

Mammals of the Macquarie Harbour region

Tasmania is fortunate in being home to a number of unique mammals that occur nowhere else in the world, and in acting as a refuge for several species that have recently become extinct on the mainland. In contrast to many other areas on mainland Australia, Tasmanian mammals remain abundant and relatively easily seen by visitors to the State.

Tasmania has 39 species of non-marine (and 41 species of marine) mammals. An additional 13 species have been introduced, often to the detriment of the native mammals. All three major groups of mammals — monotremes, marsupials and placentals — are found in Tasmania. Indeed, Australia and New Guinea are the only countries in the world where all three groups occur. Representatives of all three groups can be found in the Macquarie Harbour region.

Monotremes

The monotremes are represented by only three species (one of which — the long-beaked echidna — is restricted to New Guinea). Monotremes are egg layers — a reproductive feature which does not occur in any other mammal.

Although most active at dusk and dawn, the platypus is occasionally seen during daylight hours along the Gordon River. It also occurs in Hogarth Falls Creek and Manuka Creek in Strahan, and has even been observed in freshwater streams that run onto Ocean Beach.

The platypus feeds on the muddy bottom of the river, locating crustaceans and worms through the remarkable ability to detect the electric fields that surround its prey. Interestingly, the platypus is one of the few mammals in the world which is venomous — the male possesses a spur on the inside of its hind leg. It is thought that this is used by males during territorial disputes.

The short-beaked echidna is commonly seen by visitors along the margins of roads during the summer months. The female echidna has a pouch into which she deposits her single egg. The young hatches within this pouch, using an egg-tooth analogous to those found in birds to break out of the shell. The young laps milk which is extruded from glands within the pouch — monotremes do not possess teats as do other

mammals. Pouch life lasts for nearly two months — the age, not surprisingly, at which spines develop.

Marsupials

The majority of land mammals in Tasmania (and Australia in general) are marsupials. They are characterised by the presence of a pouch in the female, although in some species the pouch may not be present, or only present during the breeding season. Marsupials give birth to extremely small, embryo-like young which suckle within the pouch. Nineteen species occur in the State.

The Tasmanian devil is a well known carnivorous marsupial which is confined to Tasmania. The animal once occurred on mainland Australia, but became extinct there about 500 years ago, possibly due to predation or competition with the dingo and the increasing aridity of the mainland environment. The devil is primarily a scavenger. It undertakes wide ranging forays in search of carrion. It is widespread across a number of habitats in the Macquarie Harbour region.

The strikingly beautiful spotted-tail quoll and its close relative, the eastern quoll are predatory marsupials. They are also known as the tiger cat and native cat, respectively. These names, however, are somewhat illogical — the tiger cat is spotted, not striped and is definitely not a cat! The eastern quoll has in recent years become extinct on the Australian mainland, largely due to habitat loss and competition and predation by introduced animals such as the fox and cat.

The dusky antechinus and its relative the swamp antechinus, as well as the little-known white-footed dunnart, occur in the Macquarie Harbour region. These are the smallest of the carnivorous Tasmanian marsupials.

A common marsupial often seen at Heritage Landing is the Tasmanian pademelon. The rather unusual common name is derived from the Aboriginal word for the animal. Like a number of Tasmanian marsupials, the pademelon until relatively recently occurred on mainland Australia but has become extinct there due to loss of habitat and predation by introduced animals. For the pademelon, and a number of other species, Tasmania acts as a last refuge.

The Bennetts wallaby also occurs in the Macquarie Harbour region. This common species is often inaccurately referred to as a kangaroo; however the only kangaroo in Tasmania — the For-

ester kangaroo — does not occur in the area. The potoroo is a small macropod which is also found in the Macquarie Harbour area.

Wombats also occur in the region. Their characteristic square droppings and burrows can be seen in the Bird River area. Large excavations often thought to be due to wombats, however, are often the work of echidnas,

Tasmania has two species of bandicoot. The brown bandicoot occurs in the Macquarie Harbour region, while the barred bandicoot is restricted to the drier, eastern half of the state. Both species are omnivorous — that is, they eat both plant and animal matter.

The ringtail possum, the brushtail possum and the eastern pygmy possum have been recorded from the Macquarie Harbour region. The pygmy possum, as its name implies, is tiny. At a mere 30 grams, it weighs less than a hundredth the weight of the better known brushtail possum. Like many of our native mammals, they make their homes in the hollows of trees in old-growth forest.

Placental mammals

The third group of mammals — and the group to which we ourselves belong — are known as placentals, a reference to the structure which affords nourishment to the developing embryo. The only native placental land mammals to occur in Tasmania are rodents and bats.

Two rodents, the swamp rat

and the beautiful, endemic long-tailed mouse are regular inhabitants of the rainforest of the lower Gordon River. Water rats occur in the streams of the region and can sometimes be seen in the Hogarth Falls area. The broad-toothed mouse occurs in the moorlands that surround Macquarie Harbour. Its droppings can be observed in the buttongrass plains around the harbour. Possibly five of Tasmania's eight species of bat occur in the region. Unfortunately, little work has been done on this poorly understood group of mammals, so distribution records are patchy.

Victims of the highway

Visitors to the State often comment on the distressingly high number of road-killed mammals they see during their stay. In many cases, this can be avoided by driving more slowly at night. Rangers regularly remove carcasses from the road in an effort to prevent scavenging Tasmanian devils, or animals such as the endangered wedge-tailed eagle, from becoming the next casualty. Often, female marsupials will have young in their pouch which has survived the accident and are able to be hand-raised and eventually released back into the wild.

Further reading

Strahan, R. (ed) (1983). *The Complete Book of Australian Mammals*. Angus and Robertson.

Watts, D. (1987). *Tasmanian Mammals: A Field Guide*. Tasmanian Conservation Trust, Hobart.