

Breeding Complications

The amazing life of the emperor penguin

In the early autumn the emperor penguins leave the sea and climb onto the ice. They then walk 50-60 kilometres to their breeding grounds close to the South Pole.

When they arrive at the breeding grounds in late March, the penguins choose a mate. Then they seal the ice with rocks until the female lays her egg. As soon as the female has laid the egg, the male puts it into his beak. The female then returns to the sea leaving the male to incubate the egg.

There is no vegetation on the ice so the emperor penguins do not build nests. Instead the male stands with the eggs tucked away under their stomachs. They stand for over 100 weeks partly moving forward the egg must not fall onto the ice.

The effects both in July and March is one of the coldest and most atmospheric places in the world. In the middle of winter it has temperatures of -70°C and there is no food and no shelter. But it has one important advantage. It is the coldest place in the world for emperor penguins to stand as there are no predators. The emperor penguin is the only animal in the world that can survive such low temperatures. Their only enemy is the wind and the males and the chicks stand close together in big groups to protect themselves from the icy winds and storms.

When the chicks hatch, the males have fasted for over two months. Even so the males find some food for the chicks to keep the chicks. Perhaps to keep the chicks alive with the weather improves and the female returns. But the ice will break. In March the chicks weighed around 400g, but now they only weigh 200g. The smaller female emperor penguin would not have survived for so long without food.

After the female returns in early August, the males walk 150 kilometres back to the sea for a final "foraging" before returning with food. The male and female then take it in turns to return to the sea for food. In the late summer when the chicks are big and strong enough, the emperor penguin families return to the sea. The adults then have just the three summer months of the incubation returning to the breeding grounds next year.