

Antechinus

Housing and Care

by Norma Henderson



Yellow-footed Antechinus *Antechinus flavipes*

Photo Tom Tarrant

Yellow-footed Antechinus *Antechinus flavipes*

This is the most widespread of the antechinuses and has a slate grey head grading to orange-brown on the sides, belly, rump and feet, white patches on the throat and belly and a pale ring around the eye and a black tail tip. The head is long and pointed with a black muzzle tip, bulging eyes and thin crinkled ears. The hind feet are broad. They have ridged pads on the underside of the feet which enable it to climb well and grip tightly as the run along the underside of branches. Their weigh ranges from 21-80 grams.

Brown Antechinus *Antechinus stuartii*

This antechinus is greyish brown above and paler below. It has a lightly haired tail, the same length as the body or shorter. The head is long with a pointed snout, long whiskers, fairly large ears with a notch in the margin, and attractive brown eyes. Their front teeth consist of four pairs of small sharp incisors. They have pads on the soles of their feet, which are climbing adaptations, and the first toe on the hind foot opposes the others. If food is scarce they can preserve energy by becoming torpid for a few hours at a time. Their weight ranges from 17-71g.

Although these little creatures look similar to the feral mouse, there are obvious differences - they lack the pungent odours associated with mice, and they also lack the enlarged incisors (front teeth) of the mouse.



Antechinus skull

Habitat

The yellow-footed antechinus lives in a diverse range of areas from lush tropical vegetation to dry mulga country, open forests and swamps.

They nest together in hollows, in a roughly constructed nest lined with leaves and other vegetation. They are found in various vegetation types wherever there is dense undergrowth, where they spend most of the time on the ground but also climb into shrubs and trees.

Antechinuses have adapted to human habitation (but not their pets) and are often found setting up home in peoples' houses. They can run upside down along exposed beams, sideways across curtains and underneath floor rugs. Their jerky, nervous predisposition have marked them as the clowns of the marsupial fraternity. Deserted holiday homes and caravans are a favourite nest site and at holiday time are found and brought to wildlife carers to relocate.

Behaviour and life cycle

These small carnivorous marsupials sleep by day in a nest in a natural crevice. At night they burrow through the leaf litter in search of insects, spiders and other small arthropods and vertebrates. Where ground cover and leaf litter are sparse, they may seek food in the trees. They pounce on their prey, killing quickly with bites to the head and neck, leaving the skin of the small mammals turned inside-out. They eat cockroaches, beetles, and spiders and even kill and eat small mice and birds. The yellow-footed antechinus also eats flowers and nectar. They utter high-pitched squeaks if threatened.

Brown antechinus juveniles



Breeding takes place just once a year and produce around 6-10 joeys, none of which will breed until they are about 11 months old. The young are carried in a kind of open pouch for about 5 weeks, attached to the exposed nipples. During this time they are dragged around by their mother and have to hang on tight. When they are too big to drag around they are left in the nest made up of dry plant material, and are suckled by the mother till about 7 weeks of age.

The astonishing thing about their life cycle, though, is that after they mate, the males die! Because individuals in a population all mate at the same time, there is a period of months after breeding where the only male antechinus around are the tiny babies dangling from their mother's teats. Females, on the other hand, live to breed a second year and occasionally a third time. At this time sick and dying males might be brought into care. It is best to put them into a safe quiet spot and let nature take its course.

Housing and feeding in care

Babies unfurred

At 3 grams they should be kept wrapped in a cotton liner inside a small woollen beanie on a heat pad. They can be fed Wombaroo 0.7 Kangaroo milk, Biolac or Divetilact through a small rubber tube on the end of a syringe. However they suck very strongly and are in danger of inhaling the milk as it bubbles from their nose. It is best to teach them to lap the milk from the end of the tube, or from a dish that is held under their chin. Feed them one at a time by taking each antechinus from the first bag - tie the others in, feed the individual and tie it into the second bag. Always remember to tie them in, they will disappear otherwise! Stay calm and relaxed. Feed them every 3 hours in the beginning. The rule of thumb is to allow each animal to take as much as it wants at each feed. By the time they are ready for the aquarium/vivarium, they will lap from a small bottle top.



Yellow-footed antechinus 12g

Juveniles from 6grams

At 6 grams the antechinus will be about 35 days of age. Weights will differ both by species and sex - the males weight more than the females. Rule of thumb is that once their eyes are open they can be housed in a medium sized plastic vivarium with secure vented top. This should be placed partly on a heat pad with a few layers of towel between the pad and the vivarium to provide bottom warmth. They seem to need warmth 24 hours a day until about day 50. Continue to provide heat at night until about day 60 and keep them in the quietest part of the house.

Brown antechinus 6g



Hang a small woollen beanie, with the opening on the side, from the warm corner of the vivarium and cover this part of the vivarium with a towel for privacy. In real life they hang from the underside of the mother. Interestingly, instead of going to the bottom of the beanie like a possum they migrate to the top corner and hang on as if they were hanging onto the underneath of the mother. In care they will migrate to the top corner of the beanie. They generally use one corner of the vivarium for their toilet, making cleaning easy and the pouch will be kept dry. Line the floor with soft paper towels and shredded leaves and bark. Later a small box can be added for a nest site.

Once in the vivarium, offer water in a small lid and soaked good quality dog kibble, and minced meat in another small lid. Fresh moist compost-type earth with jumping things and the odd small worm is added to the leaf litter along with some grass each evening when renewing the substrate. Add a grevillea flower, and in another small lid offer some fruit salad consisting of a tiny wedge of orange, apple, banana, grape etc. with insectivore sprinkled over it. As they develop, offer mealworms, crickets and moths. These can be pulled apart at first then wounded until they are able to catch the live insects.

Adults

Adults can be housed in a box, with plenty of leaf litter on the floor and with suitable logs for exercise and a box/hollow log for nesting. Whatever your chosen arrangement it is essential that the mesh be very small and the lid very secure.

Adult males coming into care at the end of winter are often in their last stages of life after exhaustive mating. They can be housed in a very comfortable, quiet spot and allowed to die peacefully.

Release

When the antechinus are catching and eating live food, leaving milk untouched and generally behaving in a self sufficient manner they are ready to release. This will be at around 90 days. Because of their small size it is easy to keep these animals in care longer than necessary. Their life spans are very short, so let them go free at the earliest opportunity.

Remove the nest box. before dusk if it is occupied and place box with inhabitants in a well protected area with dense undergrowth. Leave food near the box for the first few days. However, generally they immediately and run through the leaf litter and disappear.

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