

Short-beaked Echidna

Tachyglossus aculeatus

What do echidnas look like?

Together with the platypus, echidnas are the world's only monotremes, or egg-laying mammals. The animals vary in colour depending on their location. In the northern, hotter regions, echidnas are light brown, but they become darker with thicker hair further south. In Tasmania, they are black. All echidnas have spines covering the back of their short, stocky bodies.



The echidna's snout is between 7 and 8 cm long, and is stiffened to enable the animal to break up logs and termite mounds when searching for food. An echidna's mouth is located on the underside of its snout, at the end. Adult echidnas vary in size, ranging from 35 to 53 cm in length. Males weigh about 6 kilograms, while females weigh about 4.5 kilograms.

The short, stout limbs of an echidna are well suited for scratching and digging in the soil. The front feet have five flattened claws which are used to dig forest litter, burrow and tear open logs and termite mounds. The hind feet point backwards, and help to push soil away when the animal is burrowing. Two of the claws on each back foot are used for grooming. An echidna's tail is short, stubby and hairless underneath.

Where do they live?

There are two species of echidnas, one confined to the highlands of New Guinea, and one which lives in Australia and New Guinea. The smaller species (the short-beaked echidna) is found throughout Australia.



For most of the year echidnas are solitary animals, although each animal's territory is large and often overlaps with that of other echidnas. Echidnas are usually found among rocks, in hollow logs and in holes among tree roots. During rainy or windy weather they often burrow into the soil or shelter under bushes and tussocks of grass.



What do they eat?

With a keen sense of smell, an echidna uses its long snout to search for food and catches the prey with its long, sticky tongue. Because it has no teeth, it grinds its food between its tongue and the bottom of its mouth. Termites are the preferred food, which is why the animal is often called the ‘spiny anteater’.

Breeding and Lifecycle

Being monotremes, echidnas produce young from eggs that are hatched outside their body. During the breeding season, a female echidna develops a simple pouch into which she lays a single egg. The egg takes about 10 days to hatch, producing a young animal which measures around 1.45 cm and weighs as little as 380 milligrams. The young echidna is carried around in its mother’s pouch for about three months during which the female will sometimes drop it into a burrow for protection.

By the time the infant leaves the pouch, its spines have started to develop, but it still stays close to its mother and continues to suckle milk through specialised pores in the skin inside her pouch. Although they begin to eat termites and ants soon after leaving the pouch, young echidnas are often not fully weaned until they are several months old.

Echidnas have been known to live for as long as 16 years in the wild, but generally their life span is thought to be under 10 years.

Protecting themselves

The echidna is a shy animal and would rather retreat than fight if disturbed. When frightened it will curl into a ball, with its snout and legs tucked beneath it and its sharp spines sticking out. It will wedge itself beneath rocks or burrow straight down into soft soil, to escape predators such as dogs, eagles and dingos.

Like the platypus, the male echidna has a hollow spur on its back leg. While a male platypus can use this spur to inject poison into would-be attackers, echidnas do not have this ability.

