

Little Penguin

Eudyptula minor

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Little Penguin coming ashore (photo: Allan Richardson)

This small penguin (it stands only 25-30 cm high) has dark blue upper parts and white under parts, yellow iris, dark bill, and yellow feet with black claws and black webbing. Unlike all other penguins, the Little Penguin lacks any distinctive head markings.

Chicks are downy and have brown upper parts. Juveniles resemble adults but their upper parts are a somewhat brighter blue and their bill is slightly shorter.

Regional Status

The Little Penguin is an uncommon resident of the Hunter Region; there are small to mid-sized breeding colonies on many of our offshore islands. There are occasional records of birds fishing within or near Port Stephens or around the Newcastle rock platforms, but most of the records are from nocturnal surveys on the offshore islands, counting birds as they return to their burrows.

Most of our local islands have at least some breeding pairs (the exceptions are Looking Glass Isle and North Rock, which both are part of the Broughton Group of islands).

Although there is a record of a beach-washed bird near Old Bar (in 2022), the northernmost known breeding colony is at Statis Rock, near Seal Rocks. In 1977 it hosted five pairs (there have not been any more recent surveys). Cabbage Tree Island and Boondelbah Island host about 140 and 100 pairs respectively. In 2012/13, the populations on Broughton Island and Little Broughton Island were described as having increased (Corella articles 2012);. That trend may be continuing – in 2009, 39 birds were counted coming ashore around Providence Point on Broughton Island (Corella 2012) but an apparently analogous count in 2023 yielded 62 birds (M. Schulz pers. comm.).

Sub-species

The IOC recognises six sub-species – one found in Australia (*novaehollandiae*, the Australian Little Penguin) and the other five occurring in various parts of New Zealand and its outlying islands.

Burrows

Little Penguins start to breed when they are two to three years old, forming a long-term monogamous pair bond (with a separation rate of about 18%). Typically they dig burrows in sand dune vegetation, although they also will take advantage of well-sheltered caves and even gaps between rocks. Burrows are dug by both parents, although mainly the male. Breeding is colonial or loosely colonial, with burrows usually at least a few metres apart. The main breeding season is spring/summer, with eggs mostly laid in September/October. However, clutches have been recorded as starting from as early as May and as late as December.

Little Penguins hunt in the daytime, catching small fish and other prey by pursuit-diving. The mean depth of their dive is 30m, at which depth the waters already are gloomy even in the daytime. Often they sleep on the ocean overnight but if they are close to home they will land after dusk and go to their burrow (with pre-breeding-age birds returning to their natal burrow) before departing pre-dawn the next morning. And when they moult, they spend 15-20 days in the burrow (usually, the pair moulting simultaneously).



A Little Penguin on its way to its burrow (photo: Alwyn Simple)

About the name

Little Penguin

This is the smallest of the world's penguins, and named accordingly. In New Zealand it is often called the Fairy Penguin and sometimes the Little Blue Penguin. Those names have been applied sometimes in Australia as well.

The origins of the word “penguin” are obscure. There is a Latin word *pinguis*, meaning “fat” but the general consensus is that is just a coincidence. The name might derive from the now-extinct Great Auk, which was known to locals as “*Pinguinis*” and had the scientific name *Pinguinis impennis* (see <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/great-auks-become-extinct/> for more information). It was flightless and it broadly resembled modern penguins.

Eudyptula minor

Many penguins belong to the genus *Eudyptes*, which derives from the Greek words eu, good, and *duptēs*, a diver. *Eudyptula* is a diminutive of that; it translates to “good little diver”. The species name *minor* indicates that, yes, it is a rather small penguin.



A Little Penguin approaching land (photo: Alwyn Simple)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • James Jobling (2010). Helm dictionary of scientific bird names • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2016). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 2

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