

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TASMANIAN DEVILS



What do they look like?

The world's largest surviving carnivorous marsupial, the devil has a thick-set build, with a relatively large, broad head and fluffy thick tail. The fur is mostly or wholly black, with white markings often found on the rump flanks and chest. Adult males are larger than adult females. Large males weigh up to 12 kg, and stand about 30 cm high at the shoulder. A typical adult female would weight 7 or 8 kg. Devils reach adult body size by two years of age

Why are they black and white?

Many predators have black and white patterns like devils. This black and white flash pattern seems to be an adaptation to break up the profile of the animal. In some respects it is a form of camouflage, making it difficult for prey to distinguish the shape of the animal. The paradoxical question however is, why do 10% of devils have no white markings?

Why are their heads so big?

The heads are very large in adults, particularly old males. Adult males compete with each other for females and, once victorious, they need to be able to subdue the females in order to mate with them. They hold the female in a den for days during mating. This den is often a cave, hollow log or wombat burrow. The large fearsome head, mouth and teeth are an effective barrier to other males that might want to join the fray.

As their diet is mainly carrion, bone-crunching and breaking through thick skin is something devils need to be able to do. The skull has strong jaw muscles attached to it and in turn the neck needs to be big and strong to carry this crunching machine. In very old males, the head and neck can contribute nearly a quarter of the weight of the animal.

Why are their whiskers so long?

Not only are their whiskers long but there are lots of them. They are positioned in clumps on top of the eyes, muzzle and in the normal 'whiskery' places. These long whiskers help when they are foraging in the dark. They also help devils space themselves from each other when they are feeding on carrion together – if devils' whiskers are not touching each other when they are feeding they are safely outside biting range. When devils are agitated or alert they raise the whiskers.

How strong are their jaws?

In absolute terms, there is no good measurement because you never know how hard they are biting. That applies to most animals but we do know the relative strength. Devils have jaws of biting power as strong as a dog about four times their weight. So a 10 kg devil has as powerful a bite as a 40 kg dog! In this respect they are very similar to hyenas, particularly the spotted hyena. Relative to body size they have a bite stronger than a Bengal tiger.

How long do they live?

Very few wild devils live longer than 5 years. In captivity, they may live to 7-8 years of age.

Do they come out in the day?

In the wild Tasmanian devils are nocturnal, (active after dark) if they are in areas frequented by people. In the true wilderness they do come out in the dark. During the day they usually hide in a den, or dense bush. When they are not surrounded by people or dogs, devils love to sun bake.

What is their hearing and smelling capabilities like?

Their hearing is excellent. It seems to be the dominant sense along with their smell.

What is their sight like?

Like most nocturnal animals their sight seems to be oriented heavily on black and white vision. Black and white vision is mainly designed to detect movement, so if something moves they have good eyesight, whereas if something stays still they are unlikely to see it clearly.

Why do they make so much noise?

The noise is basically bluff to intimidate other animals in order to avert a fight. Powerful animals like this often have sophisticated mechanisms to avoid fighting so they do not damage themselves. The sound helps to resolve the pecking order. Devils have a variety of calls. They start an encounter with another devil with a "humf growl", sniffs and snorts, and if the encounter becomes aggressive this escalates into screeches that increase dramatically until it's a crescendo of screaming.

Why are their ears red?

The ears are sparsely furred, with very thin skin. When they are stressed or very excited the ears flush with blood, making them appear red.

Why do they yawn?

The yawning is generally a sign of low-level stress. It is part of a displacement behavior, which means they redirect nervous energy to something that's harmless. A yawn also serves to demonstrate that they are an animal with large teeth and a powerful jaw.

Why do they hold their tails up?

When they are very excited they hold their tail up, no doubt as part of the body language to demonstrate to other devils that they mean business. When they are very angry they will hold their tail almost straight up. The tail can be held in many positions and the subtleties probably have much meaning in communicating the animal's level of arousal or aggression to other devils.

Why do they have fat tails?

Most marsupials store fat in their tails and a fat tail is usually a sign that an animal is in excellent condition. Old males have the fattest tails.

Why are some injured in the face?

Most Tasmanian devils with injuries on the face are adult males. Many of these injuries have been gained at the end of a mating period when the female fights off the male. Some of these injuries are obtained when males are fighting other males for access to females.

Why do some Tasmanian devils have scars on the rump or neck?

The scars on the rump are mainly caused when animals back into other animals to try and push them away from food. Basically it is safer to be bitten on the very heavily armoured, thick-skinned rump than on the face. Similarly they get bitten after aggressive encounters where the loser turns and flees and the victor snaps at their rump. Scars on the neck usually indicate the animal is a female. The scars are caused by males holding the female to subdue them during mating.

Do they have predators?

In the past, Thylacines (Tasmanian tiger) were the predators of Tasmanian devils.

What controls their numbers?

The greatest current threat to numbers across Tasmania is Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD). It is a fatal condition, restricted to Tasmanian devils, characterised by cancers around the mouth and head. In 1996, Tasmanian devils were photographed in north-east Tasmania with large tumours on their faces. Since then there has been a 95 per cent decline of average spotlighting sightings in that region, and a drop of 80 per cent across the State.

A further potential threat is the introduction of the red fox into Tasmania, which competes directly with Tasmanian devil juveniles. Both species share preferences for den sites and habitat and are of similar size.

In the past competition and perhaps predation from thylacines would partly control Tasmanian devil numbers. Other factors affecting numbers included food availability, direct persecution, competition from other devils and quolls, the loss of den sites to development, and the toll of road kills.

Where do they live?

Despite the decline in numbers since the early 1990s, populations of Tasmanian devils remain widespread in Tasmania from the coast to the mountains. They live in coastal heath, open dry sclerophyll forest, and mixed sclerophyll-rainforest.

Do they have diseases and parasites?

Tasmanian devils carry a number of internal and external parasites. They often have small numbers of ticks, tapeworms, and other parasites. Of greatest concern is Devil Facial Tumour Disease.

What are they related to?

Tasmanian devils are most closely related to quolls. Their next closest relationship is with smaller marsupials and a more distant relationship is with Thylacines. They are more closely related to all other marsupials than placental animals such as dogs.

What does their Latin scientific name mean?

Their Latin name is *Sarcophilus harrisii* – meaning *Harris' meat lover*. Harris is the name of the man who described them in scientific terms.

Why do they fight so much?

Fighting, often superficial fighting without serious contact – is the basic mechanism for establishing pecking order. The famous gape or yawn of the Tasmanian devil, which looks so threatening, can be misleading. This display is performed more from fear and uncertainty than from aggression. Tasmanian devils produce a strong odour when under stress, but when calm and relaxed they are not smelly.

Why are they so noisy?

The Tasmanian devil makes a variety of fierce noises, from harsh coughs and snarls to high pitched screeches. A sharp sneeze is used as a challenge to other devils, and frequently comes before a fight. Many of these spectacular behaviours are bluff and part of a ritual to minimise harmful fighting when feeding communally at a large carcass.

Do they injure each other?

Very occasionally, mostly when they are fighting over mates or during mating. They rarely injure each other when fighting over food.

Why do they eat so much?

Many predators eat large amounts, the main reason being that they may not get to eat again for some time. On average, they consume around 15 per cent of their body weight per day and this is very similar to other carnivorous animals.

How much can they eat?

Tasmanian devils can eat up to 40 per cent of their body weight in 30 minutes. Devils have the ability to gorge feed, eating up to 40% of their body weight in a sitting. They need to consume about 15% of their body weight per day in the wild so even a huge feast like that would only keep them going for two or three days.

What do they normally eat?

Tasmanian devils seem to eat any meat that is available. This includes birds, fish, moths, tadpoles and frogs, reptiles, and mammals such as wallabies, echidnas, platypus, and wombats. They are opportunists, eating almost anything they find. Dominant food types are pademelons, wombats, brush tailed possums and birds.

They do have preferences. Tasmanian devils seem to very much like wombat meat, probably because of its rich fat content. This is because not as much has to be eaten for the same energy (calorie count). They prefer to eat carrion as they don't have to expend energy in hunting.

Do they eat live-stock such as lambs and sheep?

In some areas, particularly farm-land, injured live-stock like sheep or lambs may be killed and eaten. Generally, only dead stock is eaten. Generally dead cows can only have small bits eaten because the skin is too thick for Tasmanian devils.

Most healthy stock is perfectly safe. Tasmanian devils can be beneficial to sheep. They maintain bush and farm hygiene by cleaning up carcasses, which can help reduce the risk of blowfly strike to sheep by removing food for maggots.

Are Tasmanian devils dangerous to people?

No, Tasmanian devils are not dangerous. They do not attack people, although they will defend themselves if attacked or trapped. Tasmanian devils, for all their appearance, are very timid, quiet animals that would much rather run away than fight. However, Tasmanian devils are very powerful and any bite could cause serious injury. Tasmanian devils are wild animals.

How many young do they have?

Tasmanian devils generally start breeding at the end of their second year. Female Tasmanian devils give birth to between twenty and forty young each year for an average of three years. As females only have four teats, the maximum of four young can be reared each year.

Where do they breed?

Tasmanian devils are restricted to mainland Tasmania. They breed in dry caves, hollow logs, burrows (particularly wombat burrows). They prefer dry and warm sites. They do not breed in exposed areas because the young are small and vulnerable to predators.

When do they breed?

Most Tasmanian devils mate in March and give birth in April. The gestation period is approximately 21 days. Around 40 young are born, but a maximum of four can be accommodated in the mother's pouch, which has only 4 teats. Young stay in the pouch for about four and a half months, generally until April - July. The young are then danned and come out of the den gradually over October-December. They are weaned at 5-6 months of age and are thought to have left the mother and to be living alone by late December.

Are they territorial?

Strictly speaking, they are not territorial. A territory is a defended core of home range. Tasmanian devils have fixed home ranges and a small mobile territory they carry with them. That is, they defend a small area of personal space.

How far do they travel?

Radio tracking has shown that many Tasmanian devils will travel 10 - 20 km in a night within their home range. They do not repeat the same movements every night. If they find food early they may not travel very far at all. Tasmanian devils roam considerable distances along well-defined trails in search of food. They usually amble slowly, with a characteristic gait, but can gallop quickly with both hind feet together.

Were devils always in Tasmania?

Remains of species of Tasmanian devils, including some very large ones, have been found in fossil deposits and only up to 500 years ago, they used to roam in mainland Australia. They probably became extinct on mainland Australia competing with dingoes or through disease, climate change and pressure from Aboriginal hunting. The actual cause of extinction is not known.

Why are some individuals wary, others confident?

Like people or any other animal, Tasmanian devils vary immensely in personality traits. They also vary in experience. Animals that have not been frightened or harmed will appear very confident. Animals that have been traumatised or hurt will be wary. Like many multiple litters, Tasmanian devils can have different fathers for the same litter, therefore personality traits can vary because of different fathers.

How fast can Tasmanian devils run?

On rough terrain Tasmanian devils can run faster than a person; on very smooth terrain they cannot run as fast as a good human runner. Tasmanian devils have been 'clocked' running on a flat road at nearly 25 km/h for up to 1km. They can run at 10 km/h for many kilometres.

Can Tasmanian devils climb?

Young Tasmanian devils climb very well, larger devils not so well, but they are very persistent. They have good gripping ability with their front paws even though they do not have retractable claws like cats. They use their large footpads on the hind legs as contact grips and friction pads.

Can Tasmanian devils swim?

Tasmanian devils can swim very well. However, if they have young in the pouch they will avoid swimming. Tasmanian devils love water and will wade and splash about, even sitting or lying down in it to stay cool. They will often dabble in water with their front paws, somewhat in the manner of racoons.

What use are Tasmanian devils?

Tasmanian devils have enormous value. They are fundamental to our ecology at the top of the food chain. As scavengers they play a vital role as nature's auditors, removing sick, slow, diseased and dead animals from the landscape.

Tasmanian devils are a very important line of defence against introduced animals, particularly feral cats and foxes. Both species are devastating to native wildlife. Tasmanian devils are a great example of wildlife succeeding against all manner of pressures, a true 'Aussie battler'.

