

Wild dog facts

Biology, ecology and behaviour

A 'wild dog' is any free-ranging dog without an owner. This includes domestic dogs that are homeless, dingoes, and hybrids of the two. These dogs are scheduled restricted matter under state legislation. Domestic dogs may also behave like wild dogs when they are unsupervised or unrestrained. In a Perth study most of the 1400 dogs involved in livestock attacks were friendly and approachable family pets—very few were aggressive to people.

Dingoes are native to Asia. It is believed that they were domesticated 10 000 years ago from Indian or Arabian wolves. It is thought they arrived in Australia 3500-4000 years ago. In settled areas, the abundance of feral domestic dogs has resulted in hybridisation with dingoes.

Wild dogs weigh between 8–38 kg, depending on the breed of the parent dogs (dingoes weigh 12–15 kg). Their coats can be yellow, black, white, brown or any variation or combination of these. Some wild dogs may have larger heads in proportion to their body size, and larger canine teeth than domestic dogs. Wild dogs can live for up to 12 years, although most live only 5–7 years.

Food, water and shelter

Wild dogs can be found on grazing land, on the fringes of towns, in rural-residential estates, or in forests and woodlands—anywhere there is food, water and shelter. Many of the changes that people make to the landscape make more of these things available.

Wild dogs feed opportunistically. That is, they will eat whatever is easiest to obtain when they are hungry. They scavenge and will eat animal or vegetable matter, will hunt for live prey, or will eat road-killed animals, dead livestock, and scraps from compost heaps or rubbish tips.

Wild dogs mostly take small prey such as rabbits, possums, rats, wallabies and bandicoots. However, when hunting in packs, they will take larger animals such as kangaroos and goats. The young of larger livestock such as cattle and horses are also vulnerable to attack. Their choice of primary prey species depends on what is abundant and easy to catch. They usually hunt in the early morning and early evening, when they locate individual prey animals by sight, approach them silently, and then pursue them. A fleeing animal will encourage attack.

Wild dogs rest during the day, often not far from water, and their travel routes to and from resting or den sites may be well defined. Their tracks depend on the size and weight of the animal; however, they are usually larger and more rounded than those of a fox.

Their home ranges vary considerably and are influenced by the availability of food. Wild dogs that depend primarily on rubbish may remain in the immediate vicinity of the source, while those that depend on livestock or wild prey may travel up to 20 km.

Wild dogs are usually timid and do not often stray into urban areas unless they are encouraged. However, those with a recent domestic background or regular close contact with people may approach dwellings or people. Wild dogs are attracted to places where they can scavenge food, and deliberately or inadvertently feeding them can make them dependent on humans. This is a source of many conflicts between people and wild dogs.

Social structure

Wild dingoes in remote areas live in packs, often of 3–12 animals, with a dominant (alpha) male and female controlling breeding. Packs establish territories (home ranges) which do not usually overlap. The size of a territory seems to be directly related to the availability of food in the area. In pastoral areas where there are regular wild dog control programs and where hybridisation is prevalent, social structures may differ and packs may be less stable. These changes are not well documented or understood.

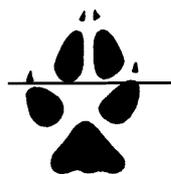
Wild dogs, particularly dingoes, visit the edge of their territory regularly. This checking of the boundaries is termed the dog's 'beat'. Knowing a wild dog's beat helps identify the best place to conduct control measures.

Breeding

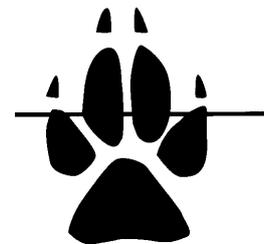
Wild dogs are often heard howling during the breeding season which, for pure dingoes, occurs once a year, mostly between April and June. Hybrid dogs have two oestrus cycles each year, although they may not always successfully raise young in each cycle.

After a nine-week gestation, four to six pups are born in a den that provides protection from the elements and other animals. Dens may be in soft ground under rocks, logs or other debris, or in logs or other hollows. Pups are suckled for 4–6 weeks and weaned at four months.

Pups become independent of their parents when they are 6–2 months old, with those becoming independent at the later time having a higher rate of survival. Increased food supplied by people also enables more pups to survive to maturity.



Fox front foot track



Wild dog front foot track

Diagram showing difference in fox and wild dog tracks

Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or by contacting Biosecurity Queensland (call 13 25 23 or visit our website at www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au).

