

# JR FACT FILE



## ECHIDNA

*Tachyglossus aculeatus*



### AT A GLANCE

#### Size:

Thirty to forty five centimetres in length and two to five kilograms in weight.

#### What It Eats:

Ants, termites, grubs, larvae and worms.

#### Life Span:

Lives for around ten years in the wild.

#### Habitat:

Common throughout most of Australia.

#### Threats:

Dingos, eagles and domestic dogs.

#### What Is an Echidna?

Echidnas are Australia's most widely distributed mammal, and along with the platypus, are the world's only egg laying mammals! They are classified as a **monotreme** mammal, which basically means instead of giving birth to live young like marsupial mammals they lay eggs.

Echidnas have a short stocky body which is covered in brown/cream

coloured spines. The spines are actually modified hairs (a bit like your finger nails). Fur between the spines provides warmth and the colour of the fur ranges from a honey colour to dark reddish brown and sometimes even black.

Echidnas have a long snout (or beak) which enables them to break up rotting logs and termite mounds when searching for food.

Due to their shy nature, echidnas are often hard to find. One of the best signs that an echidna is in the area is the mark they make with their snout in the ground when they're searching for food - a small triangular furrow with a round hole at its base.

When frightened, echidnas curl into a ball with their snout and legs tucked beneath them and their sharp spines sticking out. They commonly wedge themselves under a rock or dig down into the ground for extra protection.

#### Where Do Echidna's Live?

Echidnas are found throughout most of Australia including forests and woodlands, rocky areas, snowy mountains, sandy plains, heath, grasslands and semi-arid

environments. They can sometimes be seen slowly wandering along roadsides.

Echidnas don't like to get too hot, so in warmer areas of Australia echidnas tend to hide during the day and come out at night. However in cooler areas such as in many parts of Victoria, they can often be seen out and about during the day.

#### What Does an Echidna Eat?

Echidnas have a long sticky tongue which helps them to collect their diet of small invertebrates including ants, termites, grubs, larvae and worms. They can eat up to two kilograms of termites in one meal!

Echidnas have no teeth so food is crushed between hard pads on the roof of their mouth and on the back of the tongue.

#### A Echidna's Family Life:

Females only breed every three to seven years and not until they're about six years of age. Breeding occurs during winter.

The courtship between the male and female echidnas is quite remarkable. Males queue up behind a female, nose to tail, forming long trains that

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## FASCINATING FACTS:

- YOUNG ECHIDNA'S ARE CALLED PUGGLES!
- THE ECHIDNA'S COURTSHIP INVOLVES LOVE SICK MALE ECHIDNAS QUEUING UP BEHIND A FEMALE, NOSE TO TAIL, FORMING LONG TRAINS.

can include up to eleven echidnas, although three or four is more common. These trains can last up to six weeks before mating eventually occurs. The males will sometimes make advances by nudging the female's tail or side with their nose. When the female signals that she's ready to mate the males dig a trench beside and often right around her, competing with each other until only one remains.

The female echidna lays an egg 22 days after mating. It transfers the egg to the pouch where it hatches 10 days later. At only 1.5 centimetres long (about the size of a jellybean), the young (known as a puggle) already has front legs with tiny claws that can hold onto the mother's pouch hair. The egg is usually in the far end of the pouch so the tiny echidna must travel around six times its own body length to get its first drink of milk. The mother doesn't have teats, so the baby clings to specialised hairs within the pouch where it suckles milk oozing from the mother's mammary glands. Young puggles grow incredibly fast and their mothers spend a lot of time foraging for food to keep up the milk supply.

Puggles begin to grow spines and outgrow the pouch when they're about seven weeks old. The puggle is then transferred to a nursery burrow where it spends about five months. The mother returns to the burrow about once every five to ten days to

feed it. In one feeding a puggle can drink up to 40% of its body weight in milk!

At seven months old, the weaned puggle is left totally on its own. Unlike most mammals, the mother will leave and even avoid them. This is reflective of the echidna's character as they tend to be solitary, elusive animals. They have highly sensitive hearing and a good sense of smell and use these senses to avoid unwelcome company - even of their own kind.

Echidnas generally live for ten years in the wild, but have been known to live up to 45 years. Predators include dingos, eagles and dogs.

## Want to Know More?

[www.abc.net.au/science/scribblygum](http://www.abc.net.au/science/scribblygum)

[www.arazpa.org.au](http://www.arazpa.org.au)

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