

BY EMILY AND OLA D'AULAIRE

Lovable and inoffensive, Australia's ace burrower  
is the odd man out in the animal kingdom

**H**E IS a chubby brown creature with the build of a bulldozer and the ambling gait of a bear. His compact, low-slung body is dog-sized, hard as a rock and almost tail-less. His head is bullet-shaped with tiny button eyes, a wide nose and short, erect ears. And with his long, shovel-like claws, he looks every bit the digging machine he is: a 36-kilogram, 106-centimetre-long creature that can burrow out of sight in minutes, leaving a man-sized tunnel in his wake.

This is the wombat, one of the world's largest burrowing animals and one of the lesser known of the Australian marsupials. "The wombat is nature's clown," says Dr. Peg Christian, a veterinary surgeon in Adelaide, who has reared and treated dozens of them. "It has all the parts

that other animals didn't want." The wombat has so many odd parts, in fact, that scientists were unable to categorize it with any other living creature; they had to create two zoological families to cover the complete range of the species: *Vombatus* and *Lasiorhinus*.

Like so much of Australia's unique fauna, the lineage of wombats goes back some 65 million years, to the time when the reign of the dinosaur was waning and a new breed of warm-blooded, fur-bearing animals was beginning to take over. The early ancestors of the wombat were small tree-dwellers who swung from branches with long, monkey-like tails, or gripped the ancient trees with their opposable big toes. The wombat still carries that toe, though the tail degenerated to a

mere rudiment when his forefathers switched from treetops to burrows.

The present day version of the wombat was first spotted by Europeans when *Sydney Cove*, coming from India, was wrecked in Bass Strait in 1797. The crew managed to swim ashore and the castaways survived by eating wombat, later observing that "it resembled pork in flavour, though not in colour, being red and coarse." According to contemporary reports, the survivors were finally rescued, and a wombat specimen, preserved in alcohol, was shipped to London, where it was examined by a gathering of august zoologists. "Curiously divergent," was the reaction. "We've seen nothing like it before."

And, indeed, there is nothing quite like the wombat. There are two branches of the family: hairy-nosed wombats have silky fur and pointed ears; naked-nosed wombats have coarse hair and shorter, round ears. Their closest counterpart in looks is the European beaver, to which they are in no way related. Strangely, the wombat even possesses the chisel-like front teeth of a beaver—teeth that must be trimmed through constant chewing to prevent them growing into long spirals and becoming so useless that the animal starves.

**Razor Sharp.** Thanks to his dental equipment, the wombat is an efficient vegetarian who feeds mainly on grasses, shearing them off neatly at ground level like a lawn-mower.

As he grazes, his five-toed feet leave tracks remarkably like those of a small human. Many a "lost child" has been followed, only to find the trail ends at the entrance of a wombat warren.

The wombat is well adapted for subterranean living. By sitting solidly on his rump and hind legs, digging with his forefeet and thrusting earth to one side, he bores through baked, rocky ground in short-lived but impressive bursts of speed. His torpedo-shaped body and stout muscular legs help him scamper easily through his twisting tunnel networks, which may total 30 metres in length.

The animal's mania for tunneling sometimes has unexpected results. At Kadina, in South Australia, a wombat is credited with unearthing the state's largest copper field. A boundary rider spotted pieces of ore outside the marsupial's burrow and when tests found the ore to be unusually rich, a crew of men arrived with their own burrowing equipment. The result: the profitable Moonta-Wallaroo Mines.

The wombat has almost no natural enemies, thanks to his tough, leathery skin which is nearly impenetrable to teeth. His lower back is further protected with plate armour in near-armadillo fashion—hard layers of dead skin and cartilage fused to underlying bone. Should a dingo or fox be so unwise as to enter a warren, the wombat will brace his legs and push up,

thus crushing the invader's head against the roof of the tunnel.

Retiring and shy in the wild, wombats are easy to tame and quickly learn to follow people around like dogs. "They are intelligent, too," says Tony Carrick, keeper of small mammals at Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo, "and this is unusual for marsupials, who tend to be rather dim-witted." One young wombat that Carrick reared recently slept in bed with him, was house-trained and even learned to open doors and cupboards.

Like all wombats, it had a good sense of smell and of hearing but poor eyesight. Often, it would wait patiently by a pair of Carrick's trousers, which were draped over a chair, unaware that the owner wasn't in them!

"There is one problem about keeping a wombat as a pet," Carrick points out. "You can't have a fine lawn and a wombat too." The animals tend to make any garden look as if it had suffered a bombing attack.

Peg Christian, the Adelaide vet, has reared wombats for years and seems not to mind the damage to her lawn. "Wombats are affectionate creatures, much gentler than the koala, but they need to dig to keep



*Bong, the six-year-old naked-nosed wombat at the London Zoo, is one of only two in Britain; the other is at Paignton Zoo in Devon*

their nails trimmed," she explained, spooning oatmeal to a young female named Donnie—so called because, like Don Bradman, the great cricketer, "she's a good 'bat." Tame wombats learn to come when called and romp like puppies, although, as Dr. Christian observed, "A gambolling 36-kilogram wombat is something like a gambolling elephant."

In the wild, wombats lead live-and-let-live lives, socializing chiefly in the mating season. Then the female builds a chamber at the end of one of the tunnels and, after a brief gestation period, gives birth to a baby about the size of a peanut. This foetal wombat crawls from the mother's birth canal, navigates the hairy abdomen and makes

straight for the pouch, which is tightly closed by a set of circular muscles in drawstring fashion. Inside, the young wombat fastens on to one of two teats where he will remain for six months.

Not fully mature until two and a half years after leaving the pouch, wombats can live for as long as 37 years, according to David Fleay, a Queensland naturalist. They are thus the Methuselahs of marsupials.

When Fleay was a university student, he owned a pet wombat named Essie who waited patiently beneath his desk during classes. In the corridors, however, Essie liked to lumber about nipping students in the legs and then, turning abruptly, charge at top speed towards Fleay. "Wombats have an evident sense of fun," says Fleay.

Unique, lovable and inoffensive, it is ironic that these creatures, so easily attached to man, should have man as their worst enemy. The problem stems from their constant tunnelling, which may undermine graziers' fences, letting rabbits and dingoes in—and sheep out. As a result, wombats are considered pests and have been shot, poisoned and trapped in such numbers that they have been wiped out in many areas. Some people feel they may be facing extinction.

What can be done to save the wombat from the fate of the dodo? "The first step," declares Dr. Chris-

tian, "is to make the public aware of the situation. Indiscriminate killing must stop. Reserves must be established where wombats may rebuild their numbers in peace."

In June 1967, the International Union of Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources placed the hairy-nosed wombat on the list of the world's rare and endangered animals, and several private organizations are taking steps to preserve them. The Natural History Society of South Australia has established the 2,000-hectare Moorunde Wildlife Reserve, exclusively for the preservation of the hairy-nosed wombat. Help has also come from overseas. A group of American businessmen, members of the Chicago Zoological Society, recently donated Rs. 3.8 lakhs in order to buy about 5,200 hectares of former sheepland north-east of Adelaide for a wombat reserve.

These are heartening beginnings, but more reserves are needed. "For too long," says Helge Hergstrom, a spokesman for the Natural History Society of South Australia, "Australians have held the attitude, 'If it moves, shoot it.' The loss of the wombat would be a loss to the whole continent's complex web of life—another hole in the fabric of creation."

Hopefully, through increased public concern, the wombat will weather the onslaught and survive.

REMEMBER, this *planet* is also disposable.—Paul Palme