

Tasmanian Devil

Our unique carnivorous marsupial

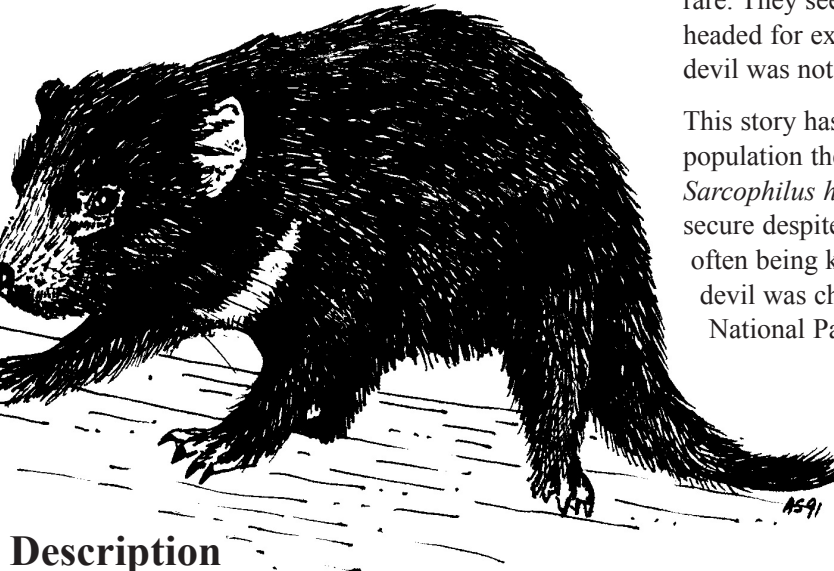


Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania

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The Tasmanian devil is unlikely to be mistaken for any other animal. Its spine-chilling screeches, black colour, and reputed bad temper led the early European settlers to call it The Devil. Although only the size of a small dog, it can sound and look incredibly fierce. Powerful jaws and teeth enable it to completely devour its prey — bones, fur and all.

In prehistoric times, the animal roamed widely over mainland Australia. Today, the hardy little devil is only found in Tasmania and is our most widely recognised endemic animal.



Description

It has a thick-set, squat build, with a relatively large, broad head and a short, thick tail. Fur colour is mostly black with white flashes on the rump and chest. About one in five is wholly black. Adult males are usually larger than adult females. Large males weigh up to 12 kg, and stand about 30 cm high at the shoulder.

Habitat

Devils are widespread in Tasmania from the coast to the mountains, from cold wet regions to warm dry areas. They live in coastal heath, open dry sclerophyll forest, and mixed sclerophyll rainforest — in fact, almost anywhere they can shelter by day, and find food at night.

History and distribution

Fossils have been found all over the Australian mainland, but even before European settlement began, the devil was extinct outside Tasmania, most probably as a result of the spread of dingoes.

To the early settlers of Hobart Town, devils were a nuisance — raiding the poultry yards — and local populations were soon eliminated.

In 1830 the Van Diemen's Land Co. introduced a bounty scheme to remove devils, as well as Tasmanian tigers and wild dogs, from their northwest properties: 2/6 (25 cents) for male devils and 3/6 (35 cents) for females. Animals caught in snares for their fur were eaten by devils. As well, devils were believed to take lambs and sheep. For over a century they were trapped and poisoned and became very rare. They seemed, like the Tasmanian tiger, to be headed for extinction. Despite this, the Tasmanian devil was not protected by law until June 1941.

This story has a happy ending, however, because the population then gradually increased. Today, *Sarcophilus harrisii* is abundant and apparently secure despite suffering from illegal persecution and often being killed by cars. Fittingly, the Tasmanian devil was chosen as the symbol of the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Lifestyle

Devils are nocturnal. During the day they usually hide in a den, or in dense bush. Active at night, devils roam up to 16 km over their home range, using well-defined trails while searching for food. They usually amble along with a characteristic gait (notice the 2 – 1 – 1 – 2 pattern) but can gallop quickly with both hind feet together. Young devils are agile and can climb quite well. Except around a breeding den, devils are not territorial.

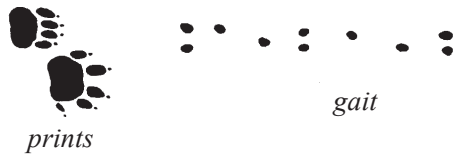
Sound and behaviour

The famous gape or yawn of the devil that looks so threatening can be misleading. This display is performed more from uncertainty than aggression. Devils produce a strong odour when under stress, but when calm and relaxed they are not smelly, and keep themselves clean.

The devil makes a variety of fierce noises, from harsh coughs and snarls to high pitched screeches. Soft grunting snorts are low level threats while a sharp sneeze is used as a challenge to other devils, and frequently comes before a fight.

Many of these spectacular behaviours are bluff and

part of a ritual to minimise harmful fighting when feeding communally at a large carcass.



Diet

The Tasmanian devil is carnivorous (meat-eating). It is the largest member of the family of carnivorous marsupials, the Dasyuridae. This family includes the eastern quoll (native cat), spotted-tailed quoll (tiger cat) and antechinus (marsupial mice). The devil is mainly a scavenger and feeds on whatever is available. However, devils do hunt and although they mainly catch the sick, injured, old, or young, they can catch healthy prey. Wallabies and various small mammals and birds are eaten. Reptiles, amphibians, insects and even sea squirts have been found in the stomachs of wild devils. Carcasses of sheep and cattle provide food in farming areas.

Breeding

Devils usually mate in March. Devil sperm is among the largest of all animals! The bean-sized young are born in April after only 21 days gestation. More young are born than can be accommodated in the mother's rear-opening pouch, which has four teats. The young attach firmly to a teat and are carried in the pouch for about four months. After this time they start venturing out of the pouch and are then left in a den, often a deserted wombat burrow. Young devils are weaned at five or six months of age, and behave remarkably like puppies, according to a few lucky people who have them breeding under their houses! Most young devils have left their mother and are living alone in the bush by late December. They probably start breeding at the end of their second year.

Status and conservation

Tasmanian devils are wholly protected, which means that you cannot trap, kill or have in your possession a devil or any part of one unless you obtain a permit from the Parks and Wildlife Service. At present devils are abundant, however this situation may only be temporary. History shows island populations are very vulnerable to persecution, disease and introduced species, we must work hard to prevent foxes from

becoming established in Tasmania. Devil numbers are monitored by yearly spotlight surveys.

How you can help

Drive more slowly at night, especially where there is bush on both sides of the road. Devils and other animals 'cleaning up' the carcasses of road-killed animals are themselves in danger of being run over. You can help by moving road-killed animals off the road, thereby reducing the risk of further deaths. Make sure you stop your car in a safe and clearly visible place.

Viewing wild devils

Tasmanian devils can be seen in many rural and bushland areas when slowly driving at night along secondary roads. Often your local wildlife ranger will know where you can best view them. Some of the best areas are the Asbestos Range, Mt William and Cradle Mountain National Parks. Some tourist operators run devil feeding programs which can show much of the animal's fascinating behaviour.

Further information

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