

ABC NEWS

Tasmania 'losing' its penguins as authorities grapple with spate of dog attacks

By Katri Uibu

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Little penguins live in multiple colonies around Tasmania. (Supplied: The Advocate/Brodie Weeding)

Eric Woehler is sick of the continuous penguin deaths from dog attacks in Tasmania.

"It's unbelievable that we're having this conversation yet again," he says.

He is referring to the latest attack, which saw 42 little penguins being mauled to death at Wynyard in the state's north-west last Thursday.

There have been seven attacks on little penguin colonies in the north and north-west in the past year, leaving a total death toll of more than 170.

It's an all too common scenario for Mr Woehler, the convenor of Birdlife Tasmania.

"It just seems that we barely forget about one dog attack and then there's another one that happens almost straight away," he says.

"The Tasmanian community clearly has had enough.

"[Yet], we don't see any real response in terms of changes on the ground."

Key points:

- More than 170 little penguins in various colonies around Tasmania have been killed in the past year
- Experts say it's put the species in a "tenuous" position
- Wildlife advocates say it is time for more action from the State Government

Orphaned chicks need round-the-clock care

After the latest attack, the nearby Penguin Rehab and Release facility swung into action rescuing orphaned chicks.

"They're standing at the edge of their burrows, calling for their parents," treasurer Sondra Roberts says.

"They're struggling. They're little, they're vulnerable, they can't fly."

Ten orphaned chicks were taken in, but one has since died.

The chicks need intensive care; they are kept in a dark room, each one in a separate box and they are laying on towels that need to be washed.

Ms Roberts and her colleagues have had a "hectic few days", trying to keep the chicks alive.

"That involves a tube down their throat so you can imagine a little penguin is not keen on having a tube down its throat," she says.

"[The volunteer] had to do that every two hours and at that time she was doing that for 10 chicks."

On Monday, Ms Roberts did 10 loads of washing and the group put a call out for towel donations.



Volunteers looking after the rescued chicks are worried the colony will now not be viable. (Supplied: Penguin Rehab And Release)



Nine orphaned chicks are being cared for following the attack in Wynyard. (Supplied: Penguin Rehab And Release)

Ms Roberts fears for the future of the colony at Wynyard.

"One of the local people who's involved with that colony has said there are probably only 20 penguins left there," she says.

"That means that colony is not going to be viable. It could be the end of that colony.

Each time there's another attack, solutions — such as installing fences, security cameras and even dog bans — have been suggested, but advocates complain no government action has followed.

Survival of Tasmanian population 'becomes more tenuous' with attacks

Chris Burridge, an associate professor from the University of Tasmania who has been researching little penguins, says Tasmanian colonies have taken a hit.

While data on Tasmanian penguin populations is decades old, there have been suggestions the attacks have left colonies under threat.

Dr Burridge says the loss of breeder adults can set back a population two or three years in terms of reproductive output.

"We will certainly lose local colonies if there's no intervention to protect those colonies from access by predators," he says.

"If we lose individual colonies, the existence of that species in Tasmania overall becomes more tenuous."

Wynyard Mayor Robby Walsh is bewildered as to why nothing has been done.

"Whilst we want to help, we can't interfere. It falls within the jurisdiction of the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment [DPIPWE]," he says.

"We as a community are seriously concerned about what's happened. We're worried that it may happen again.

"It's a serious thing and I think the Parks and Wildlife need to work in some sort of assistance."

Call to increase penalties

Mr Woehler says current measures are "clearly inadequate" and he wants tougher penalties.

Under the Dog Control Act, the owner of a dog which injures an animal can be fined up to \$650.

"Let's make it about \$1,000 as a starting point. We're talking about \$40,000 for what we've just seen on the last weekend," Mr Woehler argues.

"We're losing our penguins in Tasmania."

Penguin deaths in Tasmania

2019

- Doctors Rocks (August) 42
- Picnic Point (May) 18
- Low Head (March) 12
- Bicheno (January) 4

2018

- Bicheno (November) 30
- Low Head (November) 58
- Low Head (June) 12



Eric Woehler says the Tasmanian community has had enough. (ABC News: Rhiannon Shine)

The Tasmanian Government announced in June that it would review the act to strengthen laws and increase penalties for people not properly controlling their dogs.

In a statement, it said the review was being "progressed as a priority" given the peak breeding season occurs over summer.

The Government said it had formed the Tasmanian Penguin Advisory Group to direct resources towards protecting little penguins, and that rangers would be deployed over summer to help provide education services.

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