

# Part of the pack

Australia's iconic Dingo is much more than meets the eye. We delve into their history, personality and conservation efforts.

STORY: EMMA LAGOON & PHOTOS: DINGO DEN AND PETER WILSON



When you think of a dingo, the image of golden fur, pointy ears and sharp features come to mind. But dingoes actually come in a range of other colours too!

You'd be forgiven if you thought the iconic Australian dingo is a dog. In fact, there are many differences between *Canis dingo* and our companions we have at home. We chat to Dingo Den Animal Rescue to learn more about these intelligent creatures.

## THE DINGO'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIA

Can you believe that the dingo has been Australia's apex terrestrial predator for up to 20,000 years? Impressive! Genetic studies indicate they migrated from central Asia across land bridges that joined Australia in the last ice age.

Josh Said from Dingo Den Animal Rescue explains the dingo's vital role in Australian ecology, "The dingo's role in Australian biodiversity is irreplaceable. Dingoes are the only native terrestrial animal that can keep numbers of large herbivores like kangaroos balanced. Keeping numbers of large herbivores

balanced allows for the regrowth of vegetation that supplies other animals with food and shelter, and also prevents erosion of soils and sand around lakes, rivers and beaches. Without the dingo, vegetation becomes over-consumed by herbivores and species of both native flora and fauna struggle to procreate. Eventually many species of plants, marsupials, mammals, reptiles and birds become extinct."

You may think that dingoes would be similar to feral cats and kill small marsupials and birds, but in fact they actually hunt larger prey as a pack.

"Unlike foxes and cats, dingoes band together in packs to hunt prey larger than themselves. This allows smaller animals that are otherwise heavily targeted by feral cats and foxes to breed. The dingo removes the feral predators that hunt our natives, as well as the feral herbivores that compete with our natives for food, shelter and territory. By

allowing the dingo to fulfil its natural role as Australia's apex terrestrial predator, many of our native species can be saved from the negative impacts of the feral pests," Josh explains.

The extensive eradication of the dingo since European settlement has impacted on native plant and species extinction across the country. The introduction of foreign animals to Australia has greatly impacted our biodiversity. From toads, foxes and rabbits, the list is extensive.

Josh says, "Studies conducted in central Australia found that just one feral cat was responsible for consuming over 30 native animals in just one night (Arid Recovery). With approximately 18 million feral cats in Australia, it is not surprising that over 150 native species have become extinct since European settlement, with many others like the Bilby and the Eastern Barred Bandicoot soon to follow."

So the answer to our pest populations impacting our native animals may actually lie with the dingo. "Dingoes have been recorded to successfully eradicate feral cat and fox populations within their territories, and effectively manage numbers of feral rabbits, hares, goats, pigs and kangaroos. This has resulted in the regrowth of endangered native vegetation, and the return of native animals like the Burrowing Bettong and Spinifex Hopping Mouse," Josh explains.

## DISTINGUISHING DINGOES FROM DOGS

Dingoes are classed as their own unique species, *Canis dingo*. There are distinct behavioural and anatomical differences between your average lap-dog and dingoes in the outback.

Josh elaborates, "They don't bark like a dog but howl, chortle, yelp, whine, growl, chatter, snort, cough and bleat. They come in three core colours – black, tan (yellow/ginger/red) and white. Sub colours are sable, and cream.

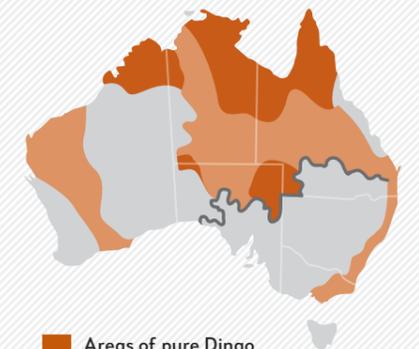
"Dingoes have a broad, natural diet including fresh meat, fish, eggs and carrion. Their stomach acidity is much higher than a dog's and so they are able to process meats with a high level of bacteria that would make a dog ill."

While your loyal companion is out at the dog park making new friends, dingoes actually have a strict social hierarchy and regularly mate for life. "Female dingoes have one annual breeding cycle, March to June and have between four to five pups. Their breeding strategy is very different to dogs. Males participate in weaning and teaching of young," Josh says.

The next time you're washing your pooch at the hydrobath, you'll be interested to know that dingoes actually lack body odour! Josh ►

## Dingo 101

*Canis dingo*



- Areas of pure Dingo
- Dingo-hybrids and feral dogs
- Rare/absent
- ~ Dingo fence

**DIET:** Carnivore

**COLOUR:** There are a number of naturally occurring colour variations of dingoes including: yellow, ginger, sable, black, cream and white. Ginger is most common and found throughout the Australian mainland. Sandy yellow dingoes are typically found along coastlines with sable and black coloured dingoes in heavily forested areas. White and cream dingoes are generally found in alpine areas.

**LIFESPAN:** 10 years in the wild and up to 20 years in captivity.

**WEIGHT:** 13–23 kg

**BREEDING:** Females breed once a year between March to June and can have 4–5 pups. All members of the pack will help raise the pups and usually only the alpha male and female of the pack will breed. Dingoes are fully grown at 7 months with males reaching sexual maturity at 1 and females at 2 years of age.

**CONSERVATION STATUS:** Vulnerable



Orphaned dingo pups learn valuable skills and are rehabilitated with the help from core pack members at Dingo Den.

Dingoes have a level of immunity to paralysis ticks and some snake venom.

## About Dingo Den Animal Rescue

The inspiration for Dingo Den Animal Rescue was personal for Josh Said. He devised a concept to create a fully accredited national dingo rescue service, supported by a network of adopters, foster carers and volunteers.

Josh worked diligently to transform a humble community initiative into a national charity, while offering support to the many concerned dingo advocates and carers that were asking for help.

Josh renovated his half acre property into a dingo sanctuary and an education and training facility for local community members and volunteers. By the start of Spring 2015, Dingo Den Animal Rescue was a registered charity and had rehomed a dozen dingoes and assisted in the rehabilitation of three dozen more, while supporting the construction of Sydney's very first dingo sanctuary.

Dingo Den is looking to expand their foster care network across QLD, NSW and VIC. If you'd like to support them, you can apply to become a foster carer via [dingoden.net](http://dingoden.net).



► also explains that they have “No natural health issues and have a level of immunity to paralysis ticks and some snake venom.”

Anatomically, dingoes are actually much more flexible in their movement than dogs. “They can rotate their wrists, subluxate their hips and rotate their head 180 degrees. These adaptations aid hunting and moving through burrows,” Josh says.

Ever noticed how cats use the length of their whiskers to determine if they can fit their whole body through a gap? A dingo's head actually does that too! Josh explains, “A dingo's skull is the broadest part of its anatomy. This assures the dingo that its body will follow its head through any obstacle, no matter how tight the squeeze!”

Everything about a dingo reflects their wild and natural heritage; driven by hunting, procreation, territory and family. “Dingoes have much larger and sharper teeth than dogs that are spread more sparsely throughout the mouth. They can open their jaw approximately 140 degrees. Jaw pressure is far more than a dog of the same size,” Josh says.

Dingoes can also travel up to 50 km a day. And if you think you can outrun one, keep trying! Dingoes can run 70 km per hour and also climb trees.

### THE JOURNEY OF A DINGO

The RSPCA works with Dingo Den to help stray dingoes find second chances.

Recently Gryffin, a young dingo pup, was found in Bundaberg and transferred to the Brisbane RSPCA at Wacol.

The RSPCA team identify dingoes that come into care by their appearance and traits so they can be transferred as quickly as possible to rescue – to be with ‘their own kind’ for rehabilitation. The RSPCA vets assist medically where possible and if old enough, pups that come into care are desexed prior to going to rescue.

In October, little Gryffin made the trip down to Dingo Den Animal Rescue in New South Wales to start a new journey.

Josh talks about his development since arriving in their care, “Gryffin has progressed wonderfully at the sanctuary. When he arrived he was a little unsure of some people, and was often aggressive with other pups and could be aggressive with handlers when required to take direction. His fur was dull and frizzy.

“He has grown rapidly on a dingo-balanced raw diet, most visible in his fur which is now thick, smooth and shiny. He is now well-balanced and patient with other dingo pups and respectful to adult dingoes. He is walking wonderfully on lead and enjoys time with all of our volunteers. He is no longer aggressive or snappy in temperament. He is a beautiful pup and one of my favourites at the sanctuary, and is available for adoption.”

Not all dingoes that head to the sanctuary are adopted in to special

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homes. There are some permanent dingo residents at the sanctuary. Josh explains, “We have a core pack of 12 dingoes that will be at the sanctuary for life. They play a crucial role in our rescue service at the sanctuary; rehabilitating orphan puppies that we take into care. These orphans are the collateral damage of dingo culling programs whose parents and other pack members have been destroyed.”

So in essence, the permanent residents provide a lending paw as foster carers to orphaned pups. “The pack provides the pups with love, security, training and mentoring while acting as a bridge between their wild, fearful instincts and embracing humanity. We are able to work effectively with these traumatised puppies thanks to the example that our core pack displays to them i.e.

Dingo pup Gryffin was found in Bundaberg. After a short stay at the RSPCA Queensland campus in Wacol, he was transferred to Dingo Den in NSW, where he is now available for adoption.

that not all humans are dangerous and the ones at the sanctuary can be trusted and loved,” Josh says.

The core pack are also advocates for all dingoes across Australia: meeting visitors at the sanctuary, engaging with



the public at community events, modelling for photoshoots and documentaries, and joining the rescue team in media interviews.

Depending on the individual's experience and personality, dingoes that head to the sanctuary are placed on health care plans and rehabilitated accordingly. Sometimes this can take several weeks, months or even years. Once dingoes are rehabilitated they are humanised to a level similar to your couch potato at home; this increases their chance of finding a suitable, specialised forever home with ongoing support from the sanctuary.

### DINGOES AS PETS

Josh talks about the Australian sentiment towards dingoes, “The public are usually very positive to the work that we do with our dingoes. When we take our dingoes out into the community, many people are fascinated by them and excited to meet a dingo in real life. They are surprised to see them lead trained and behaving beautifully. When we share about the human threats to the dingo species most people are sympathetic and want laws changed to protect them before they become extinct. People typically fall in love with our dingoes and wish to help our service through volunteering, fundraising, sponsorships, adoptions, foster caring or advocacy programs.”

Josh reflects when people ask him what dingoes are like as companions, their behaviour, intelligence and diet, as well as myths surrounding aggression and human interaction. “They are delighted to learn that they are social animals that can get on very well with dogs, and are usually big lovers of children and are caring and protective over the families they are part of.” ■