

# Annual Shearwater Slaughter

## What happens to Short-tailed Shearwaters (muttonbirds) in Tasmania?

The Short-tailed Shearwater, alias the 'muttonbird', is subject to both recreational and commercial hunting in Tasmania. See the Short-tailed Shearwater species sheet for more information on this species.

The victims of hunting are the chicks, who are taken from their burrows in dunes and headlands along the coast of Tasmania. Their parents travel 15,000 kilometres to breed, only to have their single chick killed. Shearwater chicks grow fast and reach almost twice the weight of an adult, before the adults depart for warmer climates. It is at this time that they are vulnerable to 'hunters', who are attracted to their fatty flesh.

Recreational killing of 'muttonbirds' requires a licence and there is a two week season. Birds are for personal use only and not to be sold. In addition to the recreational season, a large number of chicks are removed from their burrows by commercial season operators and sold. The birds are also vulnerable to poaching (illegal killing).

## The cruelty of 'muttonbirding'

Recreational licences are handed out to anyone who applies and pays the fee. Whilst there is a written guide for how to kill 'humanely', which involves breaking the chick's neck, many licence holders are unable to put the written instructions into practice and many chicks are killed in barbaric and illegal ways. Commonly they are swung around the killer's head until their neck breaks, or in some cases the chick's heads are stomped on. Although it is not legal to do so, sometimes long hooks are used to haul them from their safe havens. Policing is inadequate, as much of the legal killing is carried out on offshore islands.

## Damage to Burrows

Short-tailed Shearwaters re-use the same burrows year after year. Significant damage is done to burrows when chicks are removed. By admission of the Tasmanian Government, in documentation handed to those obtaining licences, 'muttonbirding' is causing significant habitat damage: *"Colonies are located on fragile soils held together by vegetation that is vulnerable to disturbance. Many muttonbirders cause deliberate and permanent damage to individual burrows by digging them by hand or spade, or by ripping them open with their shoulders when attempting to get birds deep in burrows. Vegetation is also hacked or torn away. Damaged burrows are useless for birds to breed in the future. These problems still continue in some colonies."*

There have even been places where vegetation has been taken to with a chainsaw to obtain easier access! Despite this recognition of the insensitivities of 'muttonbirders', the season is allowed to continue.

The large volume of pedestrian traffic during 'muttonbird' season, and the associated damage to the burrows and vegetation, particularly after a dry year, led to the permanent closing of all but one of the mainland rookeries for 'muttonbirding' in the 1980s. Recreational 'muttonbirding' is still allowed on a number of offshore islands, where the damage caused is not visible to the general public, and at a few locations on the West Coast.

## 'Recreational Muttonbirding'

'Recreational muttonbirding' is a 'recreational' activity that Tasmania can do without.

There are generally around 1000 licences issued each year, and the season runs for 16 days. The usual bag limit is 25 chicks per day per person. This means that a person can legally take up to 400 chicks - a lot of birds for personal use! The total number of chicks killed varies from year to year, but is usually in the range of 50-65,000. In 2010 individual 'muttonbirders' killed an average of 49 chick each.

The 2006 season was the first time that hunters had to submit returns on how many chicks they killed and it is not known how accurate their returns are. Only limited and dated survey information exists about the total number of birds in Tasmania.

The number of licences issued has been increasing marginally in recent years. Historically, however, numbers were much higher. In 1977 the number of licences issued peaked at 8000. At that time licence holders did not have to report how many birds they were taking, but studies showed that in some locations more than 90% of all chicks were killed by 'birders', an unsustainable level, and rookeries were being irreparably damaged. It was in the mid 1980s that restrictions were placed on where chicks could be taken, protecting most of the rookeries on mainland Tasmania, but leaving rookeries on the islands open to exploitation. Bag limits were also introduced.

Non-commercial colonies tend to be harvested much more heavily and many individuals go methodically from burrow to burrow, taking every chick they find until they reach their bag limit for the day. Given that the season is two weeks long, the same burrows may be checked over and over by different birders, leading to very high take rates in non-commercial colonies.

In addition, poaching is a significant problem, particularly on mainland Tasmania. This is difficult to police and usually happens under cover of darkness, so the real number of chicks killed may be substantially higher than official figures would suggest.

Killing native birds for recreation should not be condoned in the 21st Century. It causes avoidable and unnecessary cruelty.

### Commercial 'Muttonbirding'

The industry has declined markedly over the years. There were between 11 and 13 commercial operators between 1930 and 1960, and only five by 1978. In the 1930s consistently in excess of 1 million chicks were killed. Now there are two commercial operators, seven licensed processing sheds, and 36 licensed 'catchers'. Birds are taken from Big Dog, Babel and Trefoil Islands. The commercial kill in recent years has declined to well under 100,000 chicks. There is no set upper limit on how many birds are allowed to be killed.

The commercial industry was estimated to be worth a total of \$500 000 in 2005, a relatively small industry when wages and other expenses are taken into account.

At one stage feathers and oil from the chicks were a significant part of the trade. In the late 1970s to early 1980s up to 24 bales of feathers and 1690 litres of oil were produced in a season. There is no longer a market for feathers, while a small trade in oil remains.

Shearwater products are usually sold as 'muttonbird', sometimes as 'yolla' around Tasmania, with some exports to the mainland. Although the oil is sold for use in pharmaceutical products and 'health' products, mainly for animals, there is no scientific research to show that there is any significant benefit from its use.

The current commercial practice of killing chicks began with the advent of white sealers in the Furneaux Group of Island and the exploitation of Aboriginal women as their workforce.

Modern-day commercial operations adhere more stringently to regulations on the kill method, and do less damage to the burrows than recreational 'hunters', but the ethics of killing a wild species solely for profit, and the long-term viability of such an industry, is an issue.

In April 2009 around 1 million chicks on Babel Island were estimated to have perished in an emaciated condition, and some other colonies were also affected. In 2011 only 12% of burrows were occupied in the Furneaux Islands used by the commercial industries. With sudden and as yet unexplained die-offs in such huge numbers, and with the numerous modern-day threats that face shearwaters, such as gillnet fisheries, overfishing, ingestion of plastics, oils

### What can you do?

- There is no need for the flesh of the infant Short-tailed Shearwater to be on the dinner table. There are many alternatives and these birds have such amazing and majestic lives to lead. Threats to them are many without the added impact of humans. Let them live their lives in peace.
- Tasmania is the only place in Australia that the Short-tailed Shearwater is not fully protected. Taking of shearwater chicks was banned in the 1970s in Victoria and significant penalties are in place there.
- Write letters to both the Australian and Tasmanian Ministers responsible for the environment to voice your protest about the killing of shearwater chicks. Ask the governments' to ban the recreational and commercial killing of shearwaters. Ask for serious action to be taken to thwart poachers.
- Don't purchase 'muttonbird' products and ask members of your family to avoid them too!

spills and climate change, the question must be asked, is this industry sustainable?

### Risks to the species

There are a number of examples of extinctions or dramatic population collapses of species due to overharvesting by humans, sometimes in combination with environmental causes, even when numbers appeared high. The Providence Petrel on Norfolk Island, which formerly had the name of 'muttonbird', became extinct on that island due to extensive killing by the locals, and the introduction of pigs, in the late 1700s.

The effects of killing chicks at such high levels, especially of the non-commercial colonies, could be delayed because of the long breeding life of the species, and may only become evident later. It is possible that a fall in numbers could be sudden and dramatic, especially given the other risks that the species face in their natural life, from food shortages, long-line fishing, fires in colonies, to severe storms and climate change (see Short-tailed Shearwater fact sheet for more information).

It is not only shearwaters themselves that are at risk, snakes are also victims of 'muttonbirding'. Snakes, fully protected in Tasmania, are a threat to birders putting their hands down burrows where snakes sometimes lurk. Snakes have been known to be systematically removed (killed) prior to 'muttonbird' season to reduce the risk to the birders.