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Guardian Dogs: Penguin Protectors



Written by Gabrielle Fimbres

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Table of Contents

Penguin Protectors	4
Little Penguins	5
A Brilliant Idea	7
Training the Dogs	10
A Better Place	15
Glossary	16

Penguin Protectors

Eudy and Tula are on **patrol**. They protect the little **penguins** of Middle Island, off the coast of Australia.

These shaggy, white Maremma dogs watch over the penguins that come to the island every year to **breed**. The smell of the dogs and their booming bark keep the penguins safe from red foxes. These foxes nearly caused the little penguins to vanish from this small, rocky island.



Middle Island covers less than 5 acres. That's about the size of 5.5 American football fields—without the end zones!



Little penguins come ashore each night during breeding season in Australia.

Little Penguins

The little penguin, the smallest in the world, stands only 30 centimeters (12 in.) tall. It lives all across New Zealand and southern Australia. It is sometimes called the *little blue penguin* or the *fairy penguin*. During breeding season, little penguins live in **burrows** dug in sand. Once they lay eggs, they get ready for them to hatch. After the eggs hatch, adults fish during the day and return to their burrows at dusk to feed the babies. The chicks are ready to leave the nest when they are about eight weeks old.

For years, little penguins raised families on Middle Island, close to the city of Warrnambool, Australia. Then, in the 1990s, foxes began to appear on the island.

During the summer, the tide is very low. Foxes can walk to the island from the



British colonists brought the red fox to Australia in the 1830s.

mainland. As the number of foxes grew, they began to eat the little penguins. “By 2005, the penguin **population** on Middle Island was nearly wiped out by fox attacks. That year, only four penguins were spotted,” says Kristie King. She keeps track of the penguins on the island.

It seemed that the days of the little penguin on Middle Island might be over.

A Brilliant Idea

One local chicken farmer had a brilliant idea. Alan “Swampy” Marsh suggested using Maremmas to protect the penguins. He used the dogs to protect his chickens, so why couldn’t they protect penguins? Maremmas have been bred in Italy for hundreds of years. They protect farm animals—usually chickens or sheep—from **predators** such as wolves and foxes.



Eudy and Tula know they are on patrol when they are on the boardwalk.

Maremma: Sheepdogs or Guardian Dogs?

The Maremma sheepdog breed originally comes from Italy. It is bred to guard livestock. In Australia, this same breed of dog also protects other animals. The Middle Island Maremma Project calls these dogs “guardian” dogs because they don’t guard sheep.



Neighbors and **conservationists** came together to give the idea a try. The Warrnambool City Council and Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Group created the Middle Island Maremma Project. To see if Marsh's idea would work, one of his dogs was brought to the island for a few weeks.

These hero dogs turned out to be the perfect answer. Since coming to the island in 2006, there have been no known attacks on penguins by red foxes. "This has allowed the number of penguins on the island to increase,"

King says. As of the 2013–2014 breeding season, almost two hundred penguins had returned to the island.

Vince Haberfield, Deputy Leader of the Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Group, assists in keeping track of the penguins.





Volunteers visit the island during the day to weigh and record measurements of adult and young birds.

Maremmas are trained at an early age to protect penguins. Trainers begin by slowly introducing puppies to chickens under careful supervision. Over time, the dogs learn that chickens are normal animals in their territory. Once this happens, they protect the birds.

Training the Dogs

When the dogs are about two months old, they meet the penguins. To the dogs, the penguins are just “chooks [chickens] in dinner suits,” as **volunteer** Peter Abbott explains. The dogs spend time on the island with the trainers. They learn about the area and become comfortable with the penguins. Once the dogs see the penguins as a normal part of the area, they protect the birds. The trainers take the dogs back and forth to the island for an entire breeding season before leaving them on their own.



Volunteers bring the dogs to the island to protect the penguins.



The dogs return to the mainland every few days to rest up. Volunteers take good care of the dogs.

During breeding season, the trained dogs stay on a wooden deck that has shade, food, and water. From the deck, they watch over the penguins.

Eudy and Tula are the sixth and seventh Maremmas given the job of protecting penguins. Two dogs stay on the island during every breeding season. Phil Root is the main dog handler. He cares for the dogs when they are off duty.

Maremmas as Pets

Although Maremmas are cute, fluffy dogs, they are not recommended as family pets. They have strong instincts to herd and protect other animals—including humans. This instinct can make them quite a handful!





During breeding season, Eudy and Tula spend their off-duty time at Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village, Australia, with Root.

“It is an honor to work with the volunteers in the project to protect our Middle Island penguins,” Root says. “It is a great responsibility to care for the Maremmas that are truly loved by the Warrnambool community. People stop for photos and to talk about how proud they are of this wonderful project.”

These trusty pups need a break now and then. Eudy and Tula are taken to the mainland a couple of days a week to rest because the weather conditions on the island are harsh. After breeding season, they stay with a family on a farm.



This arrival cove on Middle Island shows how harsh the terrain is on the island.



Lauren Kivisalu, the volunteer coordinator, takes measurements of penguins at Phillip Island, Australia.

About two hundred volunteers give their time and money to keep the penguins safe. During breeding season, volunteers count the penguins arriving on the island each night during the penguin parade. They also check burrows, looking for penguins and chicks. “The chicks are recorded and **monitored** for weight gain and feather development,” says Abbott. Other volunteers take care of the island and educate visitors about the project.



The dogs have an exercise period each day so they can get off the boardwalk.

A Better Place

Making the planet a better place for animals takes hard work, lots of support, and sometimes the brilliant idea of one person. The Middle Island Maremma Project is a great example of how communities can come together to make a difference in the lives of animals.

Learn More About the Project

You can learn more about the Middle Island Maremma Project by visiting the group's website at www.wcig.com.au. Be sure to ask your teacher or a parent for permission before going online.

Glossary

breed (<i>v.</i>)	to make a baby or come together to reproduce (p. 4)
burrows (<i>n.</i>)	animal homes dug in the ground (p. 5)
conservationists (<i>n.</i>)	people who work to protect the environment, including animals, plants, and natural resources (p. 8)
monitored (<i>v.</i>)	observed the progress of something (p. 14)
patrol (<i>n.</i>)	the act of moving through an area to watch over it and keep it safe (p. 4)
penguins (<i>n.</i>)	aquatic, flightless birds that live in the Southern Hemisphere (p. 4)
population (<i>n.</i>)	all the members of one species in a particular area (p. 6)
predators (<i>n.</i>)	animals that hunt and eat other animals to survive (p. 7)
volunteer (<i>n.</i>)	a person who offers help or a service without being paid (p. 10)

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Coastcare Landcare Group and Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village Museum

Front cover: The thick coat of these dogs protects them from the harsh weather
on Middle Island, Australia.

Title page: Little penguins are sometimes called little blue penguins because of
the blue tint to their back feathers.

Page 3: The booming bark of the Maremmas scares away the red foxes.

Back cover: Oddball the Second is the name of this dog, which was used in the
movie about the Middle Island Maremma Project.

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