

Friends of Venus Bay Peninsula
Wildlife Discovery Forum, 2 June 2007
Small native animals of Venus Bay Peninsula

What small ground dwelling animals live round VB?
Where do they live?
Are they in danger of extinction?
What can we do to help them survive?

Agile Antechinus

Christopher Johnstone, Ph D student from Monash University, studies the shy and nocturnal *Agile Antechinus* in South Gippsland. He said these small mouse-like animals:

1. Almost certainly live around us at Venus Bay but have little to do with us. They look like little darkish brown shrews, with a long nose and slanted close set ears.
2. Have an opposing toe on their feet - like our thumb - but on the outside of the foot. This makes them fantastic climbers, unlike mice. So if you see a mouse-like creature running up a wall or through the canopy of a tree it's likely an antechinus.
3. Are carnivorous. The *dasyurus* (carnivorous) family of Australian native mammals also includes Tasmanian devils. Antechinus are ground feeders. They eat spiders and beetles for the most part, but are known to scavenge on dead animals including cows.
4. Are semelparous. This means *reproducing only once*: used to describe an organism that reproduces just once during its lifetime, after which its death is inevitable. Examples include most annual and biennial plants. Male antechinus are famous for dying of stress after intensive rutting. Most females produce only one litter and then they die.
5. Are sociable with one another. They start out in communal nest hollows, then the males and females disperse and separate. Adult females use communal 'refuge' nests to get a respite from their young. Antechinus will visit communal nests over a 5 hectare range but seem to feed within 3 hectares. The nests are in hollow trees, stumps, logs and undergrowth.
6. Best identified by their droppings - aka *scats*. These are longer than a mouse's little black scats, mushier, a different colour, and have no smell. The Latin name for mouse derives from the Latin *muscus* meaning musky smell. If you have mice, likely you will smell them.

Chris is studying the impact of habitat fragmentation on their lives. Do they cross roads and streams to find other patches of remnant bush? How much bush does a healthy population need? What kind of bush is best? He may come to VB in October to set overnight traps for small ground animals. If you'd like to be involved in checking the traps with him, please register your interest with **Janet Carey on Ph: 5663 7374.**

Southern Brown Bandicoot

This little, threatened animal is about the size of a small rabbit and often mistaken for one at first glance. A bandicoot has a longish pointed nose and a thin rat like tail. When disturbed, a bandicoot bounds a bit like a kangaroo when at high speed but does still use its front paws, unlike a kangaroo. **Southern Brown Bandicoots are considered nationally endangered under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Conservation Act.**

People who first came to live in Venus Bay said bandicoots were common. They would come close to people in the late afternoon and dusk. They would get into cars. In one story a resident killed a bandicoot because it peed in his car. Nowadays they are rarely seen but we seem to have a few left. A scientific study in 2006 didn't find any unfortunately.

Dr Rolf Willig, a zoologist with the Department of Sustainability and Environment, is part of a network researching southern brown bandicoot populations in areas to the south east of Melbourne including the Mornington Peninsula, Cranbourne Botanical Gardens, and West and South Gippsland. He said the southern brown bandicoot:

1. Is usually found within a 50 km distance of coastal areas. They seem quite adaptable, living in sandy coastal heath lands as well as to the clay soils of lowland forests.
2. Needs dense cover from .5-1 metre high.
3. Eats grubs and beetles, and other invertebrates as well as underground fungi that it finds by digging. If you put a pencil upright in the ground and twist it to make a neat, conical hole about 4-5 centimetres in diameter you'd make a hole like the one a bandicoot makes. Rabbits dig rounder flatter holes.
4. Is under threat from predators; loss of habitat from settlement; inappropriate fire regimes - too much fire and they lose the low cover they need to hide from foxes; lack of knowledge - there's lots of biology we just don't know enough about.
5. Is most under threat from foxes, followed by domestic dogs, cats that will kill young bandicoots, and the car. We know bandicoots are about because they get hit by cars. Car drivers - always check what you hit. If you hit a bandicoot put it in a plastic bag and alert DSE. You can freeze it if there's a bit of a delay.
6. Is also threatened by coastal development and the whittling away of remnant bush. Weeds around the edge attract rabbits and the bush dies back. A new edge is created. Then the cycle repeats until the remnant is gone. Fortunately, bandicoots can survive in very degraded habitat, including blackberries and gorse - anywhere that provides the cover they need. Unfortunately, foxes know this.

Rolf has \$25,000 in 2007 to start a recovery program. He'll use this to find out where the bandicoots are; what habitat they do best in; lift the knowledge of landowners and of the public; and start fox controls.

Venus Bay people can help in two ways. First, share your stories of any encounters with dead or alive bandicoots. Second, if you come across a dead bandicoot put it in a plastic bag out of reach of scavengers, your freezer is ideal. **Contact Helen Macrae on Ph: 03 9381 1436** if you have a story or a specimen. She'll make a record of your experiences and/arrange for the animal to be collected as soon as possible.

Fox Control at Venus Bay

Foxes came to Australia in the 1860s and within 30 years were identified as pests.

Dave Walsh of *Rod Bendings* often goes surf fishing at night and sees up to 20 foxes in the dunes with his spotlight. **Martin Chatfield** of Landcare South Gippsland is an expert on fox & other pest animal management. He told us that in a circle with a radius of 2 kms you can expect to find 50 foxes. In a circle with a radius of 5 kms there'll be 312. If you thought there were a lot of foxes around Venus Bay you were right. There could be more than 300 of them on any given day. In a circle with a radius of 10 kms there'll be 1,256. Foxes are known to travel 20 kms in one night, so it's possible that more than 1000 different foxes hunt and scavenge around our peninsula in any given period.

Foxes are opportunistic eaters. They'll eat anything - fruit, insects, reptiles, carrion, and of course rabbits. They proliferate around human settlements because we leave so many scraps of food around.

The main methods of control are: poison - 1080 baiting - which can also kill other animals such as stray cats and dogs; trapping - hard because they're so cagey; fumigation of dens with carbon monoxide; shooting; fencing them out - expensive; and in time maybe biological controls if a way can be found to make them infertile. And when the fox population drops you may have to control the rabbits through fumigation, poisoning, shooting, removal of blackberries and warren ripping. Chris Challis said before the township rabbits were everywhere. So that might suggest the subdivision brought more foxes; or that the rabbits have succumbed to introduced infections.

Trapping methods of fox control can be used in settled areas such as the First and Second Estates. Some fox control companies use the scent of breeding females to successfully trap males. They also use 'soft jaw' traps which are more humane and won't kill straying pets.

There's a state government funded fox control program in East Gippsland called *Southern Ark* which has been very successful, and small native animal numbers are now increasing.

Bill Gurnett, a Ranger with Parks Victoria, told us that Parks Victoria will work in partnership with Friends of Venus Bay Peninsula on a long term fox control program - if a recent application for funds is successful. For his organisation the **Endangered Hooded Plover** is a big concern because domestic dogs off the leash and foxes are the main destroyers of young chicks. The fox control project will involve a lot of signs on roads and beaches to warn owners of domestic dogs and will be done on freehold and crown land east of the second estate - i.e. Third Estate properties and the coastal park. Methods are yet to be decided. For further information contact **Janet Carey on Ph: 5663 7374**