



Department of Agriculture and Food

# Farmnote



## Dingo

### Farmnote 133/2000



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The dingo or wild dog (*Canis familiaris dingo*) is found across most of Western Australia. It is subject to management programs in grazing areas because of its predation of livestock.

## Name

'Dingo' was the name recorded in the early days of European settlement in New South Wales for the 'dogs' belonging to the local Aborigines. 'Warrigal' is one of the central Australian Aboriginal names for the dingo.

Although the dingo was classified in the same species as the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*), it was probably never exposed to the processes of artificial selection that eventually produced the modern domestic dog. A suggested change in scientific name to *Canis lupus dingo* reflects the origin of dingoes from wolves (*Canis lupus*) and the separation of dingoes from domestic dogs.

# Origin

The dingo is a primitive dog that evolved from the Indian or Pallid wolf and became widespread throughout southern Asia between 6000 and 10,000 years ago. It is now believed that dingoes were introduced into Australia about 4000 years ago by Asian seafarers, rather than during an Aboriginal migration.

# Description

Dingoes are anatomically very similar to domestic dogs with which they are able to interbreed. They are usually sandy red or ginger in colour, with white feet and a white tail tip. White dingoes and black and tan individuals are also found. Patchy colouration or brindling is a sign of hybridisation with domestic dogs.

# Occurrence

Dingoes are found through much of the state. They occur where there are suitable supplies of food and water, and where they can survive man's attempts to reduce their numbers. They are absent from most of the closely settled farming areas of the south-west, though may still be found in some forested areas.

# Habits

The diet of dingoes is flexible; they tend to eat whatever food is available. In many parts of Western Australia, kangaroos and euros feature prominently in the diet. Stomach analysis has also revealed insects, carrion, rabbits and some relatively rare native species.

Dingoes are highly social animals. They live in well-defined home ranges in groups of 2 to 10 or more, but members of the group are seldom seen all together at any one time. Most of the time they form small, flexible sub-groups. Dingoes sometimes hunt individually but may cooperate when chasing larger and more mobile prey such as kangaroos. Large packs or groups of dingoes are seldom seen in areas where they are subject to control by man, or where the food supply does not favour larger groups operating as a social unit.

Individual dingoes sometimes leave their home range, probably due to social pressures. These dispersing dingoes will travel until they find suitable unclaimed territory in which to settle.

# Life history

Dingoes differ from domestic dogs in their breeding cycle. Female dingoes have only one well defined breeding season each year; they come on heat between March and May and whelp between June and August. Litters are rarely born at other times. Sperm production in the male is also subject to seasonal fluctuations with few viable sperm produced in summer.

There is a high mortality rate among young dingoes but those that survive may live to six or seven years. In undisturbed social groups usually only the dominant females' pups are raised each year and this tends to limit numbers. When group hierarchies are disrupted, for example, by control measures,

more females may raise litters, leading to increased numbers of juvenile dingoes.

## Problems caused by dingoes

Dingoes kill and eat mainly according to need in unstocked areas. But when they move into sheep paddocks most begin to harass, bite and kill sheep, often without eating any. This behaviour appears to be a response to an abundant and panicky prey in flight. Such attacks and harassment may cause severe losses to pastoralists.

Dingoes usually attack rams from the rear, most likely to avoid the ram's horns, which are used for defence. Sometimes the testicles are bitten off live rams.

Groups or packs of dingoes also attack and kill young cattle. Calf losses to dingo predation are reported to be significant in some areas.

Dingoes can act as vectors for dog diseases such as distemper and mange. They could also be vectors for the rabies virus, should it ever enter Australia.

## Legal status

Under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, dingoes in Western Australia must be controlled in agricultural and pastoral areas but they are left undisturbed in the rest of the state. Dingoes are classified as unprotected native fauna under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*.

## Control

Agriculture Western Australia's policy is to control dingo numbers in and near livestock grazing areas. Pastoralists are responsible for dingo control on their own properties. Techniques include baiting with meat poisoned with 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate) and to a lesser extent, trapping and shooting. Control work is carried out by Agriculture Western Australia on Crown land close to pastoral leases, predominantly those carrying sheep. Complete removal of dingoes on sheep stations is aimed at preventing harassment and killing of stock. On cattle stations, control work is directed towards reducing dingo numbers to minimise the risks of groups attacking calves.

Deliberate biological control of dingoes is unlikely to succeed, as dog diseases such as distemper, parvovirus, and mange are already present in the population. Also, domestic dogs would be susceptible to any introduced organism.

## Further reading

- Farmnote 124/2000 '[Recognising wild dog and dingo predation](#)'

## Further information

For further information on dingoes, contact any office of the Department of Agriculture.

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