

Penguin protection: dog attacks, oil spills and overcoming the human threat

Meg Powell



RECOVERY: Two penguins make a slow recovery in rehab after being found injured and covered in oil.
Picture: Brodie Weeding

When a dying little penguin was brought to Burnie wildlife carer Kathy Grieveson for rehabilitation recently, she was both angered and confused - but not surprised.

For starters, the penguin was discovered on the side of a road near the small farming community of Elliott, about 10 kilometres from the nearest possible penguin habitat.

"The penguin was a fledgling, still young enough to be in the burrow being cared for by its parents," she said.

"The penguin was very unwell when it was brought to us and despite our best efforts it died after a short time in care."

But - after years in the wildlife game and of looking after little penguins in particular - Ms Grieveson has seen countless injuries and deaths inflicted on little penguins across North-West Tasmania.

LIFE ON LAND

The veteran penguin carer is certainly no stranger to the devastating impact humans, dogs and habitat erosion can have on a colony, learning to recognise many of the signs in her years of work.

"It wasn't a raptor that picked it up and took it, much as I'd like to blame it on that," she said, referring to the penguin that mysteriously appeared at Elliott recently.

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Kathy Grieveson

"It would have left marks on its body.

"A post mortem examination showed that the penguin died of a severe fungal infection, most often the result of being kept in unsuitable, unhygienic conditions.

"It would seem that not only was the penguin removed from the colony and transported to Elliott, it was also kept in captivity somewhere before apparently being dumped beside the road when he became unwell."

She said fungal infection was a "huge killer" for seabirds when they were taken into human care.

"Penguins are water-based animals," she said.

"They sleep in the ocean. They live out there for months.

"People capture them and take them home, but they're taking them to an environment they are not adapted to. Just because you see them on land does not mean that is their main environment."



CARER: Penguin Rehab and Release coordinator Kathy Grieveson. Picture: Brodie Weeding

The penguin lover said she wanted people to know about the need for wildlife to be cared for by trained, experienced people.

"It is illegal to keep protected species without the appropriate permits," she explained.

"We would also like to invite the community to contact us if they ever come across a similar situation."

COLONY ATTACKS

A swirl of publicity has surrounded famous, human-centric cases of harm in recent years, such as that of two men sprung allegedly attempting to smuggle a live little penguin and eggs from a rookery at Low Head last year, or the 18-year-old boy who slaughtered six little penguins at Sulphur Creek in 2016.

But, as countless community groups, carers and advocates have pointed out, the main killer in recent years has been unrestrained dogs.

Carers like Ms Grieveson are often called in to pick up the pieces when sick, injured and dead penguins are discovered after an attack. And the frequency of incidents is "alarming".

Since 2018 alone, about 203 penguins have been reported to be killed in dog attacks across the North and North-West. A large majority of those were in mass killings.



MASSACRE: One of more than 40 little penguins found dead after a dog attack at Doctors Rocks in 2019. Picture: Brodie Weeding

In 2018, 75 little penguins were reported to be killed in dog attacks. Five of these were reported on King Island, and the rest at Low Head. A single mass killing in June that year wiped out 58 little penguins overnight.

BirdLife Tasmania convenor Dr Eric Woehler said at the time it could take penguin colonies in that area up to a decade to recover.

In 2019, 123 penguins were discovered and reported dead after dog attacks.

A single incident at Doctors Rocks saw the death of 42 adult penguins, but, in a world first, eight starving, orphaned chicks were successfully rescued from their burrows, rehabilitated and released back to the wild about two months later.

In 2020, only five penguins were reported to have been killed in a dog attack at Burnie.

OIL MYSTERY

On top of direct human activity and loose dogs, a third danger poses a threat for little penguins - oil.

Ms Grieveson herself has cared for six little penguins over the last two summers, all discovered between Crayfish Creek and Stanley Wharf, all smothered in oil.

The centre is currently caring for three of those little penguins, each of which has had to go through a strict, "highly distressing" cleansing.

"One came to us in November and she was completely covered in oil," Ms Grieveson said.

"She'd been trying to clean herself and stripped some of her feathers.

"The we got another in November, and he was completely covered in ... a very heavy engine oil. He'd been found under a car and suffered a traumatic brain injury, singed feathers, a damaged foot, pieces missing out of his bill."



BRIGADE: Penguin Rehab and Release volunteers Sarah Facey, Barbara Hoyt, Dee Todd, Emma and Harriet Pilgrim, and Kathy Grieveson. Picture: Brodie Weeding

She said all three birds had been extremely underweight due to the oil interfering with their natural waterproofing, preventing them from hunting for fish.

"The source of the oil spills is still unknown, but there appears to have been a number of recurring small spills somewhere in the vicinity of Stanley," she mused.

"Rehabilitating these birds, it can be hard. We have to put them back out there where it happens again and again."

Got any information on the source of the oil? Found any lost, injured or isolated birds?
Contact the Bonorong Rescue hotline on 0477 264 625, or Marine Conservation Tasmania on 0427 942 537.