

## PREFACE

When the revised edition of *The Wombat* was published in 1996 I bemoaned the fact that wombats were the 'poor relations' when it comes to scientific research. Thankfully, this has been rectified to a certain extent and much more is now known about the secret lives of the three species of wombats. In this book I have tried to include this new information. Much of the text deals with the bare-nosed wombat but wherever possible I have added information on the two hairy-nosed species.

Early in my investigations in the 1970s I discovered that wombats are not easy animals to study. Much of their lives are spent underground, and even when they are active above ground it is usually dark or nearly so. They are also extremely wary and have an excellent sense of smell and acute hearing, but I found that if I stood absolutely still, downwind, they would be unaware of my presence. Following them through the forest undergrowth so that I was close enough to see what they were doing required much patience and stealth and was often unsuccessful. There is also considerable difficulty in observing social interactions between animals that spend most of their time either alone or deliberately avoiding one another.

Field studies of mammals, particularly nocturnal ones, are usually carried out by first catching or trapping the animals and tagging them in some way, so that individuals can be recognised at a distance or when retrapped. Radio-collars or similar devices are often attached to some of the animals and their movements monitored by radio-tracking. Much of the information about wombats has been gathered in this way, and, more recently, by remote censusing, which involves genetic research.

Not having the resources or the expertise needed to obtain and use any of these methods in my studies of wombats, I relied on knowing the wombats so well that I could identify them, even in poor light. This is surprisingly easy – every wombat has enough individual characteristics that can be used to distinguish it from any other wombat, such as coat colour, scars on various parts of the body, size and face shape. It is also often possible to determine the sex of a wombat without having to trap it. Females with large pouch young or young at heel are easily identified, while males can usually be spotted when they sit down to scratch, as the large scrotum is often visible at that time. The occasional use of night-vision equipment and, more often, a red-light torch, helped my observations