his daily milk bottles he spent time in the pen with him and played the cushion roly-poly game, which I believe was a lot rougher with two boys indulging. I think maybe there was some wrestling going on, minus the cushion! We thought the break from me would be good for Fidel as it would reduce the bond between us. Larry said he was exhausted by the time I returned and was very pleased to see me take over the Fidel duties again. It was like I had never gone away. I think Fidel was pleased to start doing some roaming again and I was delighted to be with him again as I got such a lot of pleasure from the shared time and had missed him. I noticed straight away that he was bigger and stronger.



pic 30 / Full of milk sleeping and snoring in my burrow

While I was in the pen I liked to be comfortable, so I had my own 'burrow'. Once Fidel had his milk and grass he liked to have a good snore with 'mum'. I would be lying on my 'burrow' reading with a very relaxed Fidel alongside. A while later he would go down his burrow for the day.

By the end of September 2014 Fidel weighed almost 12-kilo and was approx. 1yr old. Not far from his pen was an area with very long growth that led to an area where there were about four burrows. He took delight in disappearing into the undergrowth and eventually emerging on the other side. Sometimes in the evening we would see a couple of bigger

wombats grazing in that area but they had respect for each other's space. Fidel never tried to approach them and I thought it was good that he was aware of other wombats and how they were behaving. Occasionally he would duck down into one of the burrows, which worried me, but he would come back out in his own time, which was never that long. He began to evade going back into the pen for as long as possible.

One evening he took off up the hill behind the pen and disappeared from my sight neglecting to return when called. I waited for a long time and then returned home leaving the door open to his pen. During the night like any worried parent I went down every couple of hours wandering and calling but to no avail. In the morning he had returned. He did this again a couple of times over the next few weeks and seemed to be okay, but I always worried because he wasn't big enough yet to be off on his own. The manuals say release after weight has reached 15-kilo. I think it also depends on the individual animal, but weight is important as they do need to be able to defend themselves if necessary. I don't think a 15-kilo wombat would do very well against a 35 kilo-plus aggressive male—the best defense would be to flee. Author James Woodford notes that wombats can move at an amazing pace. Over a short distance they can run up to 100 meters in under ten seconds. They can run about 40k/h for over 150 meters so you can see why I couldn't keep up with Fidel once he decided to take off. I believe only a handful of people on the planet can run 36k/h for 100meters. I had no hope! Wombats are also good swimmers and good wrestlers as Larry discovered.

At the end of September Fidel took off in the evening for one of his jaunts. He didn't appear the next morning, or the morning after. I was feeling very sad and thought he had met his demise. I felt it was my fault for letting him out, knowing he could wander away at will. The third morning, at the crack of dawn, I found him grazing outside his pen and when he saw me he ran over squealing like a little piglet. We had both learnt a lesson. Fortunately for Fidel he lived through it. He had a large patch of fur missing fur on his rump from an attack. I couldn't see any skin breaks, but his rump was no doubt sore and bruised.

Wombats have very tough skin on their rump, about 1-cm thickness. Fidel was very subdued for the next couple of days, although still drinking his milk and eating grass. Then I noticed he seemed to have something in his nostril causing him to make sneezing type noises. I thought something was amiss, but couldn't find any information in the manuals so I called the veteran Helen George. Once again Helen guided me in the right direction. She said it sounded like he may have an upper respiratory infection, but whatever the problem was I should embark on administering a course of antibiotics. She told me which questions to ask the vet. I went immediately to the Merriwa town vet, Anthea Wright, who was always willing to help with anything if she could.

The antibiotics, a seven-day course of injections, had to be given each morning and evening. The skin of wombats is so tough that injections must be given in the softer tummy area to get the needle through the skin. It was a two-man job! Fidel wouldn't tolerate anyone else holding him but me, and he only just tolerated me. I had to wrap the 'bulldozer' up in a blanket to hold onto him. I'd sit down and wedge him firmly between my legs while Larry, who is better than me at giving injections, gave him the shot. We thought maybe we could

give him the injection while he was drinking his milk as he would stand with his front paws on my thigh and drink his milk and seemed to go into a state of bliss, eyes closed and oblivious to anything else happening. Larry gave him his shot while he was doing this. We got away with it once. The next time he just positioned himself so his tummy couldn't be reached. Wombats are smart.

The antibiotics took effect within three days. The skin lifted and was like a leather hide, underneath was broken skin with claw marks. We thought that some bacteria in the claws had been the source of his infection. He made a good recovery. His fur took a few weeks to grow back and was a different colour for a while, but if you didn't know what had happened you wouldn't have seen any difference.

pic 31 / back attack



pic 32 / skin lifting



pic 33 / once the skin lifted you could clearly see the broken skin was underneath

Fidel was lucky that he learnt a valuable lesson from his attack without sustaining a permanent injury. After that incident when we were outside the pen the smallest noise

would send him running in and straight down his burrow. At other times he would stay close to me and always come when I called.



pic 34/ Oct 2014 Fidel relaxing

By November 2014 Fidel had been with us for a year and I decided it was time to wean him. The manuals say to wean at 10-kilos, but I decided to give Fidel milk for longer, just as I had done with my grey kangaroos. Most manuals say to wean earlier, but Lynda Staker, who to me is the ‘macropod guru’ always maintained that greys drink from mum till they are about 18-months old. This opinion is met by scoffing and laughing by some people I talked to, but having greys around my property it was easy to observe that Lynda was indeed correct.



pic 35 / Dec2014-15kilo Fidel drinking milk. How could you not love that face!?

Raising a lone wombat from a pinky of 280-grams to weaning him at 14-15 kilos over a year later was quite a commitment. On January 1st, 2015, I left Fidel's pen open permanently so he could come and go as he pleased.

Fidel continued to live in his burrow in the pen and would come up to the house paddock to graze some evenings. I had been told to keep him away from the house as he would try to get in and possibly break doors and other such damage. We built his pen about 250 meters away from the house although we were advised to have it further away. While he was still in care I would sometimes walk him to the house paddock, sit and have a cup of tea while he was grazing, then walk back down to the pen with Fidel following.

In the early days of release Fidel tried to live under the house, where there is only rock. Larry soon found a way to stop him from going underneath. We used bush rock to block the bottom of the house, which ended up looking really good so Fidel did us a favor. He would go around the house, knowing I was inside and make his piggy grunting noises hoping I would respond, which I sometimes would as I loved to see him, tickle his head and sneak in a kiss sometimes. Bad behavior on my part, but he would just go on his way if he didn't see me.

I kept in touch with Helen George who did tell me I must stop seeing and touching him! He never made a nuisance of himself to anyone else, but he was getting heavier, stronger and rougher around me. His main crime was to drag a cushion from wherever he could find one, roll around with it, bite it and generally destroy it. I only had old cushions outdoors so I felt this was a small price to pay for the cushion game that Larry and I were responsible for teaching him.

The camp bed I used when I slept outside with baby roos, when they needed to graze at night, was folded up outside on the front veranda. We had been getting a lot of rain, so Fidel decided to make use of the camp bed as a rest burrow, knowing no other wombat except 'mum' might be in it.

Pic 36 & 37 / March 2015 - one cold rainy night snug as a bug in a rug. Good use of my camp bed!!



As time moved on Fidel dismissed the bed burrow, and stopped using the burrow in the pen completely. He moved himself to higher ground through thick foliage. I knew he was living further up the hill as he would come down from up there if I called him. I tried to follow him to see which burrow he was in but he would turn around and follow me instead if he saw me, so that didn't work.

In the hills there are quite a few caves where clever wombats dug burrows. He was attacked again in July and had bald patches on his rump and forehead. Neither of these seemed to worry him so hopefully more lessons were learned with no lasting damage. All his fur grew back quite quickly and he continued to get bigger and stronger and looked beautiful once again. He became more distant. He would still come to front yard, but sometimes not be seen for quite a few nights, which was a good development.



Pic 38 & 39 / July 2015 bum & forehead attack

Pic 40/ Sept 2015 Fidel fur grown back, beautiful once again.



I had been sleeping outside for about three weeks as Britty, my little wallaroo, needed to graze at night and felt secure if 'mum' was nearby. We have a good roo pen for the younger ones in the paddock, but Britty hated being locked in there, and I enjoyed sleeping outside observing the nightlife. There had been a few wombats coming by at different times. Fidel would often turn up at dusk when the support food was put out for the macropods. He had only been given grass while in care but he liked to have a munch of the wheaten chaff and grain mix, as did other wild wombats that came through. I found this interesting because I read wild wombats, if captured and penned, will not eat any substitute food.

One night I had just got into bed when a wombat arrived. I thought it was a regular 11pm visitor but I suddenly saw the nose go up and sniff the air. And the next thing Fidel had launched himself up into my bed. Sleeping with him was no longer a pleasure! When he was small and cuddly in his bag it was okay. He was biting hard and his distinct wombat smell, which I don't find unpleasant, was wafting through my bed.

I was trying to get out of the camp bed when Fidel suddenly realized that he could drag off my blanket and roll around in it then snuffle at my hair and claw my head. I was forced back indoors moving at a fast pace. I did consider trying to drive him off, as mother wombats often drive their offspring out of their territory once they reach about 18-kilo, but I couldn't find a way to emulate the behavior without Fidel thinking it was a terrific game. If someone had videoed this performance, it would have made good comedy viewing.



Pic 41 / bed attack



Pic 42/ Poor Britty "Who's stolen mine and Mum's bed?"

Fidel decided that a kip in that bed was a good idea at whatever hour he chose, so I had to give up my night-viewing and fold up the bed. Luckily the length of time before the Fidel camp bed 'attack' was long enough for Britty to become brave enough graze on her own for short bursts of time. I had to remove the bed altogether after a few nights as Fidel decided it was good fun to drag the bed to the middle of the yard and scatter the sheets, blankets and pillows around. I suppose he had a victory, as he had driven 'mum' from her territory not the other way around!

*Pic 43 / No conscience? **Bed thief** sleeping peacefully !*



In time Fidel would not be seen for a few nights in a row then he would appear again, much to my relief, as I always worried about him. I found that when he would turn up I couldn't help myself and would run out and pat and kiss him. He always seemed pleased to see me, but his nipping had got much harder and sometimes hurt. He also decided it was fun to chase me and I would have to beat a hasty retreat. My commonsense told me that I needed to refrain from any communication, but my emotions kept getting the better of me. I would refrain for a couple of weeks then think a quick tickle would be okay...wrong. If no one appeared Fidel would occasionally come to the back veranda and drag all the seat cushions off the lounges. He managed to wreck a couple before we devised a plan to stop him. We took the cushions off, placed wood on the seats with bricks holding down each one, and only put the seat cushions back on the seats when we wanted to use them.

When we heard Fidel on the veranda at night Larry would growl at him and tap his bum with a long pole which would chase him off. Fidel was persistent, but so was Larry, and this combination did the trick. After a few weeks Fidel stopped coming on the veranda. There was quite a bit of guilt on my part as I knew him coming to the veranda was my fault.

We built a new barbecue area in the front yard, adding a couple of hanging chairs with very nice padding. When we got up the next morning Fidel had done a thorough inspection of the new area, pulling down both hanging chairs, dragged them around the yard, and destroyed any hope we had of ever sitting in them again. Oh well, a small price to pay for having him around. Time moved on with no further destruction.

One night in June 2016, as we drove through the front gate I saw Fidel running off—the car had startled him. I went for walk around the paddock looking for him. I had no torch so he found me first. He came hurtling over, launching an attack on my legs. I had thin tights on with ordinary shoes, not gumboots, he was biting my legs very hard and standing up clawing them. It was impossible to get away, so I took my good alpaca jumper off, a treasured gift from my sister, and threw that over Fidel hoping that would give me enough time to run back to the house. That was hopeless. So, then I attempted to wrap my scarf around his nose and mouth. Worse! He thought the ‘game’ was getting better and better. Then he proceeded to yank off my gloves with his teeth.

I had covered a bit of ground while frantically removing garments, and fortunately I was quite well layered, so I managed to shed a thin top that was under my jumper, then my singlet top. Somehow I got myself over to the house and threw myself through the front door, much to Larry’s amazement, a crazy half-dressed woman struggling for breath. I ran faster than I believed I was capable of. Larry retrieved my clothing, although Fidel put up some resistance at giving them up. Nothing was damaged, since he just liked to roll around in my stuff. About twenty minutes later we looked out and there he was grazing away in the front yard like any normal wombat.

This incident really gave me a wakeup call, and I haven’t gone near or touched Fidel since...but I didn’t get off that lightly. The next, and last incident to date, happened very unexpectedly one night when I was getting ready for bed. I had completely relaxed regarding Fidel, as he had been minding his own business, staying off the veranda, and only appearing some nights in the front paddock to munch. The main bedroom has sliding doors opening onto the back veranda. Hearing a noise coming from out there, thinking it was the roo Britty, I stepped out. Fidel stepped in.

He had been standing at the door looking in. Larry was asleep but was awoken by my surprised yell. Fidel was very pleased with himself and wasn’t going to be ushered out without a game. Eventually we got a thick blanket over him and shoved him out. Not so long-ago Larry would have been able to lift him wrapped in blanket but alas no longer. Fidel must weigh between 25-30 kilo now and when a wombat wants to go a different way to where you want him to you soon find out why they are called ‘the bulldozer of the bush!’

The blanket we threw over him was the same one I used on the outside bed, which he was delighted to have. He took it around the front, rolled and dragged it around for hours. I found it the next morning way down the hill. Needless to say Larry had very stern words with me.

Pic 44/ Fidel with his beloved blanket

That was in October 2016 and I have stayed away from Fidel since. So far he hasn't done anything other than be a normal free-living wild wombat. At the time of writing this Fidel has been free for nineteen months and I can finally say that despite my weakness I did manage to raise a wombat who lives free and can look after himself. I read that you should put your wombat pen far away from your house and once you release the wombat you should not see them at all. I disagree and would go through it all again, minus the cushion game, to end up with a wombat that I am lucky enough to see (along with visitors) in our house paddock, which is part of his territory, and I know how he is faring.

Anyone that has raised wombats will understand how they take over your heart and keep a hold.

Mange

Our Australian wombats are unique, found nowhere else on earth, but they could become extinct if nothing further is done to keep mange under control and possibly eradicate it. Mange is an infestation of the mange mite. Left without treatment, a wombat with mange will die a death that is slow and painful.

The most serious health problem effecting wombats in Australia is mange. It is not known exactly where mange originated. What we do know is it has spread throughout our wombat population, affecting the bare nosed wombat in particular. Mange has been killing our wombats for years.

The irritation caused by the mite burrowing under the skin causes the wombat to scratch incessantly, which then causes worse damage to the skin including mutilation and hair loss. The constant scratching causes skin layers to come off resulting in raw skin. Seeping blood serum creates wounds and scabs. Ulcers and deep lesions develop and then these become fly blown. Skin thickening and crusting is seen over the body and around the eye and ear areas causing blindness and deafness. The wombat can no longer search for food and

malnutrition and dehydration occur. The immune system becomes completely depleted and the wombat emaciated. It has a devastating effect on the internal organs, heart, liver, kidneys, reproductive organs and respiratory system and infections set in.



Pic 45/ A bad case of mange

In 2001 Dr Lee Skerratt studied sarcoptic mange in bare nosed wombats for his Ph.D. He clearly showed that it could be treated and cured if in the early stages. The mites can be eliminated by a course of six injections of ivermectin given at ten-day intervals. If a baby wombat is taken into care, and the mange has not progressed, the treatment is easily carried out as young wombats can be handled. Due to the fact that adult wild wombats are very strong, nocturnal and live underground this type of treatment is impossible.

Free-living wombats do not cope well in captivity as they stress, and with an already suppressed immune system they usually die within days. So bringing them into care is not a realistic option even if you can catch them. An adult wombat that can be approached and handled would most likely be a very sick one with mange in the secondary stages with the organs affected so it may possibly need to be euthanized.

I did some further reading and discovered that wombats had been trapped and transported overseas and survived. London Zoo had its first common wombat on display way back in 1830. Larry & I got an idea that maybe we could set up a facility at Wombat Creek where we could capture and treat the adult wombats from this area with mange. We met Brian Keech who was an ex field officer with NPWS and an advisor with practical success in curing mange going back twenty years. He instructed Larry on how to build a wombat capture trap. Larry did build a capture trap, but we never put it to the test. The idea is that you put the trap in front of the burrow, the wombat goes into it and the door closes behind them. I can't say that I know if this method works—wombats are very smart!

I read a book regarding the care and handling of Australian Native Animals that had a section on wombats written by Ray Williams who was a member of the Biological Science

department at the University of NSW. The book has a section about housing wombats at NSW field station at Cowan, where wombats were kept for several years for research purposes. These enclosures are quite different from the wombat pen we built for Fidel. They are a practical design for treating wombats that are in care for a short period of time. I thought we might be able to build a couple of these enclosures to treat adult wombats for the duration of their ivermectin course.

I put together a proposal, which I submitted to Rupert Woods, CEO Wildlife Health Australia. Mr Woods sent it to the research working group for consideration. They believed the proposal had merit and set up a meeting between me and Tony English, who at the time was Associate Professor, Veterinary Science University of NSW. We hoped some of his students would be interested in the project and be able to help with the pathology results. I talked to several students who were interested, but unfortunately the travelling they would have to do made them unwilling participants. I also approached WIRES hoping to receive moral support and some financial assistance, but they declined. I became disheartened and the project never went any further due to lack of funds.

Wildlife health training was limited back then and looking after our wildlife was not a priority. Now there is a state of the art Wildlife and Conservation Clinic at the University of NSW. That clinic opened in 2007 after a grant was received from the Federal Government.

I think using a course of injections where possible is the best way to treat wombats for mange, but I also endorse using the burrow flap system. There are differences of opinion about how effective the flap treatment is. The flap is placed at the entrance of the burrow.



Pic 46 / burrow flap in place

When the wombat leaves the burrow the flap swings into action and the ivermectin pours onto the animals back. Ivermectin has been successful for treating humans and dogs and other domestic and farm animals.

In the winter months when wombats emerge in the day to graze it becomes easier to recognise the wombats on your property and know which holes they each use. Wombats are creatures of habit. During this time, we learnt that a good tool is a long pole with an attached

spout on the end used to pour ivermectin onto the back of their necks. With this method we knew if they got the dose, but this only worked well in a few cases because it is not easy to sneak up on a wombat.

Cameras can also be used over burrow entrances and other strategic spots. This method is not difficult and can be done without touching an infected animal. But diligence is required, as the treatment course must be carried out to the end for it to be effective. We have also found that because we follow up once the winter months arrive, we can see the wombats and can assess how they are doing. It's surprising how you get to recognise the wombats on your property and get to know which burrows they use.



Pic 47 & 48

This wombat was treated using the burrow flap He made a good recovery. We administer a treatment once every week for 8 weeks then 2 fortnightly ones to follow.



Pic 49 & 50

A happier wombat on the right after treatment

Anyone can set up burrow flaps for the treatment of preventing and reversing mange in wombats. For a very easy and clear explanation of “**how to**” go to “**The Wombat Protection Society**” link.

<http://www.wombatprotection.org.au/mange-brochure.pdf>

Research headed up by Associate Professor Julie Old of the University of Western Sydney has been carried out at a luxury spa resort, set on a 2,800-hectare conservation and wildlife reserve within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. Assistance with

funding was provided by Emirates Wolgan Valley and data collected from their reserve. Professor Old is a marsupial immunologist, one of few in Australia. It was intended that mange wombats would be treated and monitored throughout their recovery but unfortunately the scale of the problem was too large to tackle. It would be wonderful if places such as this started a program for the prevention and spread of mange. Dr Old is continuing with her research in the hope of finding a way to protect wombats from mange. Her research is also focused on the mite itself. She is the architect of womSAT, a new resource for communities to record sightings of wombats across the country. 6129 sightings have been recorded so far and womSAT has only been running since August 2015. <https://womsat.org.au>

Unfortunately trying to bring the plight of wombats to the attention of people in positions that may be able to do something is well beyond the capabilities of layman such as me. I have written this account as a plea on behalf of all the wombats suffering from mange who cannot speak for themselves and in hope that knowing the Fidel story might make people more sympathetic to the cause.

An outbreak of mange has the potential to decimate smaller populations so we should do all we can to help our unique wombats.

The End.....