

# The MARIA ISLAND WALK

BY: TATYANA LEONOV



## Nocturnal Spotlighting for Tasmanian Devils and Marsupials with Holly Schorta

RELATED EXPERIENCES:

**THE MARIA ISLAND WALK**

4 DAYS / 3 NIGHTS (SHARED)

**MARIA ISLAND WINTER ESCAPE**

3 DAYS / 2 NIGHTS (SHARED)



Maria Island is renowned for its abundance of wildlife, including a variety of both native and introduced species, some of which are more active when the sun goes down. "The island is nicknamed Noah's Ark because in the 1960s a variety of threatened species, such as Cape Barren Geese and Forester Kangaroos, were introduced to the island for their own protection," Maria Island Walk guide, Holly Schorta, explains. "You really have to come here to understand just how much wildlife is around."

"The island is nicknamed Noah's Ark because in the 1960s a variety of threatened species, such as Cape Barren Geese and Forester Kangaroos."

Night walks can be enjoyed each evening, although Holly explains that the chance of seeing more animals increases as the walk progresses. "Towards the start of the walk we spend our nights in forested areas where animals are a bit trickier to spot, however on the last night the nocturnal walk is on open land, so spotting creatures that are active

at night is more probable," she says. "Most nights we are likely to see wallabies, pademelons, Pygmy Possums and wombats. If we're very lucky we might see a Tasmanian Devil."

Although a Tasmanian Devil sighting is not guaranteed, Maria Island is one of the best locations for spotting one of these iconic creatures in the wild. "Fifteen Tasmanian Devils were introduced to the island as an insurance population in 2012 as part of a rehabilitation program," Holly explains.

"Elsewhere in Tasmania, they are near extinct because of Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD) – an aggressive and transmittable parasitic cancer. However, on the island there are no devils with the tumour, so they have been able to breed successfully and the population has steadily grown."

Although Holly can't be sure of exact numbers, she says that local research teams speculate that there are close to 60 Tasmanian Devils on the island. "The last time I saw a Tasmanian Devil was incredible," she remembers. "I was leading a group of walkers and as we turned a corner onto Bloodstone Beach there was a mother and her baby eating a dead seal that had washed up on the beach. We were all speechless."

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# Experiencing Maria's Winter Wonderland with Jemma Haythorne

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The sun sets earlier in winter, and on a sunny cloud-studded day 5pm is a stunning time to be out watching the sky transform into a kaleidoscope of pinks, oranges and yellows. The hundreds of wombats who live on Maria Island like dusk, too, and in the colder weather they are often happy to sit around and chomp on grass, not bothered by the occasional passer-by trying to snap that Instagram-worthy photo.

"Winter is my favourite time on the island," says The Maria Island Walk sales and marketing manager, Jemma Haythorne. "The island is quieter and it feels like we are the only ones there, the wildlife is easier to spot, and the sunsets are especially beautiful."

The Maria Island Walk began offering the three-day two-night Winter Escape in 2016 for those wanting to explore the island paradise out of the peak months. "Our four-day walk operates from October to April, but the Winter Escape is available from June to August and the itinerary is a little different," Jemma says. "We stay at the historic Bernacchi House both nights, and the three

walking days are focused around the north side of the island."

The walking distance guests can choose to tackle can range anywhere from 10 to 20 kilometres over the course of three days, and Jemma explains that it's not so much the distance, but the terrain that determines how the group will track from day to day.

"I like to say it's a bit of a 'Choose your own adventure' in the sense that we cater to guests' personal interests," she says.

"We will always visit Fossil Cliffs, Darlington and the Painted Cliffs, but then visitors can decide whether or not they want to climb a mountain, for example. We work around our guests."

Evenings generally run the same course... for good reason. "We prepare a beautiful three-course dinner consisting of Tasmanian produce that guests enjoy by candlelight. And, of course, we serve Tasmanian wine," Jemma says. "Everyone loves to hang out by the roaring fire. Winter really is a very special time to be on the island."

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# In Search of Tasmania's Endemic Birds with Danny Pullbrook

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## CONSERVATION IN ACTION

- Participate in citizen science programs contributing to eBird and Birdlife Australia databases



When you ask The Maria Island Walk guide, Danny Pullbrook, what he likes to do in his spare time, he doesn't hesitate to answer. "I'm heavily interested in birds," he says. "I watch them whenever I have a chance, often with my wife and kids."

Maria Island is a dream location for Danny, who is able to spend his working days outdoors spotting birds and teaching guests all about them. "We have around 150 species of birds on the island, and on a four-day walk we would easily see between 20 to 30 of those," he says. "And that's just on the main trail. If we have keen birders with us, we might take a little detour deeper into forested areas, where we'd see more."

What is interesting about the species of birds found on Maria Island, is that only eight of the 150 species are introduced. "All the others are native, so as a habitat the island offers a really unique birding opportunity," Danny says. "And of the 12 endemic bird species found across Tasmania, Maria Island is home to 11."

Although any bird sighting delights Danny, there are certain bird species that he gets very excited about seeing and showing to guests. "The Forty-spotted Pardalote, a really tiny bird weighing an average of nine to 13 grams, is an endangered Australian species. It can only

survive with White gum trees as its food source but, since it's so small, bigger birds often take over its territory," he says.

"The Swift Parrot is another species we need to watch out for, as experts estimate there are fewer than 300 remaining in the wild. It's the world's fastest flying parrot and to survive and thrive needs access to mature Blue gums (Swift Parrots live in the large tree hollows of Blue gums).

Although spotting a rare bird is always a thrill, Danny enjoys pointing out all kinds of birds to guests and chatting about their behavioural traits. "One of my favourite birds is the Dusky Robin," Danny explains. "It's Tasmania's biggest robin and one of the island's endemics. The way it presents itself and its beautiful melancholy birdcall makes it a really interesting species to observe."

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# Rehabilitating Maria Island with Ben Brown

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### CONSERVATION IN ACTION

- Participate in citizen science programs contributing to eBird and Birdlife Australia databases and regular beach clean-ups
- Select tree planting and revegetation opportunities in season



The founder of The Maria Island Walk, Ian Johnstone, has always been passionate about both showcasing and taking care of Maria Island, drawing that philosophy into his teachings and subsequently into the guides' work. "So, rehabilitation work on the island is just something that comes naturally to the guides," says operations manager, Ben Brown.

"Over the years we've conducted bird surveys, collected marine debris, gathered and studied Tasmanian Devil scat and planted trees, alongside our guests and volunteer organisations such as Taroona Scouts."

The tree planting work that is presently a focus was begun in 2014, and Ben explains that, since its inception, over 200 trees have been planted on Four Mile Headland, which is located about seven

kilometres from Darlington and where The Maria Island Walk guests arrive on day two of the four-day walk.

"The mammals that live on the island, especially the grazing mammals such as wallabies and kangaroos, tend to favour the green vegetation, so if you have a few dry years in a row there are only hardy shrubs left. This loss of green vegetation not only reduces the wildlife's food source, but it can also lead to soil loss and erosion," Ben explains.

"A tree planting program such as the one we have undertaken can be a great help. The trees help to hold the soil together and prevent environmental degradation. The new plants also provide habitat for many of the native birds." Two plant species – Coast Wattle and Sheoak – were selected for planting at Four Mile Headland, chosen specifically because they are the dominant trees in the area and The Maria Island Walk team wanted to replicate the natural ecosystem.

Ben notes that rehabilitation work is always in motion along The Maria Island Walk, and the idea is to involve guests in various environmental programs in the future, such as weed eradication. "We are also looking at potential partnership opportunities with companies working around Maria Island," he says. "It's a beautiful part of Tasmania and we want to look after it."

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# Exploring Maria Island's Ancient Geological Wonders with Dan Fisher

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The geological site that excites The Maria Island Walk guide, Dan Fisher, the most is the one that is visited last. "On the last day of The Maria Island Walk, guests visit the Fossil Cliffs, and the fossil beds here – some of which are over 10 metres tall – are an excellent example of preservation from the Permian Period and are even included in the Geoconservation Database for their outstanding scientific value," Dan says. "They are amazing to see, and even more astonishing once you have that contextual information."

The information Dan is referring to can't be just touched on, so, when guiding, he takes his time explaining the significance of the ancient site. "What is really amazing about the Fossil Cliffs is that the limestone faces are made up of millions of shells and various marine creatures," he says.

"You can actually see individual moments in time – how a wave washed over the shells and oriented them in a certain direction; how glaciers and icebergs formed overhead and dropped boulders from hundreds of kilometres away into mud as they melted."

Although the impressiveness of Fossil Cliffs is hard to match, Dan says that on every day of the walk there's a different geological formation to explore. "On day one we go down to Haunted Bay

where we see a huge exposure of granite. It dates to the Devonian Period and the earthy pink and orange looks beautiful contrasting against the blue water," he says.

"On day two the highlight is Bloodstone Point. It's formed from laterite and is red because of leached iron from the dolerite mountains. What I love most about this sight is that it tells us what Maria Island used to be like 20 million years ago – it used to be a tropical environment!"

"What is really amazing about the Fossil Cliffs is that the limestone faces are made up of millions of shells and various marine creatures."

The island's famous Painted Cliffs are visited on day three, and Dan explains that the enormous radial patterns that resemble growth rings in wood are a result of minerals that have soaked into fractures and joints in the stone. "It's remarkable when you think about it," he says. "We can see the signatures of rivers and currents that tell us how the environment has evolved over millions of years."

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# Exploring the Cloud Forest and Hiking Maria's Peaks with Davis Hinton

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For guide and keen outdoor enthusiast, Davis Hinton, there's no one singular moment that stands out over the others when completing one of the two mountain hikes on offer during the Maria Island Walk.

"Guests have the opportunity to climb Mount Maria or Bishop and Clerk, or both if they're serious mountain goats," Davis says. "The incredible diversity the mountain peaks have to offer is a highlight of the trip. The juxtaposition between the pristine turquoise water at sea level and the rugged dolerite peaks is simply breathtaking. It's a really unique geographical drawcard for the east coast of Tasmania."

Davis encourages all guests who are physically capable to considering tackling the peaks, explaining that the hikes offer a great way to truly appreciate the amazing biodiversity of the island. "There are not that many places in Australia where you can be laying on a white-sand beach by turquoise water one minute, and then a few hours later be in a cloud forest surrounded by ancient endemic trees covered in magnificent moss and lichen," he says.

Not surprisingly, the flora and fauna viewing opportunities change as you climb higher

and higher, and Davis keeps guests informed as they make their way up the mountains. "At low elevations it's a much drier coastal climate and we see an abundance of herbivorous marsupials, including countless wombats roaming around in the open areas.

When we climb the mountains, we cross unique scree boulder fields of dolerite shaped by the last glacial ice age, creating the perfect habitat for hundreds of beautiful Tasmanian lizards scattering in and around the rock faces. Watching birds of prey waiting for the right time to pounce on a sun-lounging lizard is mesmerising," Davis explains. "

Around the summit on Bishop and Clerk, also, we see a lot of Tasmanian Pepperberry, and I like to bring that to the attention of our guests as often we serve a local-made Pepperberry cheese that very evening."

The picture-perfect sweeping views of the Tasman Sea take centre stage from the top of the mountains, and Davis says that early mornings offer prime viewing. "Watching the sunrise from these mountains is truly incredible. If you're lucky the peak will be above the cloud line and it will feel like you're floating on a cloud."

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