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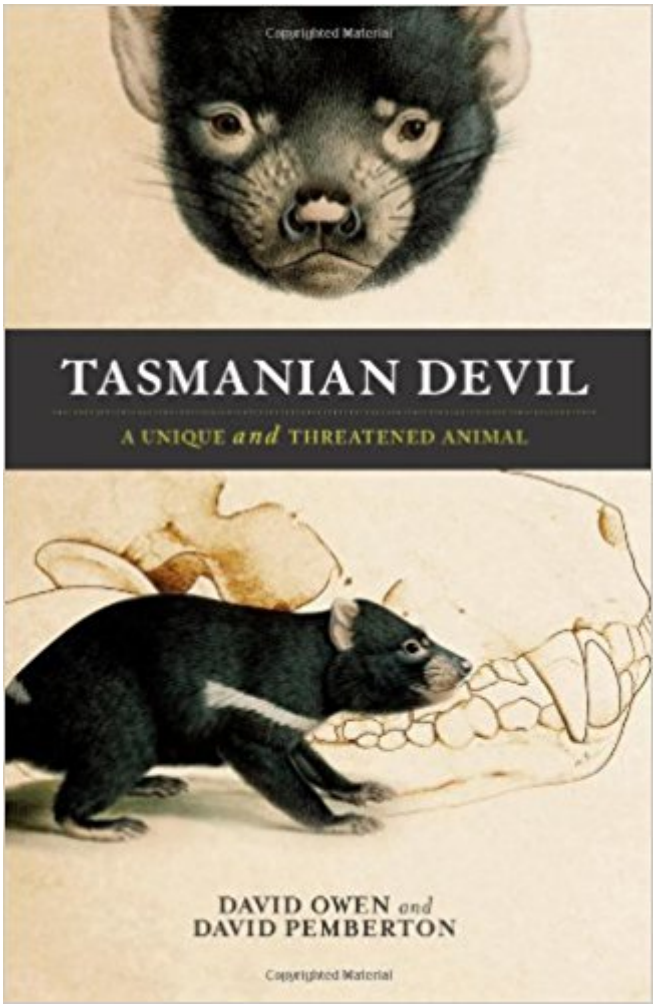
Tasmanian Devil: A Unique And Threatened Animal



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Synopsis

Fascinating new insights into the famous Australian marsupialÂ Packed with information that has only been published in scientific journals, if ever at all, this collection of biological facts challenges the misconceptions associated with Australia's most famous marsupial. Far from being a scavenging, ferocious oddity, an image perpetuated by the infamous cartoon character, the Tasmanian Devil is actually a treasured and valuable wildlife species facing extinction. By sharing the surprising, controversial, funny, and tragic history behind the world's largest marsupial carnivore, this new guidebook covers all aspects of the biology and the habitat of the Tasmanian Devil.

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Customer Reviews

"A superbly readable account of this bizarre marsupial . . . the animalÂ beneath the misnomer."Â â ”New York Sun"Written in the conversational yet informative tone of the good naturalist-lecturer . . . this will be the go-to book on Tasmanian devils for the foreseeable future."Â â ”Booklist

David Owen is the author of Shark and Tasmanian Tiger. David Pemberton is the vertebrate curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

The book was bought as an addition to our volunteer library at the Rio Grande Zoo... we will soon be one of the few U.S. zoos to have Tasmanian Devils. This work will give the docents (volunteer educators)in depth info to share with our visitors.

I went to Tasmania and this was a great bvook to learn more about the creature.v There’s deinitely a lot of padding in tebook by comparing it to other animals, but you’ll see where to skim.

Tasmanian Devil by David Owen and David Pemberton is a well-illustrated and researched overview of the natural and human history of the largest living marsupial carnivore. After the introduction the first chapters of the book focus on the animal’s natural history, the authors taking care to dispel popularly held myths about the animal. Devils are opportunistic feeders, eating live prey and carrion as well as invertebrates, fruit, and vegetation. A solitary hunter, they aren’t fast enough to chase down wallabies or rabbits but do go after wombats (though some researchers have reported that they can chase prey at about 12 kilometers per hour for short bursts). They have tremendous jaw strength and powerful teeth that enable them to consume gristle, skin, and shatter bones (the equivalent of a dog four times their size or for their body mass more powerful than a tiger’s). Though usually solitary, devils feed communally on particularly large carcasses. Often described as being some sort of free-for-all with lots of screaming and apparent fighting, devils in fact have elaborate vocalizations and postures to maintain order and some speculate that just as the sight of daylight-circling vultures attracts other vultures the noises devils make may serve to alert other devils in the area to a large food source. The first arrival is the dominant feeder, making way for a challenger once it has gorged itself, the feeder defending only the amount of food it needs, not the entire carcass. Devils will generally seek to take what they can and hide with their share, consuming it in peace. Though maligned by ranchers, the devils are the "great hygienists" of the Tasmanian bush. They consume dead and dying livestock and have been credited with breaking the sheep tapeworm cycle and keeping down blowfly populations. Another social trait of devils is that of the communal latrine. Though most of the time devils are solitary animals, depending upon population size, dozens of devils will defecate in one area, "for reasons of communication barely understood, and further calling into question the "solitary" tag." Interestingly, hyenas and ratels (or honey badgers), two species presented as examples of convergent evolution with devils, also use communal latrines. The authors go on to compare interesting examples of convergence with wolverines as well, looking at sense of smell, skull structure, markings (both devils and wolverines have white neck and throat patches), body posture, locomotion, and diet. The evolution and fossil record of the Tasmanian devil are discussed also. The famous Riversleigh fossils site of northwestern Queensland has a species that is 15% larger than a modern devil with a 50% greater body mass. Scientists have speculated whether the modern devil is a dwarfed version of this

species or if it coexisted with the larger extinct version. Some believe that several different-sized devils occupied a range of predator-scavenger niches. Devils apparently went extinct on the mainland as recently as 500 years ago for reasons unknown, though climatic issues and the introduction of the dingo are most often blamed. The authors go into detail about the history of the study of these animals. The animal was known only to the island's 4000 indigenous inhabitants up until 1803, when Europeans started to settle what was then known as Van Diemen's Land. George Prideaux Harris was the first to scientifically describe the devil (in 1806). Other important figures are Louisa Anne Meredith who in late 19th century/early 20th century bred devils in her private zoo and helped the devils' public image tremendously and Professor Theodore Thomson Flynn, a pioneering 20th century mammalogist. A chapter of course is spent on the history of the famous Warner Brothers cartoon character Taz. This "whirling, brown, slobbering creature" has vast international recognition, far beyond that of the real animal. Some have speculated that Warner Brothers studios had another Tasmanian in mind when they created the character, Errol Flynn (son of the aforementioned Dr. Flynn), who worked for the studio. Errol Flynn in his autobiography even titled the first chapter "Tasmanian Devil, 1909-1927". It would seem that that was merely coincidence as the authors provide the history of the development of the character (for all his fame only five Taz cartoons were made between 1954 and 1964 until his 1990 resurrection) and of the legal battles involving the character (Warner Brothers had trademarked the name Tasmanian Devil, a fact that has bothered and hampered many Tasmanians' use of their iconic animal in economic matters and in promoting tourism). From the earliest days Europeans regarded the devil, along with the thylacine, as "stock-destroying vermin" and sought to trap, poison, and shoot them into extinction. Later researchers showed that neither species was to blame for livestock losses on the island (instead one could point at poor management and farming practices as well as packs of feral dogs), but "bush myths" proliferated that they would hunt sheep and even people (though in reality not preying upon healthy sheep and only consuming murder and suicide victims, the devils never having been known to kill anyone). While enormous strides had been made in protecting devils from persecution, in 1996 Dutch wildlife photographer Christo Baars noted ghastly facial growths on devils he photographed and by 1998 researchers came to realize many areas were experiencing a serious decline in devils thanks to the spread of Devil Facial Tumor Disease (DFTD), a virulent facial cancer that kills within five months of its manifestation. Poorly understood, some researchers believed it was a naturally occurring retrovirus, one that perhaps had caused devil population crashes in the past, perhaps triggered by pesticide or fertilizer chemicals or the rabbit-killing calicivirus, while others think it may have jumped species, perhaps from feral cats, to the devils.

Attempts to save the devils have been complicated by political infighting over conservation and research funds, difficulty in diagnosis of the disease, and feral cats and foxes filing the emptying devil niche. Attempts to quarantine the devils to small islands have met with numerous obstacles as well.

Serious and factful book about the biggest marsupials carnivorous. The Authors seem to love them. They are right!

This is one of the few books available about the Tasmanian devil that is not geared towards children. A fair, unbiased description of an often misunderstood animal, "Tasmanian Devil" tells the habits, myths, and cultural reactions to the animal behind the famous cartoon character.Also addressed is the animal's vulnerable state, with a final chapter on the little understood disease currently ravaging the devil population and what is being done to save these animals from extinction.

This is a great, though all too brief book on the Tasmanian Devil. It is well written, giving anecdotes and highlights from scientific research on the little creatures' ecology and evolution. It also gives a chapter on devils in captivity, a great insight into those myths of devils being uncontrollable, voracious little predators that will bite the crap out of anything and everything. It tells of the persecution by man, which, unlike some books on persecuted animals, is told without being tedious.It ends with some insight into the mystery surrounding the disease that is decimating wild populations.I really was hopeing for more on the ecology of the animal, unfortunately there was not enough in this book. However, that merely highlights the lack of research that has actually been done, by amateurs or professionals.Highly recommended to anyone interested in Australian animals, or anyone interested in animals fullstop.

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