



TOWN OF GAWLER

Gawler's Diprotodon



Diprotodon australis
(Source: <http://www.goyder.sa.gov.au>)

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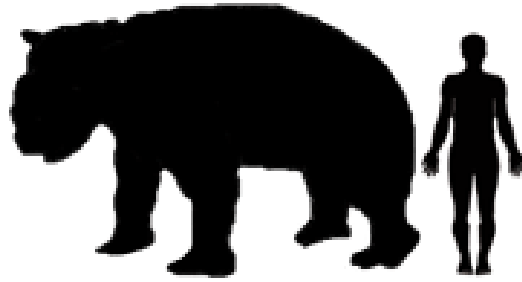
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Diprotodon australis was the largest marsupial to ever live. Its name means ‘two forward teeth’ (di = two; proto = front; dont = tooth) and it was one of the group of animals known, because of their large size, as ‘megafauna’.

There were possibly three species of *Diprotodon* which lived during the 2 million year time-span known as the Pleistocene which began about 1.8 million years ago and ended roughly 10,000 years ago. *Diprotodons* became extinct somewhere around 45,000 years ago.



(Source: <http://www.parks.sa.gov.au>)

Diprotodons were about the size of a large hippopotamus. A fully grown adult weighed somewhere between 1.5 and 2.5 tonnes and, despite its bulk, was quite fast on its relatively long legs and wombat-like feet. It was a herbivore which fed on trees and shrubs. Its large head had four molars in each jaw, three pairs of upper incisors and one pair of lower incisors. The incisor teeth (which grew continuously throughout the *Diprotodon*'s life) were perfect for rooting out small shrubs and biting through tough vegetation and the molars (which were as large as a human fist) were designed for slicing and crushing coarse vegetation.

The *Diprotodon* is believed to have had a shaggy coat of hair and it was flat-footed, walking mainly on the outside of the foot. Its feet had tough gripping soles, indicating that it perhaps lived mainly on soft ground such as river flats and marshes. It probably suckled its young from a pouch similar to a wombat.



Palaeontologists removing specimens from a dig at Lake Callabonna.
(Source: <http://www.abc.net.au>)



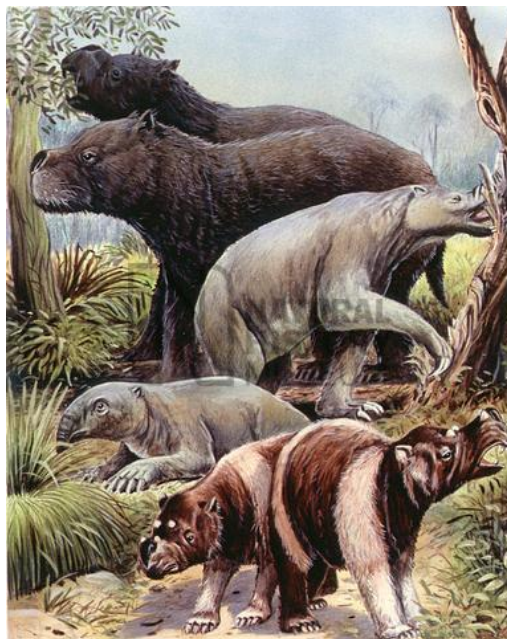
Skeleton of *Diprotodon australis*
(Source: <http://www.parks.sa.gov.au>)

In South Australia, the fossilised remains of extinct marsupials, including Diprotodon, were first reported in 1889 from a dam site at Bunday and along Baldina Creek in the Burra Region. Amandus Zeitz of the SA Museum visited the area and collected a partial skeleton of *Diprotodon australis*, the fossilised remains of the giant 'emu', *Genyornis*, the Marsupial 'lion', *Thylacoleo*, and the Tasmanian Devil, *Sarcophilus*.

Lake Callabonna, situated approximately 220 kms east of Maree in the northern Flinders Ranges, was the site of a significant discovery of fossils in 1892. It provides evidence of a more moist climate where much of what is now arid inland Australia was once part of a vast inland freshwater lake and river system, the land around which was capable of supporting forest or woodland vegetation. The fossils of *Diprotodon* were the first articulated specimens (rather than just a jumble of bones) to be found and the entire site was rich in not just *Diprotodon* remains, but also nine other extinct species including the giant wombat, *Phascolonus gigas*, and extinct kangaroos such as *Protemnodon brehus* and *Macroopus titan*.

Diprotodon at Gawler

On July 24, 1891, *The Bunyip* reported a discovery 'of more than ordinary interest' at Gawler South. While workmen, under the direction of the contractor, Mr James Peek, were excavating for a tank on the property of Thomas Molan, they discovered a deposit of bones buried at about eight feet. Initially the workmen took little notice because the bones were crumbly but as more, larger bones were discovered, Mr W Howchin, a lecturer of the Gawler Geological and Mineralogical Class was called on to confirm an earlier opinion that the bones were those of a *Diprotodon*. Amandus Zeitz from the SA Museum was informed and he travelled to Gawler to complete the exhumation of the bones. The head was discovered at a depth of



Diprotodon (background),
Palorchestes (midground) and
Zygomaturus (foreground),
mammals of the megafauna.
Illustration by Michael Long.
(Source: <http://piclib.nhm.ac.uk>)

about 11 feet and, despite the best efforts of the workmen, it had to be taken out in pieces. All the bones were packed in cases with sawdust in preparation to being sent to the SA Museum for reconstruction.

However, just as they were about to be taken away, the owner of the property arrived and demanded that he be paid £10 to let the bones go. Mr Zeitz could not promise that the money would be paid without consulting with his committee. The cases were placed in the safe-keeping of Mr E. Potter, Chairman of the Gawler Geological and Mineralogical Class, until a decision could be reached. In the next week's edition of *The Bunyip*, it was reported that the bones had been sent to the Museum after an agreement had been with Mr Molan for a sum less than that originally asked and was definitely not £100 as was reported in *The Advertiser!*

Recent enquiries at the SA Museum revealed that these bones can no longer be located. The systematic numbering and registration of fossil specimens did not begin until 1911. The Gawler material was not registered and no bones in the fossil collection is marked as the Gawler Diprotodon. It is possible that the bones discovered at Gawler were discarded in favour of the mass of such



Diprotodon australis
(Source: www.parks.sa.gov.au)

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