

Roadkill capital of the world

It is estimated that at least half a million native animals are killed by cars each year in Tasmania. However, there are many things you can do to help, writes GRACE HEATHCOTE, of Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary.



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Tourism Tasmania & Rob Burnett

Orphaned joeys of native animals like the pademelon (left) and wombat (above) are common victims that need care.

Tucked away at the edge of the world, Tasmania still hosts tracts of wilderness left largely untouched by human development. This wilderness offers a last refuge for a number of species that are now extinct everywhere else, including the Tasmanian devil, the Eastern quoll, the Tasmanian pademelon and the shy Tasmanian bettong. Nonetheless, dangers exist in this paradise that are beginning to threaten the survival of native species.

It is estimated that at least half a million native animals are killed by cars each year in Tasmania, making our roads deadlier for wildlife, per capita, than anywhere else in the world. For the most part, these animals are brush-tailed possums, pademelons and wallabies that might be crossing the road or feeding on the abundant green roadside grass.

However, road traffic is also a particular problem for carnivorous animals such as quolls, wedge-tailed eagles and Tasmanian devils that come to the roads to feed on other animals that have been killed there. Many of these species are facing challenges from disease, habitat loss, and competition from feral cats, meaning that the added pressure from car strike can have a disproportionate impact on their populations.

To respond to these threats, Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary established a statewide wildlife rescue service in 2010 to transport injured and orphaned animals to care. This has been an enormous success, with thousands of animals, including a number of endemic and endangered species, being given a chance at rerelease and survival.

With more than 30,000 rescue calls to the service to date, the

ABOVE: A pelican released back into the wild after recovery; RIGHT: Tawny frogmouths in residence at Bonorong Wildlife Sanctuary.

leading cause of injury to wildlife (almost 30% of injuries) was being struck by a vehicle. This far exceeded other known causes of injury such as becoming trapped (for example in chimneys, snares and buildings) (14.6%), cat attack (5.2%), dog attack (5%), or flying into glass windows (1.3%). Of course, there is also a large and unquantified number of animals killed on Tasmanian roads each year.

At the same time, collisions with wildlife can pose a serious safety risk to vehicle occupants. A study by the Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety (Queensland) found that 5.5% of all on-road serious casualties were caused by direct impact with an animal or swerving to avoid an animal. In addition, vehicle insurance companies have reported a consistent rise in the number of claims involving collisions with animals. According to RACT Insurance, collisions with wildlife incur more than \$5 million in vehicular damage each year.

The threat that vehicles pose to wildlife, and vice versa, can be mediated to a large extent by driver behaviour – by adopting a few simple techniques, drivers can significantly reduce their risk of hitting animals:

- Slow down between dusk and dawn, as this is when many animals are most active.
- Pay attention to road signs indicating wildlife hot spots, and to roadkill already on the road.
- Be especially vigilant on roads close to bush or other vegetation as these can provide hiding places for animals.
- Be extra careful during winter – studies have shown a peak in collisions between wildlife and vehicles in June, July and August.
- Develop an understanding of typical wildlife behaviour as many animals will move suddenly and without warning into the path of oncoming traffic.
- By using caution and common sense, drivers can make a difference to their own safety as well as that of wildlife crossing the road.

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