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Antipodean Interlude

Exploring Tasmania's unique flora and fauna

I've just returned from a trip to Tasmania, Australia's island state. We found it rather like Oregon: wet in the west, dry in the east. Rugged coastline, gorgeous beaches, chilly ocean. With a latitude similar to Oregon's, a temperate climate and good soil, Tasmania grows great fruit, vegetables and wine. Sheep and cattle are everywhere, power comes from hydroelectric dams and log trucks abound. Lightly populated, mountainous and once heavily forested, it's a battleground for conservation versus resource extraction.

A whopping 36 percent of Tasmania, however, is protected in national parks and World Heritage areas. And, of course, Tasmania is an island. Its long isolation means that much of the fabulous flora and fauna is unique. One tenth of the plant life, several mammals and six percent of the birds occur naturally only in Tasmania. On the other hand, seven of the 75 birds we observed were European species introduced by colonists, and often they were the commonest birds around. Only in natural areas were we more likely to hear native bird sounds than the twittering of house sparrows and European starlings.

When you visit a faraway place that's famous for its flora, it is disappointing to see only familiar cultivated plants in every garden — and a serious consciousness-raiser for a gardener. Roses rule in Tasmanian yards, along with camellia, agapanthus and hydrangea. There is certainly a growing interest in native plants, but it's rare to see a garden of all natives. Walking around the prettiest neighborhood in Hobart (the state capital, where our trip began), I saw just one. It was also the only garden on that walk to produce a native Australian bird: a New Holland honeyeater, sipping away at callistemon flowers.

Where the Oregon coast has puffins, Tasmania has penguins. Little penguins, that is. The subspecies of *Eudyptula minor* found in Tasmania stands around a foot tall. When ashore, Little penguins live in colonies of 100 or more, nesting in individual natural cavities or burrows that they dig in sand or soil. They fish far out at sea from dawn until near dusk, when they return to their burrows. A tour of a thriving penguin colony complete with young, right next to the hotel where we spent the Christmas holiday, was a high point of our trip. Commercial penguin tours promise a close-up look at these amazing animals, an opportunity that was not to be missed in spite of my concern for the birds. There were 20 people in our group, including three restless

small children. How could our presence possibly be a good thing?

As dusk approached, our guide pointed out faintly dark patches in the water, moving towards the beach. One patch after another materialized on shore as a small cluster of waiting penguins. Eventually they started up the beach towards us and their burrows. Bright lights, sudden movements and loud noises can disturb the birds, we were told, but otherwise they seem very well adapted to humans. The tour group, now standing in awed silence (kids included), was completely ignored. Crooning penguins heading for nests beyond us simply passed between our legs, while young penguins that were almost grown waddled out of their burrows all around us when they heard their parents approach.

Human activities generally have been hard on penguins. They've been melted down for oil and killed by the thousand for bait in crayfish traps. Their breeding grounds have been irreparably altered by erosion, development, invasive plants and introduced rabbits. At sea, plastic debris and oil slicks take a toll. In Tasmania their worst enemies are domestic dogs, a major cause of declining colonies. A dog can kill 40 or 50 penguins in one night, and traumatized survivors may abandon their burrows and never come back. The regular human presence at the Bicheno colony (and construction of some artificial burrows) provides some protection from dogs, and the colony has grown from about 50 breeding pairs to several hundred in the few years the tours have operated.

Since coming home, I learned about a 1980s study of a declining penguin population on an island where 10 percent of the colonies were exposed to tourist groups. The data showed that nightly penguin viewing did not contribute to the birds' decline. (Populations on that island have since increased.) This must have been good news for the tourist industry since penguins are a big attraction. Happily, this seems to be one of those cases where informed human intervention can be benign and even potentially positive. Very little of the world we live in remains in a natural state — none of it, some would argue. As we alter more and more habitat and continue to disrupt Earth's natural systems, human intervention may be our only hope of keeping some biological diversity. We broke it, and, ironically, only we can fix it.

Rachel Foster of Eugene is a garden consultant and author of *All About Gardens*, a selection of past Eugene Weekly columns. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org