

16. Dingoes

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1 TAXONOMY, DISTRIBUTION AND BIOLOGY

The dingo, *Canis lupus dingo*, is closely related to the domestic dog, *Canis lupus familiaris*, both being subspecies of the grey wolf, *Canis lupus*. In general terms, the veterinary management of the dingo is based on that of the domestic dog. This chapter will focus on aspects specific to the dingo.

Dingoes are found wild in Australia and parts of south-east Asia (Corbett 2001). They are thought to have evolved from the Indian wolf, *Canis lupus pallipes*, 6–10 000 yr ago and probably arrived in Australia about 4000–5000 yr ago with south-east Asian seafarers (Savolainen et al. 2004). The dingo is Australia's largest terrestrial predator, is distributed over most of the mainland and can be found in diverse environments from tropical to alpine, and coastal to arid inland. However, it has never reached Tasmania. European arrival allowed great increase in dingo numbers due to pastoralism and the use of artesian bores. As a result of dingo predation on livestock a dingo fence was built, that has partly excluded the dingo from the main sheep and cereal-growing areas of south-eastern Australia. The dingo is afforded protection in some parts of its range (e.g. national parks), while in other parts it is considered a pest and, along with other wild dogs, is subject to control measures. Poisoning with 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate) in shallow-buried or helicopter-dropped meat baits is the main method of control. Targeted padded-jaw traps, exclusion fencing, opportunistic shooting and livestock guard dogs are also used (Fleming

et al. 2001). Increasing hybridisation with domestic dogs, however, poses the biggest threat to conservation of the dingo (Corbett 2001; Fleming et al. 2001; Woodall et al. 1996) and it has recently been listed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Corbett 2004).

The dingo is held in zoos and animal parks in Australia and overseas, particularly in Europe and North America. In New South Wales it can be kept as a pet without a licence (Corbett 2004; Davis 2001; Fleming et al. 2001; Oakman 2001). However, dingoes are by nature highly sensitive, wary and elusive. Even when well-socialised with humans they remain independent and unpredictable, and liable to revert to aggressive behaviour when frightened or threatened. For this reason, they do not generally make good pets. Dingoes can live for 12–14 yr in captivity, but rarely live longer than 10 yr in the wild (Corbett 2001).

2 ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

The dingo is a medium sized short-coated dog with a bushy tail. Average shoulder height is about 60 cm. Body weight ranges from 10–20 kg, with males being heavier than females. Dingoes from arid central Australia tend to be smaller than those from cooler or tropical areas. Skull measurements, body size and coat colour show a cline between tropical, alpine and desert dingoes. Ginger with white points is the predominant coat colour, but black, black and tan, and white dingoes also occur. While these coat colours can occur in domestic dogs