



Little Penguin – *Eudyptula minor*

Description

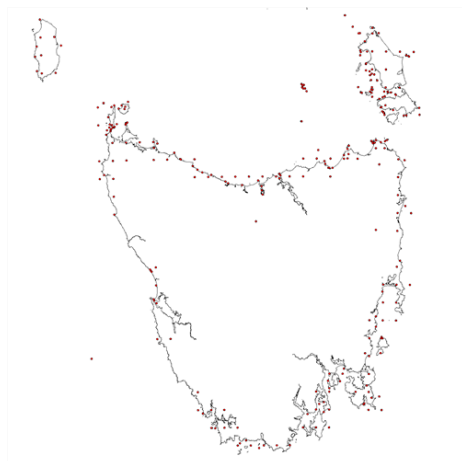
The Little Penguin is the only species of penguin that breeds in Australia. The total population in Australia is stable at perhaps a million birds. Like all penguins, the Little Penguin is highly adapted for life in the sea. The Greek word 'Eudyptula' means 'good little diver'. Its body is streamlined, its wings are modified as flippers and its feathers are densely distributed over its body. The upper parts, including the back of the Little Penguin are distinctly blue, which explains one of its alternative names (Blue Penguin) and the underbelly is white. Its bill is grey-black with a pinkish lower base, and its iris pale grey to white. Young penguins are bluer than adults. The Little Penguin is also known as the Fairy Penguin because of its small size. Adults weigh about a kilogram, grow to a height of 40 cm and live, on average, 6 years. In one instance, an age of 21 years has been recorded.

Threats

On land penguins are eaten by introduced predators and their burrows are trampled. At sea they are susceptible to oil pollution, fish die-offs and entanglement in fishing nets.

Distribution

Little Penguins live along the southern edge of mainland Australia, as well as Tasmania, New Zealand and the Chatham Islands. In Australia the most well known colony is on Phillip Island in Victoria. Dozens of colonies are scattered on islands from the NSW North Coast, south to Tasmania, and west to Carnac Island, off Fremantle. Tasmanian estimates range from 110 000–190 000 breeding pairs of which less than 5% are found on mainland Tasmania, where ever-increasing human pressure will probably result in their extinction. The most abundant populations are found on our offshore islands.



Males search for mates by posturing and calling outside the nesting area. After pairing, calling continues at the nest site to maintain the pair bond. During courtship, both birds stand erect, with flippers spread and head bowed, and walk in tight circles around the nest site, calling loudly as they go. Little Penguins form a long-term monogamous pair bond with a separation rate of about 18%. A bird will first breed when it is two to three years old. The breeding season varies in different parts of the country.

Burrows are dug by both parents (mainly the male) to a depth of 0.15 m, with an average of just over 0.4 m. The burrow can be as far as 200 m inland and 50 m above sea level. Dunes or other soft soil are usually chosen because they are easy to dig. In some localities, a pair may use a cave or crevice in the rocks. A penguin tends to return to the same part of the same colony each year, although not necessarily to the same burrow.

The parents defend a small area around the burrow entrance. As a result, burrows are usually spaced 5 m - 10 m apart, and rarely closer than 2 m. Aggressive encounters range from posturing and calling, to fights involving pecking, shoving and slapping with flippers. Young birds wandering out of their parents' territory will be attacked by other adults.



Both parents incubate the 55 mm x 42 mm white eggs, which become stained as incubation progresses. Although there are about 68 hours between the laying of the first and second egg, both hatch together. A newly hatched chick is covered with dark grey down, which is soon replaced by a second coat, chocolate brown in colour. Their eyes are just open at one day and are fully open at one week. Feathers start to emerge at four weeks, and by eight weeks, only a few patches of down remain.

Tending of the young is shared by the parents. Just a few days after the chicks hatch, the adults alternate daily, with one parent guarding the nest and the other foraging at sea. After about two weeks, both parents go to sea each day, returning in the evening or even staying away for several days. Hungry chicks beg vigorously to be fed, pursuing their parents until their persistence drives the adults from the nest.





The Little Penguin

Food

Adult Little Penguins are largely sedentary, returning to the colony when not at sea. Adult penguins forage for food at sea, mostly from dawn to an hour before dusk. Little Penguins swim with their flippers and use their tail for steering. They feed on small shoaling fish and cephalopods, and to a lesser extent, crustaceans, which they capture and swallow underwater. Although several birds may pursue the same shoal, they feed singly, not cooperatively. Adult penguins may travel 14 km - 20 km per day when foraging, covering shorter distances when breeding. A foraging bird can dive from 6 m - 69 m (average about 30 m), with a sprint speed of 1.5 m/s - 2 m/s, and remain submerged for over a minute. After feeding, Little Penguins approach the colony in tight groups, remaining offshore until dusk. At dusk they come ashore, cross the beach, and head to their own burrows.



Tracking the Little Penguin

Penguins are truly marine animals and spend half of their life in the ocean. Scientists have overcome the difficulties of monitoring penguins in the water by using various forms of technology such as satellite tracking devices and depth loggers. Satellite information can tell how far the penguins travel each day or where they go and depth loggers how deep or how often they dive. Only adult penguins have devices attached to them and up to 20 adult penguins are tracked at a time.

Useful References;

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/penguinisland/interactive/interactive.html>

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/penguinisland/video/default.htm?tab=penguins#top>

<https://www.penguins.org.au/>