

The Big Picture

series by Doug Gimesy

# Wombat Digs

Wildlife photographer [Doug Gimesy](#) meets the orphaned baby wombats who are seeing out the pandemic in an inner-city Melbourne apartment.

by [Melissa Fulton](#) *Deputy Editor*

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“Wombats are incredibly affectionate and can spend up to three years with their mum in the wild. I try to replicate that bond as much as possible while responding to their individual needs and ensuring they have the necessary skills to be released,” says Emily Small.

**W**ildlife warrior Emily Small lives in a very different kind of Melbourne share house. Sure, her flatmates eat weird food, keep weird hours and have very different personalities – Landon’s a party boy, Bronson’s sensitive and shy, while Beatrice is fierce and independent – but unlike most share houses, her flatties also boast buns of steel, body fur and a penchant for burrowing. After all, they’re wombats – orphaned baby wombats.

“Wombats have more personality than any cat or dog I’ve met and each orphan has their own unique character,” says Small, who emphasises they’re not pets.

Small founded the Goongerah Wombat Orphanage in East Gippsland, the region where these joeys were originally found. The orphanage is around 450 kilometres from Melbourne, in a tiny community that was devastated by the January bushfires. She runs the orphanage on a volunteer basis with her mother.

All three wombats in her care are car-strike victims: Landon was rescued by a vet nurse, while Bronson was collected from a member of the public who found him in his dead mother’s pouch. Beatrice was also rescued by a member of the public – she was found late at night by the side of the road and kept safe and warm until she was able to be collected by Small.

Usually the rescued baby wombats would be resting and recuperating at the orphanage, but COVID-19 restrictions make long-distance travel difficult. Small needs to be in Melbourne for her day job as a full-time operations supervisor for Wildlife Victoria, so the wombats have come to live with her in her flat in Melbourne’s inner north.

As caregivers know, it’s not always easy to get your work done from home with the kids around. “They are so cute and distracting, and, like many children, when awake they need and want your attention,” she says. They need to be fed warm bottles of special wombat milk formula four to five times a day, and the washing machine’s on constantly to deal with all the messy sheets. Small’s also set up a run for them, and gives them loads of cuddles.

In a few months’ time, when the joeys are well and the worst of the pandemic is (hopefully) behind us, Small will move them back to enclosures at the orphanage at Goongerah, so that they can get used to the sensations of being outside. From there, if all goes to plan, they will be released back into the wild.

To prepare them for the transition, Small grows grass on her balcony that was taken from the site where the wombats will eventually be released. The wombats also chew on sticks and bark from Goongerah and fossick in specially collected East-Gippsland dirt – full of essential microbes and fungus to keep their guts healthy.

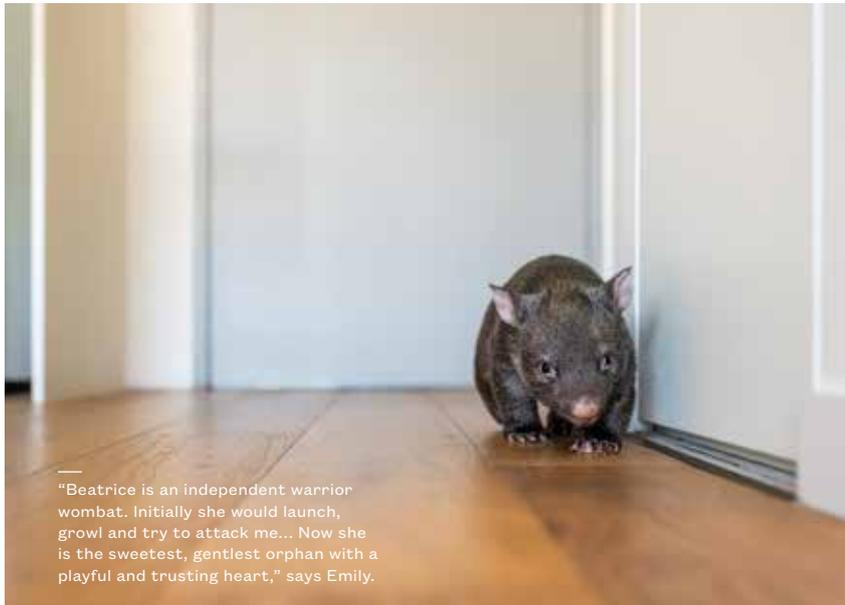
But in the meantime, the wombats are thriving in their new city digs. And Small is finding their presence a salve in these strange times: “How can having baby wombats around you not be good company?”

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DOUG GIMESY (GIMESY.COM) IS A CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER. FOR MORE ABOUT THE GOONGERAH WOMBAT ORPHANAGE, VISIT [GOONGERAHWOMBATORPHANAGE.ORG](http://GOONGERAHWOMBATORPHANAGE.ORG).



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Wombat joeys Bronson and Landon  
take a nap.



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“Beatrice is an independent warrior wombat. Initially she would launch, growl and try to attack me... Now she is the sweetest, gentlest orphan with a playful and trusting heart,” says Emily.



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Goongerah grass grows on the apartment balcony, with some fresh Goongerah dirt, from the site where the joeys will eventually be released.



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Emily has been rescuing wombats for 17 years. Here she holds Bronson while preparing wombat milk formula, which the joeys feed on 4-5 times a day.