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AUSTRALIA'S PENGUIN PARADE

by

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The assembled crowd faces east towards the bay, anxiously eyeing the gently lapping surf. No one notices a beautiful Australian sunset over their shoulders in the west, behind the concrete bleachers.

As the sunlight dwindles, large overhead lights flicker slowly to life. Eyes continue to strain toward the shore. A few dozen yards down, there is a murmur in the crowd, and the objects of our desire are upon us, emerging from the sea.

Penguins. Tiny, timid, toddling fairy penguins, returning from their day of fishing at sea.

They begin to appear in small groups along several sections of the surf, shiny little dots at first, bobbing just offshore in the outskirts of the lights. In clumsy clusters they sprawl through the surf and onto the beach, huddling at the water's edge.

One or two braver members break from the huddle and waddle a few feet inland, only to pause, panic, then turn and flee, sending the entire group splashing back into the water. The waves toss the birds back on shore, where they gather until another hearty soul tries its luck and heads toward the dunes between the bleachers. After several more false starts, one goes for it; another follows, then another, and then the group makes a break and hastily totters en masse up through the grass and beyond to their respective burrows.

The amusing scene is repeated up and down the beach to the ongoing delight of the crowd. In some places the water-bound birds seem overcome with trepidation and uncertainty, and seem unable to muster the courage to get to shore at all.

Once they are committed, though, the birds pass only a few feet from the crowds and seem used to the presence of visitors (their fear is of hovering raptors). Human officials patrol in front, ensuring no one approaches the penguins or uses flash photography.

After nearly 45 minutes, the last of the little birds have made their timid way out of the surf and on to their burrows. Visitors can follow on elevated wooden walkways to view and especially hear other evening rituals. A cacophony of squawking and hooting ensues as individuals look for mates and deter intruders from their burrows. Eventually the noise will abate and the surf will once again provide the background noise; more soothing yet perhaps less interesting.

It is just another penguin parade at the Penguin Reserve, perhaps one of the most unique attractions anywhere. Located on Phillip Island, southeast of Australia's second largest city of Melbourne, people have been coming to view the penguins since early this century. These days, there are a few extras to see.

The walkway from the bleachers leads back to the visitors center, where various displays introduce the world of the fairy penguin. Known officially as the Little Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*), the penguins are explored with comprehensive outlines of their life cycle, habitat and daily routine. An interesting section of the displays features a simulated underwater look at the penguin's day at sea. It is not always fun -- one segment shows a little penguin fleeing for its life just ahead of the jaws of a hungry seal.

To bring the penguins' daily life closer, nesting boxes have been built into the side of the complex. Through them visitors can watch the life cycle of the penguins from inches away, which include molting, nest building, egg laying and chick feeding. In the surrounding reserve area outside, dogs, cats and foxes are kept away with fences.

The popularity of the penguins is continually growing. In the 1920's, the first organized viewing of the "penguin parade" started, and in the 1960's, fences and viewing stands were constructed.

As interest grew, people sought out the few other penguin colonies along the coast, sometimes at the birds' peril. In something of an environmental compromise, the Australians constructed this unique viewing facility in 1988 in the hopes of preventing people from chasing penguins on their own. Today it is Australia's most visited natural wildlife attraction, with over half a million visitors annually. (Ironic, in a country best known for kangaroos and koalas.)

Not much is known about the life of the penguins, although there currently are abundant studies going on. It is known they set out before dawn each day and spend the entire day at sea. They may travel up to 20 miles, feeding on small fish such as pilchards and anchovies. In late afternoon they return toward the nesting ground and gather just offshore in groups called "rafts". At dusk they approach the shore and break into smaller groups to make their evening shore assault.

The Little Penguin is the smallest of 17 penguin species, and is the only species to breed in southern Australia. Researchers continually study the birds and their homes, keeping track of burrows at six different nesting sites and recording evening numbers of returning penguins. They band over 1,000 chicks a year in order to track their feeding areas and dispersal into other colonies. In one project, penguins have been fitted with tiny radio transmitters to track their feeding movements.

A volunteer Penguin Study Group, made up of local citizens, contributes thousands of hours of research annually. Their ongoing, monthly burrow monitoring project is one of the longest bird studies in Australia.

While penguins are the prime fauna of focus, they are not the only attraction on Phillip Island. Just beyond the penguin facility is Point Grant, from where you can gaze out at the intriguing rock formations called the Nobbies. Look past the tidal blowhole to see Seal Rocks, home to Australia's largest fur seal colony. At the peak of the breeding season in December, between 5,000 and 6,000 seals appear. A nearby walking trail leads past an Aboriginal midden site on the way to panoramas of the rocky coast.

The short-tailed shearwater is another well-known and popular resident. The birds spend the northern summer feeding off the coast of Alaska, and in September begin to appear back at their breeding grounds on the island and other areas of southern Australia. Chicks are born in mid-January and follow their parents on their long

northern flight in May.

To round out a visit to the island, there is also a koala conservation center and an unenclosed wildlife park. If you really want to lose yourself in the island, you will find Australia's largest maze located there as well.

But the island's most endearing stars, of course, are the fairy penguins and their sunset shuffle. It saves you a trip to Antarctica, and for them, it is all in a day's work.