



# Economy

Muttonbirding has been a part of the Tasmanian Aboriginal economy in the past and the present. It is a cultural practice that has been adapted in response to different economic opportunities at different times. The following article outlines the continuity of the practice as well as the changes.




## CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

-  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
-  Sustainability

## CONTENT AREAS

- H** History
- G** Geography
- EB** Economics and Business
- T** Technologies

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES

-  Intercultural Understanding
-  Personal and Social Capability
-  Critical and Creative Thinking

## KEY CONCEPT

An economy is a system of organizations and institutions that either facilitate or play a role in the production and distribution of goods and services in a society. Economies determine how resources are distributed among members of a society; they determine the value of goods or services; and they even determine what sorts of things can be traded or bartered for those services and goods.

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## SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › family
- › community
- › intergenerational practice
- › culture
- › production
- › industry

## GUIDING QUESTION

How can muttonbirding become a sustainable economic practice into the future?

This printed material is **to be used with Muttonbirding – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at [www.theorb.tas.gov.au](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au)

The Living Cultures Muttonbirding resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

# Introduction

Commercial birding started with the *tyereelore* clanswomen in the 1800s.

From the early 1820s the exploitation of an abundant new resource was introduced into the Bass Strait island economy. This was the mass harvesting of mutton birds for their feathers... The workers in the emergent feather economy were clanswomen.

Cameron 2011: 98

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## Catching the Birds



Nathan and Clay Maynard on Big Dog Island | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

When you become part of the crew, that's a great feeling, to be part of something so special.

Jo James

The birders take pride in continuing their cultural practices. The catching and processing of birds for both personal and commercial uses follow similar principles. The ways the birds are handled safely, ethically and sustainably have been developed over many generations and passed on to the community today. The following description tells us what is done.

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Muttonbirders on Big Dog Island | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

The people in the rookery are known as the catchers. The young birds are killed by quickly breaking their necks, a technique that has been passed down through Aboriginal birding families for many generations.

The birds are threaded onto a spit and carried on the catcher's shoulders. The catchers use quadbikes now to carry the birds to the shed, although the spit is still used to carry as many as 50 birds to the main track where the quadbike is waiting.

The following quotes are Aboriginal birders' recollections recorded for the publication *Return to the Islands*.

To catch them... grab them by their beaks.  
To kill them you just quickly flick your wrist.  
It breaks their neck; it's over so fast...

We use a long spit to carry them back to the shed. You push the spit through their beaks.

The spit is supposed to have been invented by the Aboriginal women who first went birding on the Furneaux Islands. They got the idea from their digging sticks.

The spit loaded... is balanced on the shoulders of the catcher who then carries it back to the shed.



The birder carries birds to the shed. The man on the ground is looking for a burrow for a bird.

Brendan (Buck) Brown, aged 9, 1976 cited in Reynolds & McNicoll 2006

This photograph is of Nathan Maynard as a young man carrying birds in on a spit during his first birding season. We witness Nathan taking his turn in passing on his knowledge and passion for birding to his son Clay.

The video clips from The ABC program 'Kam Yan' shows Nathan, Aunty Furley and Paul demonstrating their passion for this important cultural activity.

Hear Nathan talking about his early birding experience with Aunty Furley in the Living Cultures Mutton Bird and Birding multimedia resource.



Nathan Maynard | Image: Vicky Nicholson

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- › What is the process for catching birds?

## Processing

### Squeezing

The oil is squeezed from the stomach of the birds and is kept and sold separately for medicine and food supplements for people and animals.

The birds have a special gland in the stomach full of oil. This oil is used by the bird to keep its feathers waterproof. We used it as cough medicine. The old people believed it could cure nearly anything. It was taken for pneumonia, polio, tuberculosis, as well as colds and flu. Some people said it was good for kidney troubles too. Mixed with mashed pigface it was also used for treating burns and scalds.

The oil is squeezed into 200-litre drums.

The catcher squeezes the body around the stomach: The gurry – undigested food – and the oil are then forced out of the bird's mouth... Most of the oil is obtained at the beginning of the season.



Kitchen Shed on Big Dog Island

Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd



Tim Maynard Plucking a Bird | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## Plucking

The down and feathers are removed in the pluck house. Neville Maynard talks about teaching young people as he works in the pluck house.



Hear Nathan talking about his early birding experience with Aunty Furley in the Living Cultures Muttonbirding and Birding multimedia resource.

The pluckers remove most of the bird feathers... the down is removed by pulling it from the body.

We made all our mattresses and pillows and the mutton bird feathers were used to stuff them.

## Cutting off the birds' legs

Children often do this as their first job in the shed.

## Scalding

Boiling water is used to loosen the down that remains on the body. The down is then removed by rubbing.

First the legs are cut off. Then the birds are placed briefly in boiling water from the copper. The rest of the down is removed.

## Opening

The bodies are cut open and the intestines are removed.

The birds are opened and cleaned thoroughly. Before the brushing and laying could happen the bodies had to be cut open and cleaned on the inside.

## Laying

The cleaned bodies are placed on racks to cool before packing.

Other jobs that were given to the children were 'brushing' and 'laying'. Brushing was removing any down that was left on the birds' bodies. This was done once the pluckers had finished and after the bodies had been scalded. Placing the bodies out on wire racks to cool was called laying. Before that could happen the bodies had to be cut open and cleaned on the inside. Laying was the final job in the process of cleaning the mutton birds.

Sean Thomas as a youngster shows us 'the old way' that his family in his grandparents' shed on Big Dog taught him.



See Shaun Thomas demonstrating his expertise in processing mutton birds in the Living Cultures Muttonbirding and Birding multimedia resource.

## Packing

The birds are packed in boxes in the cool room before taken by boat off the island to the freezer store on Flinders Island.

## The Cookhouse

The cook is responsible for providing the crew with meals throughout the day. The crew works hard and needs to be fed. The job of the cook is as important as any other in the birding team.

I'm that mother figure you know... People come to me every time they hurt themselves. They're in the cookhouse to get it all bandaged up and cared for, and then of a night you go through everybody's injuries and fix them all up. Yeah, so you do more than cook.

Jo James



Dawn Blazeley (left) and Tara Maher (right) in the Cookhouse | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

### A 'feed of birds' the old way was done by salting them

The birds are first washed and graded. Then they are covered thickly in salt and packed into barrels. Two days later when the fat in the birds has started to mix with the salt, brine is poured over them. In the old days a potato was put into the barrel with the water. When the potato floated to the surface the briners knew they had put in enough salt.

### Freezing 'fresh' birds

Today's birders pack the unsalted birds into boxes and take them from their

diesel powered cool rooms by small boat to a large freezer store on Flinders Island. No birders do salt birds any more as health regulations have changed the way birds are prepared for public sale.

### The end of the season

We don't decide when the Season ends. The birds do. One day they are still there. The next day, the right wind comes and they're gone. You see thousands and thousands of them in the air. It's quite a sight. We try to help the stragglers by throwing them into the air.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › To what extent is the harvesting and processing of mutton birds a family or community enterprise?
- › How much of the operation is a commercial venture?
- › How much of the process is cultural practice?

Up until the 1970s and 1980s takeaway mutton birds were a regular feature in Tasmanian fish and chip shops. Mutton bird oil is rich in Omega-3 fatty acids (24.9% of total fatty acids). The amounts are such that one gram of oil per day taken would at least double the normal recommended daily intake.

Aboriginal people still harvest the mutton birds. Our catch and sales are dependent on the sustainability of the harvest. Mutton birds are a delicacy to eat, with a rich oily flavour unlike any other.

Those who prefer the full taste eat birds with the fat left on after the bird has been cleaned. These birds are called “plucked”. Plucked birds are sold as frozen (25 per box) or in brine (50 to the barrel).



Mutton Birds for sale in Burnie | Image: Nikki Brannigan

Those who seek a less strong flavour eat “skun” birds - no fat. These birds are frozen in boxes of 40.

Yolla Products

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › Can you suggest ways to increase the global popularity of mutton birds as a commercial food product?
- › How will the birding community maintain a sustainable future for themselves as they age and struggle to do such strenuous work?
- › What might need to happen to ensure that the birds and the birding practices are still there for the birders' great-great-great grandchildren?

## Advertising Birding

The advertisement showing Noreen Riddle carrying birds in 1955 may have enticed buyers from around the world to buy barrels of salted birds.

Noreen Riddle carrying mutton birds on Great Dog Island | From a pamphlet issued by Tasmanian Freshfoods pty. Ltd. c.1955





Mutton Birds advertised for sale in Burnie | Image: Nikki Brannigan

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What kind of advertisement would tempt people in the general population to purchase and eat mutton birds?
- › What do you think is the lure of muttonbirding today for Tasmanian Aboriginal people who live busy lives and often live in the cities?

[www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/muttonbirding/teacher-drawer](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/muttonbirding/teacher-drawer)

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