

Mammals

Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisi*)

The Tasmanian Devil is the symbol of Tasmania. It looks like a mixture between a dog and a cat, gets up to 84 cm long (including the tail), weighs between 6 and 8 kg and is therefore the biggest carnivorous marsupial in the world. It has black fur, with single or multiple white markings, a very distinctive sense of smell and an extremely strong jaw. A human hand could be taken off in one bite, but it is nocturnal and very shy. It hides in hollow trees or Wombat burrows during the day. It is a scavenger and usually eats carrion, but sometimes will climb up trees to prey on birds.

By the way, it will eat a dead animal in its entirety, including the bones! That is why it is called 'the Sweeper'. Given all this, it isn't surprising that the remains of some missing hikers (who probably would have died from exhaustion or an accident) have never been found.

The females give birth to about 4 very small young who leave the pouch after 5 months, the den after 8 months and the mother within 12 months of age.

Devils once lived throughout Australia but were wiped out on the mainland some thousand years ago by the dingo, which is not present in Tasmania. In the mid-nineties it was discovered that the devil population is under threat from a deadly virus epidemic which has spread quickly and is transferred from animal to animal during aggressive behaviour at feeding grounds. After the first examples were detected on the east coast, the illness is reported to be spreading about 20 kilometers further each year. In the areas concerned, 95% of the devil population has been wiped out, that is, 80,000 animals. So far, despite considerable research and study, there is no cure in sight.



The Common Wombat (*Vombatus ursinus tasmaniensis*)

There are 3 subspecies of Wombat in Australia, the Tasmanian one being the smallest and a descendant of the Common Wombat (found in some places on the southern mainland). Its closest relative, by the way, is the Koala.

They have brown fur, a sturdy body, short legs, little ears, a big nose, very strong claws (to dig with) and grow up to one metre (!!) They have a 2.5 cm long tail and a total weight of 30 kg.

They prefer to burrow in sandy forest soils and eat roots, grass and herbs with their very sharp front teeth. In summer they spend the day in the burrow (which can be up to 20 m long, contain many 'rooms' and has a 'front' and 'back' entrance) and feed at night. In winter they display diurnal behaviour, also eating during the day and possibly 'sunbaking' too! Wombats mark their 5 to 25 hectare hunting territories with dung and can travel up to 5 km per night, grazing.

The female has a pouch (like a Kangaroo) and the young are born before they are fully developed. They weigh only 1 gram at birth and are the size of a

bean, although they can still find their way to the pouch where they suckle milk from a teat. After 6 months the young emerge but are still dependent on the mother for another 6 months. By the time they weigh approximately 4 kg of weight, they are usually ready for an independent life.

In the past Wombats have been kept as pets with great pleasure however, nowadays, you need a permit to do this. Be warned! Wombats are very curious and will destroy anything and everything in your house if not supervised. Good luck trying to train them good habits!

Kangaroos, Wallabies and Potoroos

Kangaroos are the emblem of Australia. As is well known, they move by jumping (during which the tail has a most important function). They are usually quite shy.

They are nocturnal mammals and are famous for the 'pouch' in which the babies are raised. Because they are not greatly under threat by predators, and exist in multitudes, they have reached plague proportions in some areas sometimes it has been necessary to cull them and occasionally they are shot for sport!).

There are many subspecies in this group in Tasmania ranging from the rat-sized Potoroo to a kangaroo almost as tall as a man. The biggest kangaroo in Australia (the Red Kangaroo) does not live in Tasmania which, in fact, has only one type of Kangaroo related to the mainland Eastern Grey. The most common species on the island are Wallabies. They look like 'mini' kangaroos but are a separate species, differing only in size and one or two anatomical features. There is a rainforest wallaby and even a colony of rare white wallabies on Bruny Island! We have listed some of the many types below.

Long-nosed Potoroo (*Potorous apicalis*)

This small Wallaby only grows to 36 cm, including a 23 cm long tail. It looks a bit like a big rat and lives in forests all over Tasmania. It feeds on underground mushrooms as well as invertebrate floor animals (e.g. worms.)

Bennetts Wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*)



The colouring of this type ranges from dark grey to reddish brown with a black nose. It can get up to 80 cm high with a 75 cm long tail and is widespread in Tasmania. It eats grass and herbs.

Forester Kangaroo (*Macropus giganteus*)

It can reach an impressive 1.5m high and has a tail that is almost 1 m long if it straightens up. Its big ears are its most prominent feature. It is a social animal, living in groups in the outermost, northeast of Tasmania, in the eastern highlands and on Maria Island.



Echidna (*Tachyglossus aculeatus*)

This beaked, hedgehog-like animal is the Australian 'version' of the European Hedgehog and is similar in size. It can reach 43 cm in length and weighs approximately 4 kg. It can survive in most temperatures, including extremes like cold alpine regions and hot deserts although it prefers dry areas. It spends the whole day digging in the ground for termites and ants with its long nose. It doesn't have any teeth so its meals are mashed by hardened areas in the mouth. Its defence mechanism is to curl up quickly or dig itself into the soft earth and cling on.

The Echidna and the Platypus are monotremes, the only living mammals in the world which lay eggs. It can produce up to 10 soft eggs which are incubated in its pouch. After hatching, the young live in numerous tubes contained in the pouch. Later, when the young echidnas have developed spines, they leave the pouch and are reared in the nest for about a year until they are fully developed and ready to lead an independent life.



Tasmania Tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*)

Although considered extinct, the Tasmanian Tiger is still listed on the Threatened Species Act. From time to time rumours arise about sightings of this animal. However, so far, nobody has been able to produce evidence that can be substantiated. On mainland Australia there are records showing the existence of the same animal, or a similar wolf-like creature with the same prominent stripes, but they died out some hundred years ago. There was a large population in Tasmania and they posed a threat to sheep farmers, so in 1830 the government introduced a reward system for killing them; a 'bounty' hunt. The price per head was quite substantial leading to a later decline in numbers. When this came to the notice of the authorities practice was outlawed but not in time to protect the species from extinction. The last sighting of a free tiger was in 1930 and the last animal kept in captivity died in 1936. It was the biggest carnivorous marsupial in Australia and lived on wallabies, kangaroos and other game. The young were carried in a backward-facing pouch.



Brush-tailed Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*)

These comical-looking animals also live on the mainland of Australia in large numbers, where they create a lot of damage to private gardens by climbing on the trees, breaking branches and eating all the fruit as well as most of the leaves. They are nocturnal, not particularly shy and live quite happily in and around townships. Because they have no natural predators and are very territorial, they can't be deterred by screaming at or 'shooing away'. Producing a loud hissing sound may help a little! One method used to stop possums getting into trees, and up telegraph poles, is to wrap an half-meter sheet of metal around the base, about one third of the way up, which the possum is unable to climb.

There are many subspecies of this marsupial, but I have used the Brush-tailed Possum as an example because it is the most widespread. This type is approximately 60 to 90 cm long (with a bushy tail which is used for balance during climbing) and weighs about 1.2 to 4.5 kg. They give birth to one or two young who remain in the pouch for about 5 months. After that period, they are carried on their mother's back until they are old enough to look after themselves.



Platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*)



At first sight the Platypus looks like a mixture between a duck and an otter. It is not only quite rare, but also extremely shy. You can think yourself lucky if you manage to see one in the wild. You should not attempt to touch one because it has a poisonous thorn which can inflict a deeply painful wound. Science is of the opinion that the Platypus is a surviving prototype of a mammal which got stuck between the reptiles and the higher mammals during its evolutionary development.

It gets up to 55 cm long, including a 12 cm tail. Its habitat is very clean streams, lakes and also dams throughout Tasmania as well as the south and east coast of the mainland. The Tasmanian Platypus is genetically, slightly different. It lives on little fish and other aquatic animals (worms etc.), that it picks up from under stones and along banks. It has a special pouch for the safe storage of food for the young. Adult platypuses don't have teeth and their food is pulverised by a comb-like structure.

It usually swims about and feeds during dawn and dusk, spending most of the time in 20 meter long burrows built into river or shore banks.

It, and the Echidna, are the only living mammals in the world who lay eggs! In the case of the Platypus, it is mostly 2 eggs which hatch after two weeks of incubation and suckle from tubes (not teats) at the lower end of the mother's abdomen.