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The Sealers' Legacy - Ferals

Wildlife Management Officer, Geof Copson, made his first trip to Macquarie Island in 1974. Since then, he has visited the island regularly. He is responsible for controlling introduced pests on Macquarie Island, many of which were introduced by sealers. Geof Copson is also a very talented photographer, and many of his photos have been used on this site.



Macquarie Island wildlife manager, Geof Copson, Parks and Wildlife Service, Hobart. Photo Glyn Roberts.

Protecting Macquarie Island's natural heritage – a lifetime's work

Macquarie Island has been set aside by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve. This means that the Tasmanian Government, which administers the island, has a responsibility to reduce threats to the island's native animals and plants. Wildlife Manager, Geof Copson, has devoted a life's work to the task of eliminating introduced species from Macquarie Island.

The sealing company, Elder & Co, introduced rabbits to Macquarie Island as food for sealers during the 1870s. The rabbits thrived and their population on Macquarie Island grew to 150,000 during the 1970s. Scientists then became worried that the rabbits were causing soil erosion and changing the patterns of vegetation. The Australian Antarctic Division, Department of Primary Industry and CSIRO jointly investigated methods of controlling rabbits on Macquarie Island.

Geof Copson and his research team introduced the myxomatosis virus to Macquarie Island in 1978. This disease has since brought the rabbit population down to around 5-15,000.

The problem with reducing the rabbits was that they had been a food source for feral cats. Once the rabbit numbers were reduced, the cats turned their attentions to sea birds!



Rabbit on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

Cats are skilled hunters that have adapted well to life in the subantarctic. They kill winter-breeding sea birds, particularly the prions and petrels, and other introduced species.



A feral cat on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

Geof Copson believes that cats are responsible for wiping out two native sub-species of birds, the Macquarie Island parakeet and a land rail, which have not been seen on the island since the 1890s.

It is thought that after the rabbit population declined in the 1970s, cats were killing around 60,000 sea birds per year. Since 1985, Geof Copson has been concentrating his efforts on reducing the cat population on Macquarie Island. His efforts have been successful. 1,367 cats have been destroyed there by park rangers during the last ten years. The program, which involves trapping and shooting, has been so successful that there may now be less than ten cats on the island.

Wekas have been another pest on Macquarie Island in the past.



A weka on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

Wekas are New Zealand birds that feed on plants and invertebrates, but sometimes kill smaller birds. Geof Copson believes that they may have contributed to the destruction of the Macquarie Island parakeet and land rail. In 1979 there were 232 sightings of wekas on the island but by 1984 there were only 11 sightings.

Feral cats probably ate the wekas after myxomatosis had reduced the rabbit population.

A program to totally eradicate wekas was introduced in 1985 and the last recorded weka was destroyed in December 1988.

Sealers first introduced dogs to Macquarie Island in the early nineteenth century, but dogs did not adapt well to life in the subantarctic. A pack of wild dogs was reported to be living on the plateau in 1820 by Russian scientist, Thaddeus Bellingshausen, but the pack quickly died out.



The Wandering Albatross. An endangered species under threat from introduced species on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.?

Sealers were not the only visitors to Macquarie Island to keep dogs as pets. The spaniel, 'Mac', was a faithful companion to geologist, Leslie Blake and biologist Harold Hamilton, of the Australian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). Mac had pups while she was on the island, but these dogs were probably taken from the island at the end of 1913.



Biologist, H. Hamilton with Mac and one of Mac's pups on Macquarie Island. Photo from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

Transient aliens

'Transient aliens' is a term for species which live for a brief time on Macquarie Island. The following animals have been introduced to Macquarie Island by both sealers and scientists, either to provide food, or to assist in the moving of equipment around the island.



Sealer, Harry Cross with Nugget and Taggart,. Photo E.J. McQuarrie, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

'Nugget' and 'Taggart', two Clydesdales, were used by Joseph Hatch's sealing gangs early in the 1900s to transport oil around the island. Horses were also used by Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) scientist to move equipment in 1970.

A donkey was introduced to Macquarie Island by sealers in 1878 but was removed in 1879.

Cattle were introduced by ANARE in the 1950s.

Sheep were introduced as food by AAE in 1911 and reintroduced by ANARE in the 1950s.

Goats were introduced by ANARE in the 1950s.

Pigs were introduced by sealers in 1878 and by ANARE in the 1950s.

Chickens were introduced by the AAE in 1911 and by ANARE in the 1950s.

Geese were introduced by ANARE in the 1950s

Rats probably came ashore on shipwrecks during the nineteenth or early twentieth century.



A rat on Macquarie Island.
Photo Terrence Pye.

***R*eferences**

Interview with Geof Copson, Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service,
November, 1999.

***F*urther *R*eadings**

You can read about the rats of Macquarie Island in:

['Scobie' Pye - Rat Scientist](#)

and about two scientists and their dog, Mac in:

[Hamilton, Blake & Mac](#)