

A dog's life really

Kristy Moyle catches up with the caffeine canine

IT'S VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE to miss Gemma as I arrive at Wynlen House for our interview. The barking from the house is of a quality that has me looking about for a Great Dane.

So, as I look down, and then down again, and then even further down, I am impressed to realise that my celebrity dog is smaller than a large guinea pig.

After the necessary security processes are fulfilled — a comprehensive sniffing-down, followed by three turns in a clockwise direction — we are ready to commence the interview. Gemma sits on three copies of the yellow pages (the Canberra ones) in order to reach the microphone.

Gemma's name is actually short for ... Gemma. She was purchased as a companion for Bronwyn's ageing mother June, who at that point (eleven years ago) lived independently. The pair got along famously. Gemma always had the answer for the trickiest cross-words and the pair loved to share a bickie and a cup of coffee.

Yes, Gemma was allowed to drink coffee.

June wasn't exactly a dog whisperer. In fact, Gemma took it upon herself to

train June instead. Gemma slept in the bed (or attempted to, having drunk several coffees) to keep her companion warm at night. She provided around-the-clock security detail, in what she describes as 'the crime capital' of Braidwood. This most likely accounts for her vigilant, if perhaps neurotic behaviour today.

June moved into Narbethong in 2006, leaving Gemma to live with Bronwyn (June's daughter) and Helen (Bronwyn's partner). The transition was difficult while Gemma was detoxing from caffeine. But, soon enough, she was learning to be a 'dog' (although she still uses this term quite loosely to describe herself).

Gemma was, and remains to this day, intimidated by Bronwyn's 'menagerie' (as Bronwyn describes it — Gemma describes it as a holding-yard for the deranged). Gemma has been head butted by sheep, intimidated by turkeys and pursued by pigs.

Even six years down the track, Gemma still struggles to cope with the hustle and bustle of farm life. Luckily, she is able to vent her emotions quite successfully on the resident cats.

When Gemma first arrived at Wynlen,

she was an only dog. She was later confronted by the knowledge that she would co-exist with another. Bobby, the Tibetan-spaniel arrived in the house, full of life as the very attractive younger man. Bobby's arrival in the house fully confirmed for Gemma that she was second-place in the world. To this day she remains fatalistic about this flaw in her life destiny.

Gemma is a Gemini. Or a Virgo. Or whatever sign of the zodiac is most anxious. She has a charming tendency to exaggerate the ills and threats of the world. She shivers while being cuddled. (This could also be as a result of her developmental diet of coffee). She is naturally distrustful of people ... and chairs ... and shoes ... and loud noises. Gemma remains convinced to this day that when Helen starts chopping vegetables, she is next on the menu.

Like her mothers, Gemma is a strong advocate of the slow food movement. She is constantly impressed by the way in which Bronwyn digs in the dirt and is able to make plants stick out. She still struggles to understand why Bronwyn and Helen get so excited about the flapping, feathery animals, that are obviously deranged and a complete safety hazard, but copes with this out of love and her long-term resignation to personal hardship.

"The flapping beasts of insanity seem to make them happy", Gemma says of Bronwyn and Helen, as they happily coo over the recent batch of baby flapping beasts of insanity.

Gemma's only exception to her philosophy of slow food is about her own food. She prefers that this is delivered quickly and on schedule, without the flapping.

She has considered working as front of house to support Bronwyn and Helen on a monthly basis at the local market. Unfortunately, the dynamic activities and goings on at these events provoke her anxiety. She prefers to take a 'back-of-house' role, guarding the house in their absence and generally eating kibble. Gemma enjoys her alone time, as it gives her the opportunity to consider how immediate are the risks in her life.

"It's a wonder anybody is alive, really."

And the burning question, on the topic of Gemma having two mums:

"It's fine. I mean sure, I sometimes wish I knew who my father was, but they smile and laugh a lot together. I guess that happiness isn't about gender, but then again, I know nothing of happiness."



CORINNA LITTLE PHOTOGRAPHED THIS CURIOUS FELLOW.

Echidnas What do you know?

Richard Elliott

UNFORTUNATELY EVEN SCIENTISTS don't know much about these creatures. Almost all of what we do know is completely outside our every day experience with domestic mammals.

Most Australians will go through their life never even seeing an echidna in the wild. We are fortunate that we still have a few wandering around and outside our town. Sadly it appears that we are killing them off faster than they can breed through being run over, poisoned and due to our introduction of cats and foxes. They are a protected species throughout Australia.

With the platypus these egg laying mammals date back to the time of the dinosaurs (60-120 million years). They represent the pinnacle of sustainable survival. They maintain low population, can survive in a wide range of climates and are not aggressive toward other animals nor to other echidnas.

Determining echidna population is difficult. Echidnas are not attracted to baits or traps. They do not have any permanent homes for the census collector. In fact a typical home range maybe as much as 200 hectares. Unlike other species it is not possible to determine the sex or age of an echidna from its appearance. Echidnas (and the platypus) are called monotremes meaning they have one hole - the cloaca through which passes urine, faeces and reproductive products. All genitals are located internally. The penis is not used for urination and is only outside the body during mating. You may not be surprised to realise that the echidnas mate face to face or at least side to side. There are no discernible nipples.

Most mammals maintain a body temperature of around 37 deg C however the echidna when active is close to 32 deg C and in fact will die of heat stress at higher temperatures. An echidna has no sweat glands and can't pant. Echidnas

can survive with their body temperature as low as 4 deg C. They can enter a state called torpor (like a short hibernation) where they can conserve energy. In this state their breathing may be as slow as one breath every 3 minutes and with long periods of not taking a breath at all. During hot days echidnas may bury themselves or find a cool cave. They may also take long swims in cool water including the sea. It is possible that this ability to manipulate and cope with a wide range of temperatures has been a factor in their long survival.

The echidna has a beak which is covered in a thin tough leathery layer. It does not have a moving lower jaw, and has no teeth. It extends its sticky tongue out through the small hole at the end of the beak to bring small insects, worms and larvae into its mouth where it can be ground between a hard portion of the tongue and the roof of the mouth. Some insects may be crushed by the strong beak before being brought in by the tongue. On the top of the beak are the two nostrils which are used to breath through. Because the beak is also used to dig the echidna produces a fair amount of mucus which it snorts out to clear the dirt. Echidnas can produce cooing noises but this is very rarely heard compared with the regular snorting when digging and eating.

Anatomically the echidna is very strong - it can effortlessly move rocks ten times its body weight. It is the only animal which can dig straight down, partly due to the rear claws facing outwards and backwards. Each spine is attached to muscles which can be moved individually. This is why an echidna can climb up inside a pipe or and escape from most containers. The spines are also used to right themselves if rolled over. Echidnas can climb over two metre high chain wire fences. They can effortlessly destroy a car interior.

The eyeball is large with only a small portion being apparent from the outside. The flat lens gives it panoramic vision although sight is not a particularly refined sense.

In maze tests echidnas perform similarly to cats and rats - they are intelligent with very long memories. Echidnas have been known to live at least 50 years and we don't have good information on their life expectancy. Almost half of the echidna brain is neocortex thought to be the area of 'higher mental functions'. The echidna has 33 chromosomes against the 22 of humans. A mother echidna teaches its offspring very little and it is possible that a great deal of knowledge or the ability to learn is transferred in the genetic payload.

Echidnas have good hearing and the ability to sense ground vibration.

Even the echidna's stomach is unusual compared with other mammals as it produces no secretions to aid digestion — it is just a 'grinder'. Unlike marsupials echidnas do



"This is going to hurt me more than it'll hurt you."

