

Tasmanian Devils (*Sarcophilus harrisii*)

Basic Facts



Order: Dasyuromorpha
Family: Dasyuridae

Location: Tasmania
Habitat: dry sclerophyll forests and coastal woodlands



Diet: Mammals (wombats, wallabies, sheep, fur seals, possums, platypus, rats, and rabbits), birds, insects, and fish

Life span: ~5 years
Reach maturity ~2 years
Mating period: Mating lasts up to 8 days within the months of March and April
Gestation period: 21 days



Size: Males 26.4 lbs and Females 17.6 lbs



Form and function

Tasmanian devils' gait is a loping 'rocking-horse gait' that is energy efficient, allowing them to cover large distances in search of food. They have short metatarsals compared to the length of their femur, indicating that they are not fast runners and will not likely pursue fast prey. They mainly walk with having a digitigrade foot posture.



Some skull adaptations that Tasmanian devils have are a short rostrum and masseter muscles for a powerful bite force at the canines. Their canines are circular in cross sections and well adapted for killing prey and eating bone. Their molar teeth have slicing and grinding areas to crush down their prey before digesting.



Female Tasmanian devils give birth between 20 and 30 young. When young are born, they must move into the mother's pouch and find an unoccupied teat. Young weigh about 5 mg. The mother only has four teats so not all the young will survive. The young are attached to the teats for 90 – 105 days. Even though there are four teats, it is likely only two or three young will survive to be weaned.



Behavior

Tasmanian devils are nocturnal and solitary animals. Rarely seen traveling with others. Due to large overlapping home ranges, they have a tolerance for their neighbors and will occasionally feed communally on a large carcass



The dominant Tasmanian devil controls the food source after finishing eating through vocalization and chasing, preventing the subordinate devil from eating. The dominant one of the interaction is usually larger, older, and hungrier. Males are dominant over females, except when females are pregnant or guarding young. Young eat the scraps of the carcass after all the other Tasmanian devils are gone. Young are less aggressive and more vigilant at the carcass as they are smaller and have a higher risk of injury from a fight with an older devil.



Agonistic interactions are common when feeding on a carcass, whether alone or in a group. Agonistic behaviors include chasing, bites, wrestling, locking of jaw, and shouldering. Agonistic vocalizations include growls, grunts, hisses, moans, whines, shrieks, and foot stamping. A foot stamp with a bark is very common and means the Tasmanian devil is defending their food, but a bark alone is an alarm call



Tasmanian devils are a promiscuous or a polygamous species in which the female raises the young on her own. Promiscuous means both the males and females have multiple mates, and the male will follow females or form seasonal harems. Males will make a huff or clap sound while they pursue the female. The male will mark its scent with a cloacal drag. Then during the copulation period, the male will hold the female in a den for up to eight days. Polygamous means males' mate with multiple females and females only mate with one male. Due to overlapping home ranges and males usually being the dominant one around food, Tasmanian devils are also suggested to have a polygamous mating system

Conservation and management

Currently Tasmanian Devils are listed as an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. They were once found all over the mainland of Australia, but then about 400 years ago Dingoes arrived and Tasmanian Devils could only be found on an island called Tasmania. They inhabit forests and coastal scrublands of Tasmania. Then two major things for the Tasmanian Devils caused their populations to decrease. The first happened in the late 1800s. Tasmanian devils were being killed because farmers saw them as livestock killing pests. The second started in 1996 and is still ongoing, it is a type of cancer called the Devil Facial Tumor Disease (DFTD). The disease causes lumps to grow on the face of a Tasmanian Devil, making it difficult for them to eat and eventually starve to death.



There are a few conservation efforts being made for the Tasmanian Devil. One is a program called Save the Tasmanian Devil. A group of people isolate populations of Tasmanian Devils that have not yet come across the disease, and they capture individuals for breeding programs. Then there are also researchers trying to develop a vaccine for the disease.

