

Joe's Story (and Serl but mostly Joe)



Joe

Joe came to us as a 900gram joey after his Mum had been shot by some 'wally' who thought a weekend's wombat shooting would be fun. I use the word 'wally' kindly as it is the best term I could think of without using offensive language.

We decided to call him Joe after a good friend of the same name (but different spelling and gender) who brought him to us and asked if we could take him (what a silly question!).

Joe progressed well at the beginning, doing all the wombatty things little boy wombats do. Took his bottle well, put on weight well and peed and poed just as he should.

A week after Joe turned up we had a call from a friend who lives not far from us saying that she had had a call from a relative and that they had just run over a wombat that had a joey in it's pouch. Could we go and check it out and collect the joey if it was OK. Another silly question!

This joey was a near-pinkie and appeared to be unharmed and weighed in at 675grams. At first glance I thought it was a female but it turned out to be another little boy. In defence of my mistake, at that age the scrotum was still tucked up inside his body and looked a bit like a pouch opening. Anyway, that's my excuse.

I must also commend the people who accidentally ran over his Mum. They were only a young couple but still had the sense to stop and check if the animal had a pouch young and then do something about it. Pity there are not more people about like that.

At the time this was happening I had had an email from some like minded people in Western Australia who wanted to send us a donation (which I accepted gratefully) and wanted to sponsor one of our wombats, so I offered them the



Serl

naming rights to this new little boy. As I mentioned earlier, at the time I thought 'he' was a 'she' and so told them that we had a little girl. They told me that if it had been a boy they wanted to call him Serl and so said "Maybe we should call him/her Shirl" And why not – sounded OK to me!!!? But then 'she' turned out to be a 'he' anyway, and so he became Serl. I had not heard that name before and was intrigued why they had chosen it. They told me it had family connections. So Serl it was, but it seems to keep changing. To put it bluntly, once he got past the pinkie stage he was a little bugger and would charge around the place biting everything in sight. I would pick him up and pass him back to Jan (who was caring for him as I was looking after Joe) and say to her "Here; do you want you little bugger back?" So then he then became known as 'buggaback'. That has now progressed, or digressed if you like, to 'Squirt' as he charges around the floor running under anyone and everyone's feet, but despite his antics he is a lovely little boy and the biting thing has quietened down somewhat (famous last words!!!). As I am writing this he is now around 6kgs and had his first sojourn outside in the dirt the other day. After lots of scratching and digging noises emanating from a hole in the ground just outside our back door he eventually re-emerged and trotted back into the house looking like the inside of an unemptied vacuum cleaner bag.

But I am getting off the subject – back to Joe. Joe and Serl would run about together but Joe was becoming increasingly slow and did not want to 'play'. He also did not like to lie on his back; which is ***not*** typical of a healthy wombat as generally this is a wombat's favourite pose, and sleeping position, i.e. to lie on their back with feet in the air, snoring away without a care in the world. This worried me but there was nothing you could point at and say "there is his problem". It was just that he would walk slowly and not at all if he could help it but just sit hunched up and look miserable.

After some weeks of this strange behaviour and after a couple of days when he would not walk at all, we decided it was time for a trip to our vet.

My thoughts went back to when his Mum was shot and I was thinking that maybe he had collected a stray pellet from the shotgun at that time (he would have been in his Mum's pouch at the time she was shot). I would have thought we would have noticed any scarring or damage to his body at the time he arrived if that were the case, but we had not. Maybe we had overlooked something.

So, one Saturday morning, it was off to our vet. We placed him on the floor of the surgery so she could see how he behaved and the rotten little shit walked around the examination table twice without much of a problem at all. There was some evidence he was not favouring his left hind leg but nothing obviously dramatic. She seemed to think there was some weakness there but again



Joe on the left and Serl on the right (Serl has the much larger white nose patch)

nothing really you could put your finger on. So we decided to play the waiting game.

We did not have to wait too long. The next couple of days he refused to move at all (maybe it was all that running around the vet's surgery) and we were becoming increasingly alarmed. So it was back to the vet again the following Tuesday. This time we arranged for X-rays and blood samples to be taken.

If you are not a little confused already, the story now starts to get even more complicated; so please bear with me.

As I mentioned earlier my thoughts were that a stray shotgun pellet had penetrated him and had migrated to somewhere that was now starting to cause him a problem. This apparently was not the case. The X-rays showed no pellets of any kind and our vet said she could see no other problem either but admitted that she was not sure what she was looking for, as she was not entirely familiar with what a healthy wombat skeletal x-ray should look like. In an endeavour to help her out in this regard both she and I did a lot of internet searching to see if we could find an X-ray picture of a wombat skeleton but without success. Found plenty of skeleton pictures but no X-ray pictures. I also contacted some friends in the eastern States who I thought may be able to

point me in the right direction. They were all very helpful and I did strike some sort of pay dirt with a friend, Linda Dennis, of Fourth Crossing Wildlife who kindly sent me some X-ray pictures of hind legs of a Bare-nosed Wombat (see below) for which I was extremely grateful although (as I thought at the time) was not quite what I was looking for, as at that stage we were looking for spinal problems. Little did I know how relevant those pictures were.



(You can find Linda's website here - <http://www.fourthcrossingwildlife.com>)

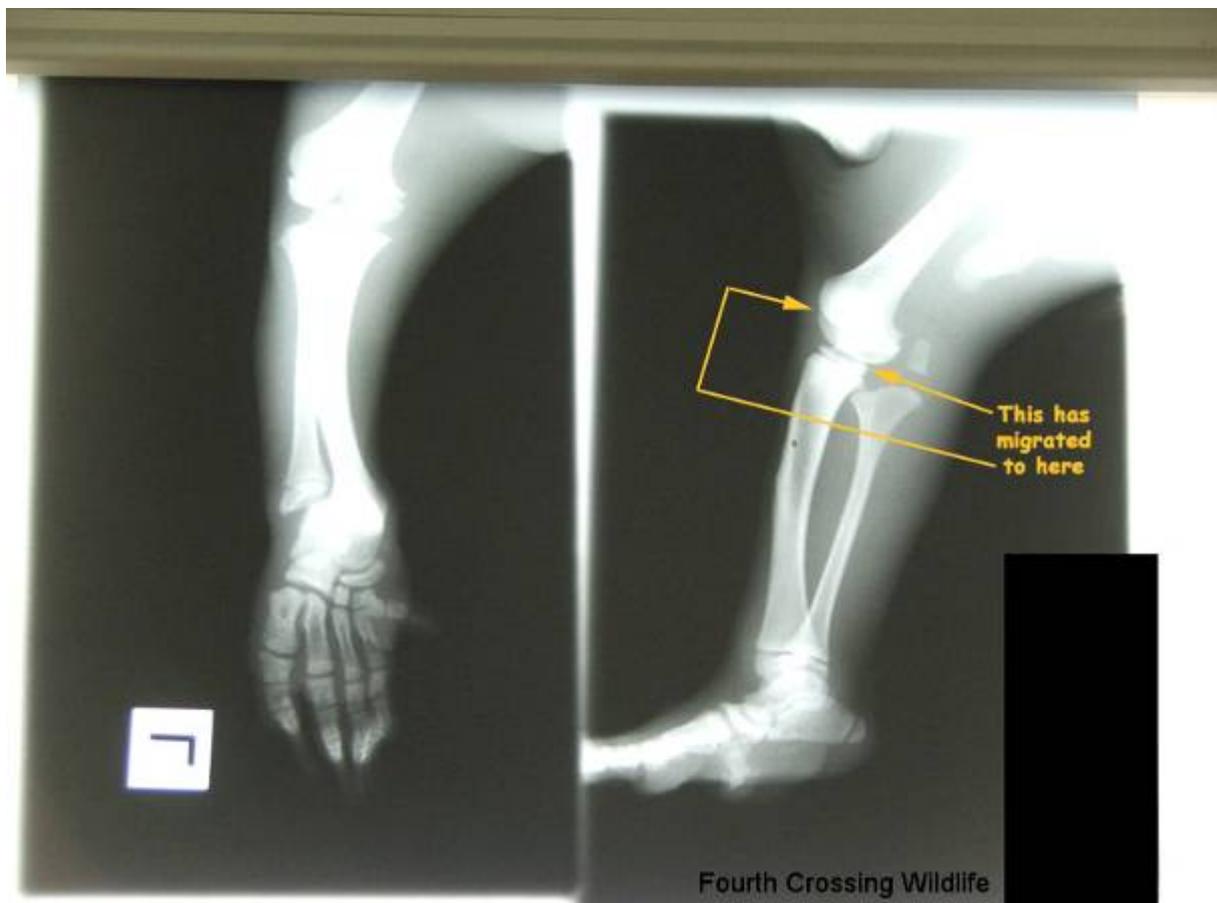
Whilst all this was going on it occurred to me that a young lady (a veterinary pathologist), who had visited us some months before Joe had even arrived, may be able to help. She was working out of the Veterinary School at University of Adelaide's Roseworthy Campus and had collected a Wombat carcass from us that they wanted for research purposes that had been dropped off at our place by The Wombat Awareness Organisation (see <http://wombatawareness.com/>). Whilst she was here, she said that if we were ever in need of any assistance at anytime she would be pleased to help if she could and left me her 'phone number and email address.

So I rang her, thinking she may be able to help me, and our Vet, with an x-ray of a healthy wombat skeleton that we could compare to Joe's. She surprised me

by offering to pick up Joe's blood samples from our vet and take them back to the college and have them analysed. This she did and they all came back negative as far as any blood problem was concerned. She also suggested we take Joe down the College where they could take more x-rays themselves and see if they could find out what his problem was. We made an appointment for the following Thursday. At this point I should say that I can't speak highly enough of the people at Roseworthy College, their sympathy, understanding and professionalism, together with their expertise and the technology they have available to them, is second to none.

So poor Joe went through another round of X-rays but this time there happened to be an experienced orthopedic surgeon on hand who picked his problem almost immediately. It seems he had what they called slipped growth plates in both hind legs at the knee joint (as indicated on the modified x-ray below).

This meant that each time he stood up there was bone to bone contact at the joint, which would have been extremely painful, and also if not corrected his legs below the knee would not grow and he would be permanently disabled – not exactly what a young wombat would want and he would certainly not be able to walk around, let alone dig holes! Whilst we were looking at the X-rays, the vet at the college said to me that I had two options for him – euthanasia or



surgery, and even with surgery they could not guarantee success but would give it their best shot should we decide to go down that road. There was even some talk that he may not recover from the anaesthetic. Well guess what? Euthanasia was NOT (I repeat NOT) an option. This was late October and we had had this little guy from a 900 gram joey some six months earlier (in early April) and he was my mate, so there was no way I was going to have him put down until I had given him some sort of chance and exhausted all other options. So I said to the vet that we would go for the surgery option; to which the vet told me it would be fairly costly, “probably around the fifteen hundred dollar mark” he said. My reaction was to ask “What, per leg?” to which the reply was, with a wry smile, “No, no for both legs” he said; (much to my relief). I have since spoken to many people about this (my own vet included) and they all said the same thing, which was, “Is that all?” with surprised expressions on their faces. So we got a good deal.

Joe had his operation on the following Thursday which by any standards was quite long. We dropped him off at the college at a little before 10am and then went to spend some time with friends who lived close by for lunch and to bite our fingernails. At a little after 1pm I could stand it no longer and rang the college to see how Joe was going and they told me he was still in surgery but





would ring me as soon as he was into recovery. That call came at 3.30pm.

We picked up Joe about an hour later and were told that the operation went well and were hopeful he would make a good recovery. Probably not a hundred percent but he should be able to lead a life in captivity in relative comfort. As I write this we are just two weeks out from his operation and he is still not walking yet but it is still early days. We took him back to the college a week after the operation for a check up and to have his dressings removed. He has some lovely scars but was healing up very quickly and we were given some advice on how to put him through a course of physio

exercises, which incidentally, he does not like very much, but I keep telling him he has to do it, otherwise he may never walk again and I do not even want to think about that scenario.

Joe's operation was performed on the 1st of November and as I write we are now into the 2nd week of December, some five weeks on, and I am pleased to say that he is looking good. He has just started to make some attempts at walking again and with some success I might add. I am so pleased but my pleasure was dampened a little by the appearance of a squishy lump that appeared on Joe's left leg at the surgery site! Obviously some sort of fluid build-up but what and why? I considered it needed to be looked at so made an appointment with our vet for the next Tuesday morning. On that morning our vet rang us to say that it would be better if we took him back to Roseworthy College as they had all his records and would be better placed to deal with whatever the problem was. So back to Roseworthy again!!! These days I get into the car and say "Roseworthy" and the car takes itself (I wish!!).

At the college the duty vet took a sample of the fluid within the lump (well, emptied it in fact) but did say that the lump may come back again. The stuff he took out was a pinkish fluid that he considered was a reaction to some sort of irritation at the surgery site, possibly the steel pins that had been inserted in his

legs. He had a look at it under the microscope but could not find anything too dramatic but said he would send it away for analysis and get back to me if there were any issues that needed to be addressed.

So now we have Joe on the right track but have had some problems with Serl. (Think we must have run over about 467 black cats this year or walked under a heap of ladders????)

Serl's problem started around the third week of November (at the time Joe was recovering from his surgery). We picked him up early one morning to give him his bottle but he refused to take it (an immediate worry). He then tried to pee but couldn't. Now I am beginning to panic. He strained and strained but nothing came out apart from a few drops of urine stained red!! Rushed him off to the vet thinking he had a blockage. My thinking was that if something was not done immediately his bladder would burst and that would be the end of Serl.

Our vet knocked him out and took x-rays of his internal organs including the bladder which appeared to be only about half full (panic now reduced to worry). To alleviate the possibility of a blockage he was put on a course of Vitamin C tablets to acidify his urine to break up any possible crystals that may have formed within his bladder. The vet also thought he may have Urinary tract infection (similar to Cystitis in humans) and so put him on a course of antibiotics.

So for the next week he was given both these medications and within that time he was back to normal. Unfortunately this was short lived. He came good for about a week then early one Sunday morning (and the day we had planned to go to a Native Animal Network meeting as it happens) the same thing happened again but this time much worse. His straining was quite severe and he was obviously in some distress. So again we panicked – our vet is not available on Sundays so I rang the Roseworthy Veterinary college who run an after hours service. Rushed him off to Roseworthy that morning and they gave him some pain relief and some sub-cut fluids to which he responded well. After some time he was then given a new antibiotic drug that consists of one injection that lasts for two weeks. He slept for pretty much all of that Sunday and consequently missed out on both his bottles for that day. The next morning (Monday) he took his bottle reasonably well and actually did a short piddle that looked normal. The vet at the college asked us if we could get them a sample of his urine at a point four days from when the antibiotic effect had elapsed – that would take us to two days after Christmas Day. Why is it that these things always happen at times of weekends and/or public holidays?

On a brighter note, whilst all this was going on and as I alluded to earlier; Joe has been walking reasonably well. He is now around 10kgs and does not like to walk too far but is behaving much more like a young Wombat should. He leaps up in the air and spins around and tries to take chunks out of anything that gets in his way – so good to see – but have to watch those teeth. A close encounter of the wombat kind can result in a rush for the first aid cabinet!! I don't think he will ever be 100% but he is certainly well on the way to a good recovery.

As time went on I began to worry about him again, although a little unfounded. It is now into March of the following year and Joe is around the 17kg mark and has recently started to spend much of his time outside digging holes and generally becoming a 'normal' Wombat. We now see very little of him during the day. He will usually appear late evening (9 - 10 pm) jump up on my lap for a cuddle then by the time it is time for us to go to bed he will trot off outside and continue with his digging routine and usually re-appear (if that is the right terminology) at around 3 or 4 in the morning. He comes into the house through our 'wombat flap' and then attempts to jump on the bed, often successfully with a little help from me, where he curls up between the pillows and goes to sleep, often (no - always) leaving us a collection of messages, if you get my meaning!. Are we mad or what? He does not get on with Serl. They 'tolerate' one another but more often it comes to blows if they become too close to one another and these are not play bites but get very serious from time to time – both of them are appearing with bits of fur missing, and bite marks in a range of places that look a bit tender, but this is all part of the life of a young wombat. They are not social animals by any stretch of the imagination and for two males to co-habit in the same location is fraught with problems/danger

Have to finish off this part of the story by saying that I am going to miss my little Joe terribly when he finally disappears into the local population. He has been my best mate for long time now (13 months) and I love him dearly and will miss him terribly when he goes, but at some point in the future, go he must – a day I am not really looking forward to.

Update May 2013

Some good news and some not so good news.

Firstly the not so good news. Young Serl, now well over 20kgs is still a 'bitey' and we have to very careful around him because his biting is not play biting but he has serious intentions of taking chunks from any part of yon he can. Anyway he trotted into the house the other night in his usual aggressive mood and starts to get stropo with a box of tissues. These went flying across the room but so did something else I couldn't find at first but did notice some drops



of blood on the carpet where Serl had previously been. Turns out this 'something else' was a tooth. One of Serl's upper incisors to be precise. I have seen broken teeth before but this was the whole tooth (see picture). After this event he took off outside not to be seen again that night. The following evening he comes in again; this time much more subdued and he allowed me to pick him up without any

resistance. With some trepidation I checked his mouth and found that he had lost both of his upper front teeth. I have no idea if they will grow again or how he can eat hard solid food and there is little I can do to help him. He did try to give me a little nip at that time and it felt like even at that early stage his upper gums were very hard and may compensate for the lack of teeth if they don't grow again. I am going to have to watch him very closely over the next few weeks.

The good news is that Joe is, to all intents and purposes, a normal healthy young male Wombat. He also is tipping the scales at around the 20kg mark and has recently discovered the big wide world out at the front of our place and spends pretty much most of his time there now although he still does come to visit in the middle of the night, jump onto our bed (which he can do almost on his own now)



and usually falls flat on his back and goes to sleep. I can live with that but when he is in one of his little boy moods and starts humping my pillow I draw the line. He then gets unceremoniously tipped off the bed. See ya later Joe!!

I think they will both be with us a long time and now we have girl friends for them. One turned up eight weeks ago as a 335gram pinkie

(Ivy) and the other a couple of days ago (Julie) as a just furred 1015grams. (A future story in the making perhaps) - so here we go again Sigh!!!



Ivy at day 14 and a healthy 450grams



Julie with Sally (a good friend and NAN member)