

**Talking Point: Saving little penguins is a labour of love**

**RHYLL VALLIS: Volunteers don't want to lose a special — and super cute — species**

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ADULT little penguins spend most of their time at sea, coming ashore at dusk, and those seen ashore during daytime are often sick, injured or lost.

We rescue these sick and injured penguins and provide rehydration, treatment for parasites and wounds, and nutrition (most birds arrive severely underweight). We also have a swim therapy pool to ensure penguins can swim for the several hours necessary to survive in the wild once released.

Few people know that little penguins have a salt gland above their eyes to filter salt from seawater, providing fresh water. And that their feet are oddly fragile which means they can suffer something called bumblefoot, which sounds cute but isn't (it involves ulcers).

These traits mean that the facility in Burnie requires a constant supply of fresh sand (for feet) and fresh seawater, both of which are provided by volunteers. The facility was built with the help of volunteers, using grant funding from the Devonport, Burnie and Wynyard-Waratah councils.

We opened in November and received the most penguins in January, when young birds are making their first trips from burrow to ocean. The directionally challenged ones can end up inland or even on the highway. Our rescued birds have also been found behind wheelie bins in backyards, and one at a childcare centre.



Each penguin has its own personality.

Every penguin in our care displays its own personality and quirks. Some birds remain biting, hissing 'attack' penguins their whole stay, while others nurture younger birds, keeping guard over and disciplining them, and teaching them how to preen. Some are stress squealers and regurgitators. Occasionally, a bird stands constantly while in care (even when their feet are swollen and sore) to

hide any signs of distress. This is an instinctive defence against being selected by a predator and can easily fool people into thinking a critically ill bird is healthy.

One long-term resident, the very determined P7 (still in care) has a stubby little tail and weighed less than a can of beans when found at midday in January walking along the ocean's edge. Malnourished and anaemic — from an extremely heavy infestation of ticks, fleas, lice and roundworms — she made what was a heroic trek for her condition, determined to find someone to feed her. Now an adult, P7 is prone to expressing her displeasure by vocalising (similar to a bark). A fan of peace and quiet, she will go to the enclosure wall and bark if someone on the other side is making too much noise. She also likes to show off in the pool.

Then there's P15 who arrived with brain trauma which caused her to act like a young chick rather than the adult bird she was. She followed the much younger P7 around, acting in a submissive way, which rather confused P7. Once recovered and no longer behaving like a chick, P15 would stand at the wall of the enclosure calling for her mate, who she has hopefully found since her release in August.



Sarah Facey and Jacinta Land rake sand at Penguin Rehab and Release. Compacted sand can cause painful bumblefoot condition.

Our volunteers do many essential jobs. They shuttle rescued birds to the vet, our facility, other carers and release locations. They clean, do laundry, manage websites and social media, respond to media and public inquiries, and some also rescue birds. They rake the enclosure sand to keep it from getting compacted

(and causing bumblefoot) and they place penguins in the pool and supervise their swimming (there's also a nanny cam in the pool enclosure). They also fish often-reluctant penguins out of the pool which sounds like fun, but can get pretty cold in winter. Volunteers also help with the preparation of fish and rehydration fluids because multiple patients may need rehydration every two hours, and feeding up to four times a day.

Volunteers are also dedicated scroungers and fundraisers. Little penguins prefer to eat fresh, ocean-going fish, which can be quite expensive. One penguin even decided it would only eat trevalla, which costs roughly \$50 a kilogram! Volunteers also hunt for strange care items such as catheters, and know an impressive amount about catheter size and type.

Our volunteers do this work because they don't like little penguins suffering and dying. Some also fear that if they don't do the work, no one else will, and then little penguins could go the way of the Tasmanian tiger. All that would be left is pictures and people who remember the time when there were wild penguins in Tasmania. This would be a shame, because those who have had the privilege to observe and learn about little penguins know how unique they are (besides being super cute).

We thank all our donors (in particular the Spirit of Tasmania) and volunteers, who help us to give sick and injured penguins another chance at life.

**Rhyll Vallis is secretary of Penguin Rehab and Release, which is a Landcare and Wildcare group.**