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Researchers race to save Norfolk Island's rare hairy snail

'Hairy' snail breeding program to bring it back from the brink



The Norfolk Island hairy snail. Credit: Isabel Hyman

19 October 2026 Sydney

A team of experts is racing to save Norfolk Island's hairy snail from extinction, kickstarting an emergency breeding program to save the unique species.

Fanulena imitatrix, or the Norfolk Island hairy snail, is only found on one small reserve on the island. The unusual species has a fine hair-like covering on its shell and adult snails are roughly the size of the nail on a pinky finger.

Australian Museum Malacologist (snail expert) [Dr Isabel Hyman](#), who is leading the conservation effort in partnership with Taronga Conservation Society Australia, said she originally thought the Norfolk Island hairy snails were extinct, until they found a population alive and well.

"When I saw the beautiful, slightly golden hairs stand out on the shell, I instantly knew that the hairy snail population was holding on," Dr Hyman said.

"Seeing the delicate hairs, which usually wear off in museum specimens, on a living snail was a very special moment.



The Norfolk Island hairy snail with its characteristic delicate golden hairs on the shell. Credit: Isabel Hyman

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But the hairy snail is still at high risk of extinction. The location at which they were found is in a public reserve, with visitor access and adjacent to a road. In August last year, invasive Argentine ants were found very close to the site.

Parks Australia rangers from Norfolk Island National Park have led regular monitoring of the hairy snail population since August 2025, in conjunction with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts.

Timed searches from August 2025 to May 2026 revealed a steady decline in live snails and an increase in dead shells observed, usually a sign of increased mortality.



Hairy snail shells (right) next to the shell of a common garden snail (left) Credit: Ivy Shih

Dr Hyman said she realised this was an extreme situation and they needed to act fast to save the hairy snail, otherwise it could become truly extinct.

The team sprang into action, and in August 2026, 30 snails were collected and taken to Taronga Zoo Sydney to establish an emergency conservation program.

The goal was to establish a breeding population to be released back on Norfolk Island to bolster the wild population.

Senior Keeper Tarryn Williams Clow from Taronga Zoo Sydney said that one month on after arriving at Taronga's quarantine breeding facility, the tiny snails have adapted well to their new habitats and replicated diets. They have even started to give birth to live young, giving the Taronga Zoo husbandry team cautious optimism.

"Starting a conservation breeding program for an endangered species that has never been cared for before obviously has its trepidations, but we are so excited to learn everything we can about this species' biology and requirements and how to best support them so we can bolster numbers of endangered species in the wild".

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*An adult Norfolk Island Hairy Snail being held by Taronga Zoo Senior Keeper Tarryn Williams Clow.
Credit: Taronga Conservation Society Australia*

The collaborative conservation program is testament to the expertise that each partner organisation fosters.

Earlier this year, the program successfully bred, returned and released another critically endangered Norfolk Island endemic snail, *Advena campbellii* or the Campbell's keeled glass-snail, back to the wild in a record five-year start-to-finish conservation win.

Hairy snails are just as important as any other living organism



Spot the hairy snails. Credit: James Joseph Roberts

Norfolk Island is an important global hotspot for snails, with about 60 unique species.

PhD student James Joseph Roberts from the Australian Museum and Western Sydney University said snail populations in the wild are facing multiple threats including ants, climate change, and predation by rodents and feral chickens.

"The hairy snails are funky little dudes and look nothing like garden snails. They look a lot like tiny little pom poms," he said.

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“We don't know for sure the function of the hairs on their shells, but in some other land snails, hairs can be an adaptation for moving around in very wet conditions. For example, you can imagine how droplets of water can be held away from rough or hairy surfaces. It helps them to move around when it's very wet.”

Dr Hyman said that most people are probably only aware of the snails in their garden, which in Australia, are usually introduced species. But Australia has a whole host of beautiful native snails that play an important role in the ecosystem in breaking down leaf litter and are not the culprits munching on your cucumbers.

“Our native snails, like the hairy snail, are really charismatic and just as important as any animal. There are more recorded extinctions of land snails than for any other group of animals.”

-ENDS-

Photos and B roll available [here](#).

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About the Australian Museum

The nation's first museum, the Australian Museum (AM) was founded in 1827 and will mark its 200-year anniversary in 2027. It is internationally recognised as a natural science and culture institution focused on Australia and the Pacific. The AM holds more than 22 million objects and

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specimens in its collection, the largest in the Southern Hemisphere. It pursues a mission to ignite wonder, inspire debate and drive change. The AM's vision is to be a leading voice for the richness of life, the Earth and culture in Australia and the Pacific and commits to transforming the conversation around climate change, the environment and wildlife conservation; being a strong advocate for First Nations cultures; and continuing to develop world-leading science through the [Australian Museum Research Institute \(AMRI\)](#). The AM is not only a dynamic source of reliable scientific information on the environmental and social challenges facing our region, but also a trusted site of cultural exchange and learning.

Taronga Conservation Society Australia

Taronga Conservation Society Australia (Taronga) is a leader in the fields of conservation, research, animal welfare, wildlife rehabilitation and environmental education. Taronga is a not-for-profit organisation with a commitment to conservation and securing a shared future for wildlife and people.

Taronga's two Zoos, Taronga Zoo Sydney and Taronga Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo, create experiences for its 1.9 million guests that inspire lasting connections between people and wildlife. Through education programs, community engagement and environmental campaigning, Taronga works to create the next generation of conservation champions.

Taronga's staff, scientists and researchers are experts in their fields. They work in partnerships with governments, universities and conservation organisations to support dozens of science, research and conservation projects and programs across Australia and around the world. Taronga believes that a future without wildlife is not an option. Taronga is for the wild.

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