

Aboriginal Diet

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



What did Aboriginal people eat?

Tasmanian Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers, meaning that they caught and collected their food by hunting animals and gathering plants.

With sophisticated and detailed knowledge of the environment, they knew how to best utilise the natural resources available to them. In Tasmania, with such diverse landscapes and expansive coastline, this resulted in an extremely rich and varied diet, higher in protein and vitamin C than on the mainland of Australia.

Which plants were eaten?

Fruits, roots, seeds and sap were all part of the Tasmanian Aboriginal diet.

An important year round food source was the native pigface. The leaves

of the pigface are edible and have a mildly salty flavour and following flowering it bears sweet red fruit. This plant is still widely used by Tasmanian Aboriginal people today for stings, bites, wounds, and food just as it has been for hundreds of generations.

The grasstree is another versatile plant for Tasmanian Aboriginal people; the leaves, nectar, root and stem of the plant are all edible. Grasstree seeds were collected and ground into flour to make damper and the flowers were soaked in fresh water to make a drink.

Other plants eaten included native currants, native cherry, kangaroo apple, native potato and native carrot, honeysuckle nectar, pith from manfern, and the 'native bread' fungus. A unique seasonal food collected in highland areas was the fermented sap of the cider gum which provided a weak alcoholic beverage, used occasionally.

- Aboriginal people had a sophisticated knowledge of their environment
- Resources were used in a sustainable way for thousands of years
- A large variety of plants, animals and seafood were eaten
- Plants eaten included:
 - Grasstrees, pigface, native currants, native cherry, kangaroo apple, native potato, native carrot, honeysuckle nectar, manfern, and cider gum sap.
- Animals and seafood eaten included:
 - Shellfish, crayfish, mutton birds, emus, seals, wallaby, wombat, bandicoot, bettong, echidna, emu, potoroos, and possums.



Which birds and animals were eaten?

A large variety of birds and animals were eaten by Aboriginal people.

Larger marsupials such as Bennett's wallabies and Forester kangaroos were a common food source, as were possums. Other animals eaten included wombat, bandicoot, bettong, echidna, and potoroos. Many of these animals were cooked whole on open fires or coals. Birds eaten included mutton birds, emu, swans, ducks, crows and penguins.

Mutton-birds (also known as Short-tailed shearwaters) were an important food source collected



by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people for at least the last 8000 years. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mutton birding was the mainstay of families on the small islands in Bass Strait, particularly among the Furneaux Islands in the north east.

Today, Tasmanian Aboriginal people still undertake mutton birding, with it being one of the major industries for the community. The main rookeries are on Big Dog Island and Babel Island. Non-commercial cultural mutton birding is permitted in other selected rookeries around the state depending on the seasonal mutton bird population. Licence holders are required to abide by the *Animal Welfare Act 1933*.

As well as eating the meat, the oil in the birds is well known for its health benefits because it has a high proportion of omega-3 fatty acids. The omega-3 content is so high that if a person drank 1 gram of oil each day they would more than double their normal daily intake.

What seafood was eaten?

Seafood was a significant part of the diet of many Tasmanian Aboriginal groups, evidenced by the extensive shell middens found around Tasmania. Many low lying coastal areas have shell middens. Some of the shell middens in Tasmania are among the largest in the world. They indicate the many generations of people and the thousands of meals eaten in these places.

Within coastal areas seals, crayfish and shellfish were plentiful. To access seasonally abundant foods which were available on offshore islands, such as mutton birds and seals, ocean-going canoes were constructed from bark or reeds. Shellfish including abalone, mussels, oysters, and limpet could be collected on-shore or by diving. Some early colonial records indicate that Aboriginal women dived for shellfish. They filled their grass baskets with enough food for their family or tribe gathered on the shore. The shellfish was cooked on a campfire before the fish was eaten and the shells left at the site.



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