

Tasmanian devil

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Its scientific name is *Sarcophilus harrisii*. *Sarcophilus* meaning 'flesh lover'. They are the largest of the carnivorous marsupials (dasyurids). Dasyurids range in size from the Tasmanian devil that weighs 8 to 9kg (18 to 20 lbs), to one of the world's smallest mammals, the narrow-nosed planigale, that weighs only 5 to 9g.



CHARACTERISTICS

Tasmanian devils have a black coat, with white markings on the chest, shoulders and rump. This dark colouring camouflages them when moving around at night.

When angry, their ears turn red due to an increase in blood flow, another reason they are likened to devils. However, despite their name, Tasmanian devils are shy animals.

BEHAVIOUR

Being strictly nocturnal, Tasmanian devils rest during the day in underground burrows, hollow logs or caves. They are solitary, but not territorial and may use a number of burrows or dens in their home range.

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DIET

Tasmanian devils are largely carrion (dead flesh) eaters, but will also hunt. When hunting they capture prey through ambush or persistent pursuit. Their strong teeth and powerful jaws enable them to feed on a variety of prey e.g. small mammals, birds and insects. All flesh, fur, feathers and small bones are consumed, with only the large, indigestible bones being left.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

Tasmanian devils live in most habitats with a preference for eucalypt forests and woodlands. They are only found in Tasmania and are classed as vulnerable.

REPRODUCTION

Mating occurs between March and April. After a gestation period of 31 days, up to 50 offspring are born. They are a little larger than a grain of rice. Females have only four teats, so only the first four young to attach themselves to a nipple may survive. An average of two to three will reach maternal independence. The young leave the pouch at 15 weeks of age. At this time, they are left in a den, while their mother searches for food. Lactation continues for a further 15 weeks. Young are independent in November or December. The average lifespan of the Tasmanian devil is six years.

THREATS

In recent years a horrific disease, that manifests as cancer-like tumours, has been devastating populations. Little is known about the disease. Tasmanian authorities are currently researching ways to prevent its spread and hopefully find a cure. Spotlight surveys show a decline in sightings of 53% state wide.

Other threats include habitat destruction and being hit by cars on roadsides when feeding on road kill.



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