



MIDDLE ISLAND PROJECT

2019-2020 - Season Report



The Little Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) is a seabird that is an important component of Warrnambool's biodiversity. The Middle Island Project (the Project) has been working to conserve the local colony for fifteen years now and, during that time has had strong and ongoing support from Warrnambool City Council, Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network, Deakin University, the Warrnambool Field Naturalist Club, the Department of Land Water and Planning and Parks Victoria.

PetStock and The Vet Group are the major sponsors of the Project and their contribution and support is invaluable.

The aim of the Middle Island Project Season Report is to provide feedback to Warrnambool City Council and project partners regarding the key achievements made during the year from July 2019 to June 2020.

The Project highlights for 2019-2020 include:

- Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network received funding from the Department of Land Water & Planning to employ a Penguin Monitoring Coordinator
- The arrival of a new puppy, Oberon, named by the community
- Tula's retirement and celebration
- Ongoing sponsorship by local businesses
- Continued popularity of the tours
- Continued widespread media interest
- Completion of Deakin University Honours project by Shelby Schumacher
- Training in penguin handling and microchipping at Phillip Island Nature Park

The Project challenges for 2019 – 2020 included:

- Predation of the little penguin
- Low population of little penguins
- COVID-19 and resultant cancellation of the Easter Holiday tours & activities
- Dog transport and facilities

Key Penguin Statistics

- Penguins arrived early to breed
- Reduction in breeding capacity

- 8 penguins sighted during arrival counts
- Lowest number of penguins arriving
- No evidence of breeding was observed
- Moulting occurred a month earlier than previous years
- Estimated total population of 70 to 100

Key Maremma Statistics

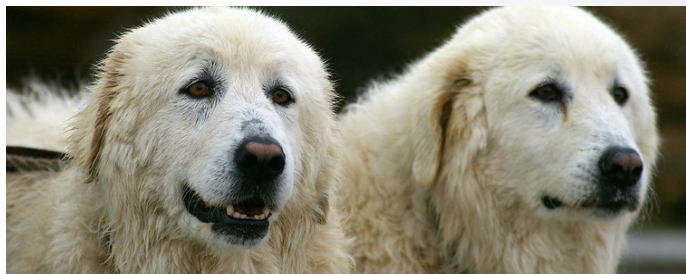
- The guardian season gets longer each year
- 7 dogs
- Arrival of puppy Oberon
- Retirement of guardian Tula

Little Penguin Facts

- Little penguins are approximately 33cm tall
- The fastest little penguin on record could swim at 6.4kph

Key Education Statistics

- Tours & activities were cancelled due to COVID-19
- 57 tours conducted
- 1,215 people attended
- \$15,652 in ticket sales
- 27 schools attended & 1190 students engaged
- 12 bus groups & 296 participants engaged



LITTLE PENGUIN POPULATION

Since the beginning of the project in 2006, the Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network (WCLN) has been responsible for monitoring the Little Penguin population on Middle Island.

WCLN conducts dusk arrival counts to estimate population size of breeding penguins, undertakes burrow surveys to record reproductive success and where possible microchips individual penguins and collects their morphological data.

Dr. Patricia Corbett was employed by WCLN to coordinate the Penguin Monitoring program this season and according to the Monitoring Program Season Report (Corbett, P 2020; Middle Island Little Penguin Monitoring Program 2019-20 Season Report) the 2019-2020 season was disappointing. At the end of June and beginning of July 2019, a total of 15 penguins arrived early to breed and were killed by dogs and/or foxes. The majority of these penguins were males resulting in the colony losing more than half the number of male breeders that had been recorded in the previous year. Consequently, there was a reduction in breeding capacity very early in the season. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that when further penguins arrived to breed it was late in the season and while some of these individuals paired up, they did not breed.

Five penguin arrival counts were conducted between 5 October 2019 and 12 January 2020 and only 8 penguins were sighted. This is the lowest number of penguins arriving during a count since the beginning of the Project. A total of seven nest checks were completed during this time and four individual birds were microchipped, three females and one male. Two pairs were observed in December 2019, however they did not lay eggs. In fact, no evidence of breeding was observed. Penguins began to moult from the 14 January 2020, around a month earlier than usual. Observations at the entrances to 54 penguin nests between 14 January 2020 and 19 February 2020 revealed penguin feathers in the entrance of a burrow, indicating a moulting penguin inside. Using both these direct and indirect observations it was estimated that the total population remains at about 70 – 100 individuals.



CONSERVATION & ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Maremma Dogs

The 2019-2020 year has been an eventful one for the Maremma dogs. With penguins arriving earlier each year, their season as guardians of the penguins gets longer each year. There are now seven dogs that are being managed by the Project.

A new puppy arrived in late August 2019. A naming competition was held with an enthusiastic response from the community and an array of different naming options. After much deliberation the name Oberon was selected. Oberon is a German name that means noble bear.

After serving as a penguin guardian for nine years, Tula began to suffer from severe arthritis and could no longer cross to Middle Island. A retirement function was organised for her and held at Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum. It was well attended by those involved in the various aspects of the Project, sponsors and members of the community. It was a successful event that ended up receiving much publicity.

Fox Predation

Fox predation continues to be the biggest threat to the survival of the penguin colony. The coordinated control program by Warrnambool City Council takes into account seasonal conditions like tides, fox and penguin movements. It is important to be aware of these variables and changing conditions to ensure program efficiency.

Dogs must be on the island as early in the season as possible when it is safe to access. Crossing to the island during the winter months is mostly a dangerous exercise. Yet as soon as the opportunity arises the foxes have been gaining access. The Project team need to be ready to mobilize the dogs and access the island before the foxes get a chance and this is proving to be quite challenging.

RESEARCH

Deakin University student Shelby Lyn Schumacher recently completed Honours research on 'An Investigation of the Value of the Middle Island Penguin Project'.

The Middle Island Penguin Project uses The Warrnambool Method of Wildlife Conservation and is familiar to audiences across the world through a film released in 2015 called Oddball. The popularity of the film is said to have attracted visitors to Warrnambool providing indirect evidence of the project's value. However, to date no study has been undertaken to determine the true value of this project. This research focuses on the intrinsic and recreational value of the project in Warrnambool and is based on data collected from 245 questionnaires conducted during the Victorian summer holidays 2019-2020.

EDUCATION

The local community and visitors continue to be highly supportive and engaged with the Project.

The Meet the Maremma tours were conducted between Boxing Day and Australia Day this season, along with five additional tours conducted in March. Plans were in place for further tours during the Easter school holiday break. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and government restrictions on movement, these tours were cancelled and all those who had booked and paid for tours during this time were given full refunds.

Between December 2019 and March 2020 57 tours were conducted, enabling 1,215 people the opportunity to experience the Project by learning about Middle Island, penguin conservation and meeting a Maremma ambassador dog. The total income from tour ticket sales for the 2019/2020 season was \$15,652.

Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum also run sessions with groups that visit and provide an opportunity to learn about the Project, penguin conservation and the Maremma dogs. From 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 a total of 27 schools attended with 1190 students engaged and 12 bus groups with 296 participants engaged.



MEDIA & PUBLICATION

The Middle Island Project continues to attract media attention from the global to the local community. A summary of media attention and reach by the Project during 2019-2020 includes:

DATE	COMPANY	LOCATION	MEDIA TYPE
2019 June	24/06 The Standard	Warrnambool	Newspaper
	25/06 Fitzmedia Productions	Warrnambool	Facebook video
2019 July	25/07 The Royal Auto	Victoria	Magazine (Article online)
	23/07 Womens Weekly	Australia	Magazine
2019 August	03/08 Pooches at Play	Melbourne	TV Series
2019 September			
2019 October	15/10 FitzMedia Productions	Warrnambool	Facebook video
	16/10 The Standard	Warrnambool	News website
	17/10 LadBible		News website
	17/10 PedestrianTV		News website
	17/10 10 Daily	Australia	News website
	17/10 ABC News	Australia	News website
	17/10 New Idea	Australia	News website
	19/10 Probono Australia	Australia	News website
	20/10 Daily Mail	United Kingdom	News website
	28/10 A Big Country (ABC Radio)	Australia	Radio
2018 November	07/11 FitzMedia Productions	Warrnambool	Facebook video
	08/11 The Standard	Warrnambool	Newspaper (online)
2018 December	13/12 The Standard		
2020 January	13/01 Dog Jobs 2020 (Channel 31)	Melbourne	TV/Youtube series
2020 February	10/02 ABC	Southwest	Radio
2020 March	06/03 The Standard 08/03 ABC Southwest	Warrnambool	Newspaper
	13/03 Tas Talks	Southwest Victoria Tasmania	Radio Radio
2020 April			
2020 May			
2020 June			
Media inquiries	SBS News French group New York publication Nine News		

The Middle Island Project Working Group manages a Facebook page, as well as a Twitter and an Instagram account. These social media tools are a convenient and far reaching way to provide information and updates on the Project. It also allows the community with a connection to the project, the Maremma dogs and the little penguin colony.

Access to information about the project is also provided through the Warrnambool City Council web site at <http://www.warrnamboolpenguins.com.au>.



COMMUNITY

The Project provides the opportunity to build community capacity and participation in conservation management and wildlife education. The opportunity to volunteer in penguin monitoring or other aspects of the Project builds skills and experience in penguin handling, microchipping, dog handling and first aid.

Deakin University Environmental Science students have gained experience and training through the Project to contribute to completion of their studies.

The community connection and support of the Project is evidenced by events such as Tula's retirement function and the communication of activities via social media. The Project continues to receive positive feedback and the support of project partners.

Wallis, A & Schneider, L (2020) Middle Island Project Season Report 2019-2020. Report to Warrnambool City Council, Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia.



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