

From 35 to 400: The 40-Year Resurrection of the Northern Hairy-Nosed Wombat

In the early 1980s, a small group of scientists and conservationists faced a dark realization. The northern hairy-nosed wombat, a burrowing marsupial that once ranged across much of eastern Australia, had dwindled to just about 35 individuals, all found in a single location in central Queensland. A species that had survived for millions of years was suddenly hanging by a thread. In an effort to save the northern hairy-nosed wombat, the next four decades became a period of focused scientific research, tenacious fieldwork, and cautious optimism. Has it worked? While the species' recovery remains fragile, we can say with some confidence: so far, so good.

A Perilous Low Point

The northern hairy-nosed wombat (*Lasiorninus krefftii*) is a stout, burrowing herbivore roughly the size of a medium dog, with coarse, grayish-brown fur and a distinctive hair-covered nose—hence its name. Unlike its more common southern cousin, this wombat is highly specialized for digging extensive burrow systems in sandy soils and feeds almost exclusively on native grasses. It is also one of the rarest marsupials on Earth.



The northern hairy-nosed wombat is one of the rarest marsupials in the world.

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By 1982, the northern hairy-nosed wombat existed in only one place on Earth: Epping Forest National Park in central Queensland, Australia. Before European settlement, the species lived widely across Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria. However, extensive habitat loss, competition with grazing livestock, drought, and predation by wild dogs and dingoes had driven it to near extinction.

That solitary group faced what conservationists refer to as the ‘single-population problem.’ When an entire species exists in just one concentrated location, it becomes vulnerable to random catastrophes such as disease outbreaks, fire, or extreme drought. If one of these disasters were to wipe out this group, it would mean the extinction of the entire species. Additionally, genetic issues like inbreeding also loom large for tiny populations, reducing resilience and long-term viability.

Securing the Last Refuge

Recognizing the peril, officials took decisive action. In 1971, they secured the last known habitat by establishing Epping Forest as a scientific national park. That was a great start, but legal protection alone wasn’t going to be enough. Wild canines, especially dingoes, were killing wombats. Around 2000-2001, the wombat population had increased to an estimated 133 individuals, but about 10 percent of that population was lost to dingoes during this time.



Wild dingoes are natural predators that once posed a serious threat to northern hairy-nosed wombats.

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In response, conservation teams built a predator-proof fence more than 12 miles long around the wombat habitat to keep dingoes and wild dogs out. It was a game-changer. It stopped

many of the threats from outside and created a safer, managed zone where wombats could dig burrows, forage, and raise young with fewer hazards.

Not only did the predator-proof fence keep the canines out, but this secure, contained habitat allowed rangers and scientists to monitor the population closely, using hair-sampling and genetic analysis—methods that let them track health and numbers without ever having to trap the animals.

This effort involved more than just fencing; conservation teams also managed habitat quality. They ensured a reliable supply of grass—the wombat’s main diet—controlled invasive weeds, and provided supplementary water during dry periods. They monitored wombat health, birth rates, and burrow use, giving them the data needed to adapt their strategies as conditions changed.

But that still didn’t solve the single-population problem. A catastrophe like wildfire or severe disease could still undo decades of work, highlighting the need to try to spread risk by starting additional colonies.

Spreading the Risk

The first major step to reduce the species’ vulnerability came in 2009, when wildlife authorities translocated 15 wombats to a second fenced-in and managed site: Richard Underwood Nature Refuge near St George in southern Queensland. Although much smaller than Epping Forest, this site became an insurance colony. Animals were periodically added to maintain genetic diversity, and the first successful births occurred not long after establishment.

By the early 2020s, that second colony housed about 18 wombats, offering a foothold outside Epping Forest and proof that translocations could work. Meanwhile, the main population at Epping Forest continued to grow, reaching about 300 individuals by 2021—nearly ten times what it had been in 1981! Although this was significant progress, scientists recognized that having only two populations would not be sufficient.

Toward a Third Population: The Powrunna State Forest Project

In 2024, conservationists took the next big step by translocating northern hairy-nosed wombats to Powrunna State Forest, another site near St George. Teams spent months preparing the habitat, building protective fencing, ensuring suitable food and water resources, and even creating starter burrows to help the animals settle in.



Translocations to additional sites helped reduce risk and support population growth outside the original refuge.

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The first group of around 15 wombats was moved to Powrunna in mid-2024. By July 2025, additional translocations had taken place, with more individuals being carefully transported from Epping Forest to the new forest home. These ongoing efforts aim to establish a thriving third population, initially targeting a group of at least about 60 wombats at the new site within a few years.

This strategy reflects a growing understanding of wildlife biology. The old adage of “putting all your eggs in one basket” holds just as true when it comes to an endangered species. A trio of secure colonies increases the odds that a species will go on existing; if one site suffers a disaster, there are still two more populations out there. Spreading these populations also

creates opportunities for natural genetic exchange over time, reducing the dangers of inbreeding and increasing overall resilience.

Success Still Remains Fragile

This all sounds wonderful—and it is. But despite these gains, northern hairy-nosed wombats still remain critically endangered. More than 95 percent of the entire global population still resides at Epping Forest, even after expanding to new sites. That means a single major fire, drought, or outbreak of disease could have devastating consequences—though certainly not as dire as it would have been before the two additional colonies were established.

Predation remains a threat outside predator-protected reserves, and habitat loss continues to limit where new colonies can be formed. Climate change adds another layer of uncertainty, as shifting rainfall patterns affect grass growth and water availability in these arid regions.

There is also the genetic reality. Small populations, even when growing, carry limited genetic diversity. Scientists must carefully manage breeding and translocations to avoid bottlenecks that could compromise the health of future generations.



Even with population growth, northern hairy-nosed wombats remain critically endangered and highly vulnerable to environmental threats.

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Securing a Future for an Uncommon Marsupial

The northern hairy-nosed wombat's journey from about 35 individuals in the early 1980s to more than 400 today is a remarkable conservation achievement, clearly showing what

sustained protection, careful science, and adaptive management can do when a species is given a chance.

But to truly secure the future of this unique marsupial, conservationists must continue their work of expanding populations beyond a few fenced reserves, improving habitat connectivity, and maintaining the vigilance that has brought the species back from the brink. This is a remarkable accomplishment that deserves to be celebrated. However, it is important to remember that the work is not yet finished.