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Top: Shallow bays and beaches make the island an ideal location for snorkelling and swimming.

Photo – Michael James/DEC

Above: Timber boardwalks link the island's facilities and protect the island environment. The boardwalks are suitable for wheelchairs and disabled access.

Photo – Terry Goodlich



Above: Visitors have the opportunity to learn about the marine life at Penguin Island.

Photo – Michael James/DEC

More information

For information on ferry and tour services please contact Rockingham Wild Encounters on (08) 9591 1333 or visit www.rockinghamwildencounters.com.au.

DEC rangers regularly patrol Penguin Island, other islands and waters of the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park. Volunteers are on duty daily in the Penguin Experience and are happy to answer questions.

For more information, contact:

Swan Coastal District
Department of Environment and Conservation
PO Box 7002
Safety Bay WA 6169
Phone: (08) 9592 7802 or (08) 9592 9047 (10.00am–3.30pm)

For information about Penguin Island and the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park visit DEC's website (www.naturebase.net).

Front cover: Penguin Island is one of Western Australia's premier ecologically sustainable tourism destination.

Photo – Michael James/DEC

Penguin Island



Information and walktrail guide



Department of Environment and Conservation

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Introduction

Situated in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park just 42 kilometres south of Perth, Penguin Island is part of a chain of islands that boasts breathtaking marine and coastal scenery. This 12.5-hectare island is home to the largest colony of little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) on the west coast of Australia and has an array of wildlife that amazes its visitors. The significance of the island as a sea-bird breeding site also creates a focus for wildlife and scientific research.

Educational and recreational opportunities as well as natural history attractions draw visitors of all ages to the island. They arrive by direct ferry or as part of a boat tour, with boats leaving on the hour from Mersey Point on the mainland near the island during island opening times.

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for managing the island and has progressively undertaken work to enhance the natural environment and provide essential facilities to make it one of the State's premier ecologically sustainable tourism destinations.



Above: Penguin Island lies in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park. *Photo – Duncan Dodd*



Above: Visitors to the island once stayed in the caves.

History

The island was probably used by Aboriginal people as suggested in the 'Dreaming' stories that relate to the area, although no evidence of their presence has been found. In the 1800s the area was occasionally visited by whalers and sealers for hunting, shelter and relaxation.

The first-known occupant of Penguin Island was Seaforth McKenzie who lived in a shack he called his 'manor' and in hollowed-out limestone caves. McKenzie used the island extensively between 1918 and 1926 and encouraged visits by holiday-makers who camped on the beach or in the roughly furnished caves.

Since 1935 a variety of organisations have managed the island for a range of uses. In 1966 Penguin Island was gazetted as an 'A' Class reserve and vested in the National Parks Authority. Part of the island was leased to a private company that operated a number of small shacks as a holiday resort.

The National Parks Authority became part of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in 1985 and, in 1987, CALM negotiated the surrender of the private lease. Today DEC manages the island as a conservation park for its plants and animals and for visitor education and recreation.

Little penguins

Penguin Island gets its name from the colony of little penguins, the smallest of the penguin family, which nest in sand depressions under dense vegetation and in limestone caves on the island.

This is the largest colony of little penguins in WA and is thought to contain as many as 600 breeding pairs. Penguins are nocturnal on land and make their landfall at Penguin Island in small flocks or rafts after sunset. Little penguins are vulnerable to human disturbance, especially when in moult, so it is important they are not approached too closely.

Penguins are the most specialised of all birds for life in the marine environment. Their feathers have evolved into a dense covering of pin-like structures that resist water and maintain the birds' streamlined contours, while vestigial wings have developed into flippers for underwater propulsion.

The number of penguins that come ashore begins to increase in early March. The onset of noisy courtship activities signals the start of the breeding season. Little penguins normally lay a clutch of two eggs which are incubated by both parents over about 35 days.

They feed on small-schooling bait fish and squid and may range many kilometres from the island on feeding forays.



Top left and right: Penguin Island supports WA's largest colony of little penguins.

Above: Boat tours depart from Mersey Point during the island's open season. *Photos – Terry Goodlich*

Other inhabitants

The 75 plant species of Penguin Island are adapted to the harsh coastal environment and provide the habitats needed by breeding colonies of seabirds. Ground covers such as sea spinach (*Tetragonia decumbens*) protect the coastal dunes, anchoring the sand against erosion and providing cover for the island's five species of reptiles – marbled gecko (*Phyllodactylus marmoratus*), king's skink (*Egernia kingii*), southern skink (*Hemiergis initialis*), fence skink (*Cryptoblepharus plagiocephalus*) and gray's legless lizard (*Delma grayii*). On the leeward slope of the island's central dunes a low woodland of coastal wattle grows to 2.5 metres high.

More than 30 species of birds have been observed on the island. These include seabirds such as the little penguin, bridled tern (*Sterna anaethetus*), silver gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*), pied cormorant (*Phalacrocorax varius*) and the Australian pelican (*Pelicanus conspicillatus*). It is also home to terrestrial species including the little eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*), singing honeyeater (*Lichenostomus virescens*) and buff-banded landrail (*Rallus philippensis*).

About 2,500 pairs of bridled terns, a tropical species, migrate to the islands of Shoalwater Bay in spring to breed. The birds leave the area in April to return to the north-west Sulawesi (Celebes) Sea.

Although no native mammals live on the island, Australian sea lions (*Neophoca cinerea*) which occupy nearby Seal Island occasionally visit the beaches.



Above left: Penguin Island is an important habitat for Australian pelicans.
Photo – Michael James/DEC

Above right: Sea lions occasionally visit the island.
Photo – Terry Goodlich



Above: There are daily talks at the Penguin Experience about the little penguins.
Photo – Terry Goodlich

The Penguin Experience

This unique viewing facility allows visitors to observe rescued and rehabilitated little penguins which are normally quite secretive and rarely seen in the wild. Penguin commentaries and feeding times are at 10.30am, 12.30pm and 2.30pm during the island's open season where visitors can discover the intriguing life of little penguins. The glass walls of the pool provide an unrestricted underwater view of these delightful birds and the centre has information panels and touch-tables to help you plan your day and learn more about the island's inhabitants and history.

Guided interpretative walks – *The Penguin Island Waddle* – are conducted daily at 11.15am and 1.15pm during the island's open season, departing from the Penguin Experience. These walks give visitors a rare insight into the island's natural and cultural history and the DEC guide will describe the special relationships the island's plants and animals have within the area.

What to see and do

Access

Penguin Island is open during daylight hours, with ferries operating from September to early June. The island is closed for the rest of the year to protect the penguins from human disturbance during their breeding season. If you are visiting by private vessel, please set your anchor on sand off the beach at Penguin Island and leave the jetty clear for ferries and management vessels.

Weather conditions can change quickly, making crossing the sand bar very dangerous. DEC strongly recommends against walking the sand bar to reach the island. When you're visiting the island, remain on the boardwalks, walktrails and sandy beaches and stay clear of limestone cliffs, caves and overhangs as they may be unstable and prone to collapse.

Picnics

There are no barbecues or kiosk facilities available on Penguin Island and gas or spirit cooking appliances are not permitted. Composting toilets, grassed picnic sites and tables, shelters and fresh water are available in the facilities area (see map).

Fishing

You are welcome to line fish from the general use areas of the island. Fisheries bag limits and size regulations apply and please be considerate of other visitors.

Diving

The reefs and seagrass beds around the island form habitats for a variety of marine life. Examine the underwater world first-hand by diving or snorkelling but please allow others the same experience and do not disturb the marine environment. Spear guns or hand-held spears (gidgees) are not permitted on the island or in the surrounding waters.

Surfing and windsurfing/kitesurfing

Ideal windsurfing/kitesurfing conditions exist in the waters of the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park. The western side of the island can produce good surfing, but please take care.