

24 Jan 2025 Bicheno Penguins – Important Update

Unfortunately, there has been an unusual population decrease in Little Penguin numbers along parts of the East Coast of Tasmania, especially in Bicheno, since mid-December.

Why has there been a rapid decline in Penguin numbers?

Based on all of the current data available to us, the rapid decrease is related to a rise in the ocean temperature that has resulted in a depletion of food supply for the penguins. The recent increase of people on the foreshore at dusk is exacerbating the pressures on penguins.

We have received reports of water temperatures approaching 22°C off Bicheno, indicating that tropical waters are reaching the East Coast of Tasmania - this is caused by a strengthening of the East Australia Current. Generally, warmer waters are less productive than cooler/cold waters, so there is less penguin food in warm water.

As a result, penguins are forced to spend more time at sea looking for food, both for themselves and if they are breeding, for their chicks. At some point, the penguins will have been forced to "decide" to abandon breeding and direct their energies into preparing for their annual moult. Adults can double their weight ahead of moult, so they have a great demand for food to survive moult/fasting for 20+ days.

The presence of people on the foreshore at dusk prevents penguins coming ashore. Penguins return to land after sunset to minimise the risk of predation, and the presence of people will either prevent the birds coming ashore or force them to come ashore farther from their nests, increasing the risk of predation. I would support any local efforts to inform locals/visitors of the increased threat they pose to penguins by their presence along the foreshore at dusk. This is particularly important now with the conditions being faced by the penguins - the last thing they need is additional threats, disturbance and pressures.

We thank Dr Eric Woehler – who was the Convenor of BirdLife Tasmania for 20 years, and has been working on Little Penguins in Tas on/off since the 1970s – for providing the information.

How can the Bicheno community and visitors help?

There has been a substantial increase in the number of tourists and visitors looking for Little Penguins on the beaches and foreshores at sunset, and this is unfortunately hindering the few remaining birds that Bicheno has left from getting back home safely.

It is very important that as a community we get the message out to visitors about the unlikelihood of seeing Little Penguins because of the very low numbers currently and for the next 3-4 weeks. The penguins will be moulting and staying on land. As a result, there will be very few Penguins coming out of the water. Obviously, it is very important to leave these moulting birds alone as they are already under stress during the moulting process and are easily disturbed.

We must protect the Little Penguins that are coming home, so please spread the word to any guests or people visiting Bicheno. Together, we can help rebuild their numbers and help these incredible Little Penguins.

Bicheno Community Development Association -

Dr Eric Woehler - Bicheno Penguin Tours