

LITTLE BLUE PENGUIN



notes

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Little Blue Penguins are also known as Fairy Penguins. These penguins can be found in cool, temperate coastal waters of both Australia and New Zealand. In Australia, they are found around the Southern coastline from Fremantle in the west, to Sydney in the east. These are the penguins found on Granite Island, Victor Harbor and in the famous 'Penguin Parade' at Phillip Island in Victoria. Little Blue Penguins are the only penguins to breed on our coastlands.

All penguins are very social animals. Some penguin colonies can number several million breeding pairs. Little Blue Penguins live in smaller colonies. Our colony has about 12 animals at one time. Can you see where they shelter? They rest in tussocks of grass and burrows close to the

water's edge where they are safe from predators. Penguins are most active on land during the hours of the morning and early in the evening. During the day they go on long fishing expeditions.

Penguins have been described as the 'bird least like a bird'. Although they do not use their wings for flying in the air, their movement could be described as 'flying in the water'. The penguin's wings have evolved into powerful flippers and they are the most efficient swimmers of all bird species. The Little Blue Penguin is a coastal feeder, not hunting further than 10km from the shore. They usually dive from 10 to 30 metres, which is quite shallow compared to an Emperor Penguin which has been recorded diving to a

depth of 265 metres. Their diet consists mainly of small schooling fish, squid and small crustaceans (crabs, shrimps etc). The penguin's mouth and tongue are lined with backward facing spines that help it to hold onto its slippery prey, which they swallow whole.

The penguin's outer feathers are short and overlap like tiles on a roof forming a water-tight outer layer. This covers a layer of dense down feathers keeping the skin dry and warm. Little Blue Penguins are white on the chest and abdomen and dark blue to black on their back. Their colouring enables them to be camouflaged from above, against the dark blue ocean and from underneath, against the light coloured sky. Have a look at Little Blue Penguins feet...do you notice a colour pattern?

The penguins' main predators in the water are sharks, sealions, and sea eagles and on land are Pacific Gulls, Tiger Snakes, foxes and cats. Water rats and large lizards will also take penguin eggs.

Little Blue Penguins nest from July to March when their food supply is most abundant. The male will start renovating an old nest or digging a new one in winter and begin displaying to females. Nests can be found in a burrow or under a bush, rock or tree root and are lined with plant material. They usually produce 2 eggs that hatch after about 36 days. The parents share the incubation with one sitting on the eggs while the other feeds at sea. When first hatched, Little Blue Penguin chicks are very weak, have their eyes closed and are covered with down. The parents continue to share the rearing of the chick, with the adult who has returned from the sea regurgitating semi-digested food for the chick. The chick will leave the nest at about 56 days when it is fully feathered and able to swim at sea by itself. Little Blue Penguins live for about 7 years.

Nearly half of Adelaide Zoo's collection of Little blue Penguins has been rescued from the wild due to injuries. Some of them have come from Port Lincoln and others from Victor Harbor. The keepers have supplied the penguins with eight burrows for breeding purposes and also for shelter when they are not breeding. If there are any young in the burrows, adults are usually fed three to four times daily, compared to twice daily, so they can feed their young. The keepers must hand-feed the penguins because they will not normally eat dead fish. The movement caused by the keeper holding the fish will stimulate them to feed. Some of them will even hold their wings back as they would if they were diving for a fish. This feeding from the bucket allows close-up monitoring of each individual penguins appetite and health. They live solely on 'weedie' whiting and pilchards and an adult with young may consume up to 8 fish in a feed (21-22 per day). The exhibit is capable of holding 14 birds comfortably. More than this will see territorial and 'pecking order' conflicts. All birds are weighed once a month to monitor their health.

At present the Little Blue Penguin is quite secure in the wild but their survival can be threatened by oil spills, plastic waste, other forms of pollution, and over-fishing. Oil is toxic and when ingested by penguins, which can cause internal problems. Humans are continually encroaching on the penguin's habitat with construction of buildings on the foreshore, reducing the areas for nesting. This increases human contact and also brings introduced predators such as dogs and cats.

