

# Little Penguin

*(Eudyptula minor)*



## Species Profile

Animalia - Aves

WEIGHT: 1000g

SIZE: 33cm

LIFESPAN: 7 years.

CONSERVATION STATUS: Population stable

## Little Penguins

Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) are the smallest of all penguin species. They stand approximately 33cm tall and weigh around one kilogram, with males weighing slightly more than females. Little Penguins breed in colonies along the southern coastlines of Australia and New Zealand, with Phillip Island in Victoria home to an estimated 32,000 breeding adults.

Little Penguins are seabirds but they can't fly. On land they waddle and tumble about the

colony taking care of their delicate plumage and raising chicks, but in the water they are masterful swimmers using their well-adapted wings as flippers to 'fly' through the ocean foraging for food. Little penguins can dive 200 – 1300 times per day, with an average depth ranging from 10m – 30m, and can swim on average 2-4km per hour.

Adult little penguins are the only penguins in the world with blue and white feathers instead of black and white feathers. They are 'countershaded', the dark blue back of penguins blends in with the water to camouflage against any predators flying or swimming overhead, and the light stomach blends in with the sky to camouflage against any predators swimming underneath.

## Habitat

On land Little Penguins live in holes in the ground known as burrows. These burrows provide a place for Little Penguins to rest, nest

and moult. Burrows also provide protection from predators and extreme heat. While on land little penguins remain inside their burrows during the day to avoid predators.

## Diet

Adult little penguins from Phillip Island can spend over 4 weeks out at sea fishing in the Bass Strait and Port Phillip Bay. They prey on young barracouta, anchovies, red cod, warehou and pilchards. They also eat interesting things like squid and even sea jellies. When chasing prey they can flap their flippers up to five times per second to increase speed, catching about 25% of their body weight in food daily! During breeding season, little penguins are what the scientists call 'central place feeders'. This means once the little penguins have finished hunting for food, they return to their burrow on land, a central place to feed their chicks

Before coming to land, little penguins gather offshore in groups called 'rafts'. They wait for dusk before crossing the beach, to hide from predators such as birds of prey like pacific gulls and sea eagles. They waddle across the shore in groups and follow familiar tracks back to their burrow. Along the way, they look for landmarks or listen to a partner calling to help them find their way home.

## Breeding

Little penguins spend approximately 80% of their lives in the ocean, coming ashore only when it is necessary to maintain their burrows, breed and raise young, as well as moult their old feathers. Male penguins are slightly heavier and have a bigger beak with a more defined hook than females. Both male and female penguins will build and maintain their burrow, lining it with vegetation.

Most penguins renew the pair bond each season, although research shows they have a divorce rate of 18% to almost 50% in some years if breeding has been unsuccessful.

Breeding season is usually between August to February where females lay two eggs, each weighing 55g, which are the size, shape and colour of a chicken's egg.

## Threats

Human impacts such as introduced predators, over exploitation of marine ecosystems, oil spills, marine pollution and climate change can threaten little penguins and their ecosystems. The more we know about little penguins, the more we can do to protect them.

## Island Ark

Phillip Island is fox-free which provides a haven safe from introduced predators for Little Penguins to breed, but they remain vulnerable to human activities such as habitat disturbance, artificial light at night, marine debris, overfishing, plastic pollution and feral cats.

## Securing a brighter future

Phillip Island Nature Parks provides a sanctuary for Little Penguins. Nature Parks rangers protect them through predator control programs, habitat management, education, regular beach cleans to remove plastic debris from local beaches, and rehabilitation. Scientific research and other conservation activities are also conducted to better understand the implications of local and global threats to Little Penguins in order to protect them today and into the future.

*Little Penguin guardians contribute to securing a brighter future for this protected species by supporting scientific research and conservation efforts to protect Phillip Island's wildlife.*