



Fourth Crossing Wildlife factsheet



Short-beaked echidna

Tachyglossus aculeatus
"spiny swift-tongue"

other names
Spiny Anteater or Echidna



<https://mol.org/species/>

Description

Head and body length 30-45cm, weight 2-7kg. Surface of body and rudimentary tail covered in spines. Fur usually present between spines, more fur in cooler climates (in Tasmania fur sometimes obscures the spines). Long tubular nose/snout.

The echidna is easily recognised by the covering of spines across its body - which is a safety mechanism for the animal. When threatened, the echidna will bury into the ground, or curl into a tight ball and raise its spines (quills) so that it cannot be handled easily. Between the spines is soft hair - longer in cooler climates and shorter in warmer climates. The echidna can be found throughout all of Australia where ever there are ants or termites present as this is their main diet source. The echidna has no teeth, but a very long tongue (which can flick out of the mouth 100 times a minute!) which is used to extend into ant and termite mounds. Its tongue is coated with a sticky saliva substance which food stick too. The echidna will also eat grubs, beetles and spiders, dirt and ant nest material is also ingested. The echidna is a solitary animal occupying overlapping ranges, but it does not have fixed nest sites. Nests are only used for incubating and suckling the young, which are called puggles. Normal shelter is under thick bushes, hollow logs and other debris, and the echidna will often use rabbit and wombat burrows as well. During extreme weather such as intense heat, the echidna will shelter for most of the day, and will forage at night. In cold weather the echidna will enter torpor - lowering body temperature, heart rate, respiration and metabolism to save energy. Mating occurs in July and August and approximately. Copulation can last between 30 minutes and 2 hours. 22 days after copulation a single, soft shelled egg is laid, which is carried in the "pouch" which is more like a flap of skin that completely disappears when not in use.

The egg is about 14-16mm in diameter, which is about the size of a 5 cent coin. After 10 days the egg will hatch, the puggle weighing about 231-371mg - it would take 8 newly hatched puggles to weigh the same as a 5 cent coin! The puggle will lick and suck at milk that is excreted from pores in the pouch-flap (there are no teats). The puggle will remain in the pouch until spines develop, at around three months of age, and then it will be left in the nest while the mother echidna forages nearby. As it gets older the puggle will be left for longer periods and the mother will return every 2 to 5 days to feed it. The period of suckling milk is thought to be around 7 months where upon the puggle will leave the nest and be independent. Juveniles are seen around September to November weighing approximately 1 to 2 kilograms. Sexual maturity is from 6 to 12 years of age and the echidna can live up to 50 years in the wild. The echidna can be found throughout all of mainland Australia and Tasmania but distribution is sparse, particularly in arid and built up regions.

Many thanks to Peggy Rismiller- Echidna Guru - for sharing the information in this fact sheet.



adult echidna - Victoria



adult echidna – northern NSW



echidna puggle (pouch bound)
photo – Cheryl Brentson



echidna puggle (spines emerging)