



Weird and wonderful

This vast country is home to many weird and wonderful animals that are not as well known as the kangaroo or koala. Paul Done introduces you to a few of his favourites.



Thorny devil

Having grown up in Australia and travelled extensively around the country, I've encountered some really strange yet wonderful creatures, indigenous and unique to my homeland.

Dugongs are marine mammals which can grow to three metres in length and weigh up to 400 kilogrammes. Very docile creatures, they drift around in family groups, surfacing only to breathe. Affectionately known as “sea cows” due to their feeding habit of grazing on sea grass, dugongs are amongst 16 endangered species which inhabit the Shark Bay World Heritage Area and Marine Park in Western Australia. Out of the water, the quokka is a pint-sized kangaroo found only on the island of Rottnest, ten miles off Perth's coast in Western Australia. These cute marsupial creatures were in fact thought to be large rodents when the island was discovered. The island is steeped in cultural history and is now a beautiful natural reserve, and the quokka is as important at attracting visitors as the stunning white beaches and dramatic scenery.

Most at home in the arid desert scrub, ‘thorny devils’ can be found across the sand plains of central and western Australia. They are covered entirely by conical shaped spines which both protect them and help to collect the water that is channelled through grooves to the mouth. For food, the thorny devils feast on ants, eating up to a thousand in one sitting. Despite their ferocious spines they are hunted by bustards and goannas so their camouflage colouring and ‘false head’ on the back of their necks is essential for survival.

Deriving its name from a mythical creature, the leafy sea dragon is native to the waters of southern and western Australia. Cleverly camouflaged, “Leafy” as they are popularly known, are able to



Tasmanian devil

change colour depending upon age, diet, location or mood. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the leafy sea dragon is that it is actually the male that gives birth.

Tasmania's location, separated from the mainland by the blustery Bass Straits, has helped the survival of many species which have become, or are on the verge of, extinction in mainland Australia. The paucity of introduced predators such as the fox, combined with a relatively large amount of intact habitat, make Tasmania a final refuge for many species. A couple of the more fascinating creatures who continue their existence on this island are the quoll and the Tasmanian devil. Often referred to as native cats, eastern and spotted-tail quolls are carnivorous marsupials, distinguishable by their fawn, brown and black colourings, with small white spots covering all but their bushy tail. Last spotted on the mainland in the 1960s, these nocturnal scavengers are widespread throughout the island.

Although only the size of a small dog but with jaws as powerful as a crocodile, the Tasmanian devil can look and sound incredibly fierce. Characterised by its black fur, offensive odour and extremely loud screech, the devil is a Tasmanian icon. Despite its fearsome armoury it is today sadly under threat with the virulent, devil facial tumour disease reducing numbers so much that they may soon be listed as an endangered species.

Fascinating as these creatures are, nothing beats seeing them up close and personal yourself, and a visit to Australia to encounter them in the company of one of our extremely knowledgeable guides will be something you will never forget.

Paul Done
Australia Specialist



Above: Leafy sea dragon
Opposite page: Dugong, Shark Bay

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Australia, including visits to Perth and Tasmania costs from £2,550 per person. For further details please contact Lucy, Paul or Jenny on 01993 838 800.



Creatures of Australia