

The Lone Penguin

Every year as the Antarctic summer ends and daylight fades into the long dark night of winter, colonies of Emperor Penguins set off from their feeding grounds near the sea to their breeding grounds inland. Taking the cue from the change in the season and from each other, they form meandering lines and wander off in procession for sixty miles. Tens of thousands of them. These lines of waddling penguins converge at their ancestral breeding ground hidden away on the sea-ice in one of the remotest and most hostile places on earth.

The first task is to hook up with last year's mate, failing which an elaborate and noisy courtship ritual ensues with the aim of attracting a new one. After everyone is paired up and have completed the necessary mating tasks, the female lays a single egg, holding it carefully on her webbed feet. All of this may have taken two months, from April though to June, during which time, far from the ocean, none of them has fed.

It's now mid-winter, in perpetual darkness, at minus sixty degrees with winds gusting to two hundred kilometres an hour. Within a few hours, the female shuffles her egg over to the male, carefully avoiding any contact with the ice. He nestles it onto his own feet and covers it with the feathery blubber of his tummy. If the egg rolls off, the chick will die. Many do. It's a hazardous undertaking.

Now the females set off in line back to the ocean to feed and fatten, leaving the males huddling together for warmth as they incubate their eggs. To conserve energy as they endure blizzards and conditions which would freeze anything else to death, they sleep for twenty hours a day.

Six weeks later, the eggs begin to hatch and soon after the females return to feed and nurture their chick. And to relieve their mate who by now has fasted for nearly four months and has lost half his body weight.

Now the males set off in long lines, weakly waddling back towards the ocean in search of a good feed. Meanwhile, the chicks grow, fed by regurgitation from their mums. For some of the males, they've had enough. The spouse can handle the rest. But others return yet again to the breeding grounds, carrying fresher food for the youngsters.

By November the chicks are huddling together themselves, spring is in the air and soon they can all start the long march back to the sea and their summer feeding grounds. But even now the adults face a dilemma. If they leave too early, the chicks may not yet be strong enough and will die en route. If they leave it too late, they themselves will not be able to feed again as their winter feathers moult and lose their waterproofing.

Just imagine for one minute . . . if a smarter than average penguin thought: "Hey, why do we do this? Why don't we just stay by the sea and save all this walking and exposure? We'd lose far fewer of us, and our chicks would grow faster and bigger. And we'd wouldn't have all that hassle of hiking backwards and forwards in the snow."

He would die, because he would have no mate. The lone voice of reason will always be drowned out by the baying of the crowd.