

Love birds flock to Portland gannet colony



Marine biologist and self-confessed seabird nut Melanie Wells will lead a tour of the Point Danger gannet colony at Portland on January 25. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] M
[/dropcap]elanie (Mel) Wells is beside herself with excitement: not only are the glorious Australasian Gannet seabirds back at Point Danger, near Portland, but they have guests.

"We have counted three Cape Gannets (from South Africa) and two have had chicks," she says with a level of enthusiasm that makes you instantly want to grab your binoculars and go for a peek.

“It is rare to have them coming here, and they have never bred before.”

Mel, from Warrnambool, will be sharing all that she knows about the gannet – and that is plenty – during a free, guided “gawk and talk” at Point Danger on January 25 (see details at the end of story), where people may be lucky enough to see the South African tourists. *(Update: unfortunately the Cape Gannets have since abandoned the nest and their chick died, edit.)*



Love birds: an Australasian Gannet (left) and Cape Gannet get cosy at Point Danger. The Cape Gannet has a white iris, pale blue eyelids and a longer black stripe on its throat. Image: Mel Wells.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] M
[/dropcap]el, a marine biology honours student at Deakin University, has had a fascination with the Australasian Gannet since first spotting one from the Warrnambool breakwater.

“I had always liked birds ever since I was a little kid – I

remember going for a walk around Melbourne with my Dad and coming home to write down all the birds I had seen," Mel laughs.

"But my first love has always been the ocean, so when I started to study marine biology, it was seabirds that came to be my thing."

Gannets are a superb seabird. A broad wing span (it can extend up to 2 metres) and a dynamic flight pattern that is part kite, part racing car and part dive-bomber, make for a spectacular sight.

But spotting them is usually not easy, as they spend the majority of their lives on the ocean, only coming to land to breed.

"They are perfectly designed for a life at sea and once they have fledged, they will stay out at sea for the first five years of their life," Mel explains.



Mel on location at Pope's Eye, near Queenscliff, where the nesting birds have become familiar with human

company. Image: Mel Wells.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] S
outh-west Victoria is particularly privileged, as Point Danger is the only mainland gannet colony in Australia where people can see the birds without needing a boat.

They arrive in their hundreds from September each year to take advantage of the bonney upwelling – a natural phenomena where nutrient rich waters are pushed to the surface from deep below, providing a sort of drive-through cafeteria for a range of marine animals, including seabirds.

“Gannets mate for life and will keep coming back to the same place each year to breed,” Mel says, adding that she knows of one female gannet at Pope’s Eye, off Queenscliff, that is 24 years old.

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link="https://www.dropbox.com/sh/udkjpwn3fhhzhi6/AABm0cognIL4G
K7JDwD0-7koa/pointdanger.MOV?dl=0" newwindow="yes"] If you
have Dropbox, you can watch a 1 min video of the Point Danger
gannets here.[/button]

The species is also a great believer in gender equality, with both the male and female taking turns to look after the chick, of which they have only one each year.

“They are so gentle and loving toward each other, it is really beautiful to watch, but when they are breeding, they can be super aggressive to anything else,” Mel says.

In fact Mel and her fellow researchers strap plastic chopping boards to their shins when walking among the Pope’s Eye colony to avoid having their legs pecked to pieces.



Not quite a fascinator for the Melbourne Cup...Mel has an unexpected head-to-head during a research trip to Pope's Eye. Image: Mel Wells.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] M [/dropcap]el has been studying the feeding habits of the Australasian Gannet since last July as part of her honours thesis, under the guidance of lead researcher **Associate Professor John Arnold**.

The work involves attaching a tiny camera and GPS to the tail of the gannet which records where the birds are feeding and how their diet varies according to their location.

"Some of the images we are getting back are just amazing – David Attenborough stuff," Mel says.

It appears to be both fascinating and fun work and Mel hopes to specialise in such research after she finishes her thesis in April.

In the meantime, she is thrilled to be able to use the [Summer by the Sea](#) guided walks to share her passion for gannets, before they start to take flight again in February.



Gannets have just one chick which, once fledged, will remain at sea for the first five years of its life before returning to breed. Image: Mel Wells.

[box]The Gannets Gawk and Talk is on Sunday, January 25 at 10am. Meet at the Point Danger Gannet Colony Car Park, off Madeira Packet Road, Portland (near the Alcoa smelter). Free, but numbers are limited, [so you must reserve your place here](#). Find [full details here](#).[/box]

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