

Penguins on Parade

Wildlife photographer [Doug Gimesy](#) shows us a colony of little penguins enjoying an inner-city lifestyle.

by **Melissa Fulton** *Deputy Editor*



A little penguin at St Kilda pier, just a stone's throw from Melbourne CBD.



After talking to scientist and volunteer researcher Zoe Hogg, the life of a city-dwelling St Kilda penguin sounds pretty sweet. The colony of 1400-odd little penguins lives just 7km south of Melbourne's CBD. "They get up about four o'clock in the morning and they stand on the rocks and have a bit of a talk to each other," says Hogg, who has worked with Earthcare St Kilda – a non-profit group working with the penguins – for the past 30 years. "And then they go out to sea at around about six o'clock in the morning, and go fishing for a little while and then swim around and just float around, and come in at dusk." There, they have a bit of a chat on the rocks again, "looking at each other and wondering if they want to have a bit of sex". Then it's off to bed before getting up in the morning to do it all over again.

According to Hogg, these penguins – perhaps the only colony of wild penguins in the world to live, feed and forage exclusively in a bay – are rather enjoying the metropolitan lifestyle. "They're fat and lazy," she says, laughing and pointing out their size – they're markedly larger than their famous Phillip Island neighbours roughly 70km away. The difference is they don't have to travel too far for food – it's about a 14km round trip per day on a foraging expedition, compared to an average of twice that for their neighbours, who also have to dive deeper for fish.

Nor are the city penguins particularly worried about noise. "If there's a party on at the kiosk, they usually sit under the kiosk and seem to listen to it," she says. And they're typically not too bothered by people either, who come in hordes all year round to see the penguins do their thing – between 60,000 and 100,000 visitors per year, pre-pandemic. Due to the redevelopment of the St Kilda pier, the penguin viewing area is currently closed.

So how did they end up here, in this most unlikely of habitats? Hogg says there has always been the odd penguin in the area, but when the breakwater was built at the end of the St Kilda pier – to protect the yachts that were coming in for the 1956 Olympics – the penguins took notice and decided to move in, likely migrating from Phillip Island. The little gaps between the rocks are draft-free and perfect for nesting, and over time the colony has grown.

The biggest threats to the penguin colony are human: pollution – oil spills from boats can slick the birds' fur, causing them to drown; and plastic pollution on the beach. Stress from tourism can also be a factor, and Hogg implores visitors to resist the temptation to use flash photography when admiring the penguins once the viewing platform reopens. "Be respectful," advises Hogg. We gotta do our bit to preserve their fabulous inner-city lifestyle, after all.



Little penguins have been described as “socially monogamous but sexually promiscuous”, meaning they keep the same partner from one breeding season to the next, but seek out other mates when their partners are out at sea – ensuring genetic diversity.



Earthcare volunteers Zoe Hogg (left) and Kate Bulling examine a young penguin for fleas and ticks.



Volunteer Vicky Lee weighs a young chick before recording its sex and microchipping it.



Two little penguins make their way back to their nest after a day at sea.



Two little penguins nesting under the breakwater.