

# THE PENGUIN QUEST

**F**ourteen days at sea. Our goal was almost in sight. And conditions were deteriorating by the minute. Winds whipped up white caps on the sea, and a dangerous 10-foot swell was coming broadside. It was early morning in April 2017, but there would be no sunrise — just low clouds and a building gale.

The captain pulled us into a more-or-less protected spot at Gough Island. It's one of the most remote islands in the world, eight uninhabited and rarely visited miles of cliffs and loneliness. Halfway between Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, it's a difficult place to get to, and it's prohibited to go ashore.

Six hermitted, hardy souls run a weather station in the distant outpost. They may be alone, but they have lots of company. Gough is one of the most important islands in the world for

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**BY CHARLES  
BERGMAN**

nesting seabirds. In the middle of the South Atlantic, it's home to such rarities as Tristan Albatross, Sooty Albatross, and the magnificent Spectacled Petrel. And perhaps the world's most-difficult-to-see penguin.

Rockhopper Penguin was recently split into two species. Southern Rockhoppers are found mainly in the Falkland Islands. Northern Rockhoppers breed exclusively in the Tristan da Cunha Archipelago, which includes Gough.

Like most of the 44 passengers on the ship, my wife and I really wanted to see this penguin. For more than a decade, Susan and I have been traveling throughout the Southern Hemisphere in a quest to see every species of penguin in the world. This was the chance for our last species, the Northern Rockhopper Penguin.

Number 18.

King Penguins Macquarie



Credit



But we could barely distinguish the shoreline, much less the penguins. The expedition leader, addressing us all, called conditions “extremely marginal.” But, he announced, he was putting the Zodiacs in the water. Everyone cheered. “Please,” he implored, “take care.”

After a gingerly step into a Zodiac bucking on the swells, we were bobbing toward the penguins. A pelting rain hit us horizontally as we rode the surge just off shore.

The penguins were lined up, watching us. They are perhaps the most stunning of all the crested penguins. They had a spectacular shock of golden feathers on their head, blowing wildly in the wind. Slapping their faces, the thick crest forced them to peek out like shaggy dogs. Someone in the Zodiac commented on their bad hair day.

Their crest was wild, outrageous even,

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and wonderful.

I might use the same language for our quest to see every penguin species.

Susan and I beamed at each other. Number 18 — check! Soaking wet, hypothermia a real possibility, people’s cameras breaking down in the heavy rain — and we were completely happy. Chasing penguins can be the most miserable way to have the best time of your life. And they’ll teach you about a deepening bond with nature and birds.



WE DID NOT SET OUT intentionally to see every penguin species in the wild. We actually resisted the idea, knowing the difficulties involved. But as we saw more species, we grew somewhat obsessed with penguins. Gradually, our obsession left us with only one option: Go for it.

At first, penguins were for us a series of adventures — traveling to remote

places with bad weather, riding Zodiacs, seeing adorable birds. Slowly, we began to think of it as a quest, a journey in search of something we could not define but that looked like penguins. It felt like a pilgrimage, a journey of discovery. A journey of the heart.

Occasionally our encounters turned dangerous. With Fiordland Penguins in New Zealand, for example, heavy rain left us with a swollen, angry river to cross. As we waded through the hip-deep water, the current knocked us over, but somehow we made it across.

Surprisingly, one of our biggest challenges was explaining our travel to our friends and family. Many species of penguins live on just one small island, in the middle of the ocean, like Gough and the Northern Rockhopper Penguin. Friends and family had rarely heard of where we were going. We’d get blank stares.

But the minute we said why we were going — to see every penguin — faces lit up. Friends waddled like a penguin, called like a penguin, slapped flippers like a penguin.

People may not know how many species there are — most are surprised to learn there are more than one — but one thing was clear. Everyone loves penguins. Penguins are irresistible. It’s nearly impossible to find someone who does not love penguins. The reason is also clear: We love penguins because, more than any other bird, they remind us — of us!

Penguins are the most anthropomorphic bird in the world. Anthropomorphism may produce bad science, but it can help us understand our feelings for creatures.

With their shining chest, so bright it seems silver, penguins are living mirrors, reflecting us back to ourselves. They look like little people, with their upright stance, their flippers like arms, and their characteristic and charming waddle. Wherever they’re going, it must require formal wear, because penguins always arrived dressed in black tuxedos.


Like people, they are irredeemably social. It’s unusual to see a penguin all alone. King Penguins form enormous breeding colonies on South Georgia and Macquarie islands — as many as 200,000 loud, devoted, bickering birds. They

definitely reflect our social vices. Penguins are largely monogamous but cheat. They love company and steal from their neighbors.

If they seem comical, even cartoonish, it’s because penguins are feathered parodies of ourselves. Their clownishness — a sudden pratfall, an unexpected face-plant, a projectile poop that hits a nesting neighbor — undermines their swagger and self-importance.

They are our “mini-mes,” childlike, diminutive versions of us. And like children, they evoke in us a parental love and affection.

It was this feeling they inspire, in their company, that changed Susan and me over time. They are living lessons in caring for the planet and its creatures, in all their beauty and their vulnerability.



MANY PENGUINS are creatures of far-away, ice-bound, and unpeopled places. The Northern Rockhopper is one example. One of the biggest revelations of our penguin quest, however, was how connected and entwined our lives are with theirs. They may live in another hemisphere, in the far south. But we are increasingly stitched to them.

This was a big discovery for Susan and me on our 10th wedding anniversary, in June 2011. We celebrated the day in South Africa. It illustrated how our own relationship was increasingly marked by our love of penguins. I was on assignment for a large U.S. magazine to write a story about African Penguins. Together we volunteered for a two-week stint with Earthwatch Expeditions on a study of African Penguins at the last best stronghold of the species — Robben Island.

The island, a low-lying hump of rock and sand, is dominated by its famous prison. For several decades, it was notorious for housing around 1,500 political prisoners whose crime was opposing apartheid. Nelson Mandela, one of the great heroes of the 20th century, spent 18 years on Robben Island.

Now the prison is a museum, a powerful symbol of both repression and

## FIRST SIGHTINGS

Listed here are the 18 species of penguin along with the places where and dates on which Charles Bergman and his wife, Susan Mann, saw them. The conservation status for each species is from BirdLife International.



### GALÁPAGOS PENGUIN

Endangered  
Rábida Island,  
Galápagos Islands  
January 24, 2003



### MAGELLANIC PENGUIN

Near Threatened  
Magdalena Island,  
Tierra del Fuego  
December 2, 2005



### GENTOO PENGUIN

Least Concern  
Drake Passage  
January 9, 2006



### CHINSTRAP PENGUIN

Least Concern  
Half Moon Island,  
Antarctica  
January 10, 2006



### MACARONI PENGUIN

Vulnerable  
Half Moon Island,  
Antarctica  
January 10, 2006



### ADÉLIE PENGUIN

Least Concern  
Torgersen Island,  
Antarctica  
January 11, 2006

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Gentoo Penguins

the fight for freedom. In his book *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela wrote that prisoners often “laughed at the colony of penguins,” so comical as they marched back and forth to the sea. The birds, he noted, gave the prisoners pleasure. They were a comical distraction from the harsh conditions of prison life.

The penguins still march past the prison, still make nests in its shadow. It’s one of the great, unremarked ironies of conservation: The prison, once an instrument of racism, now provides a de facto sanctuary for Africa’s only species of penguin.

Every day, Susan and I counted penguins going to sea and returning at night. We weighed and measured baby penguins. We even helped conservation biologist Richard Sherley put a satellite-tracking device on an adult penguin. By mapping the penguin’s movements in

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the bay, Sherley got a better understanding of the intersections of penguins and human fisheries.

The African Penguin has suffered a steady decline for more than a century, its population down by 95 percent. Guano and egg harvesting, oil spills, conflicts over fishing, and now warming seas and changing ocean currents — the pressure by humans has been unrelenting. Sherley spoke bluntly about the very real likelihood of extinction.

This beloved family of birds is paradoxically one of the most endangered. Of the 18 species of penguins, 13 are facing various degrees of threat for extinction. Dee Boersma, a well-known penguin biologist at the University of Washington, calls the birds “marine sentinels.” They speak to us of the health of the planet’s oceans.

Nevertheless, like the prison that

looms over their island, African Penguins are a sad story that inspires hope.

One morning, Susan and I were helping Sherley weigh baby penguins just across the road from the prison. As people walked past us to and from the prison, we held tight to flailing penguins as we collected data. Few people noticed us or the penguins.

Sherley held up a downy chick, still little, but feisty. I measured wings and beak.

“You know,” Susan said, “this is our 10th species of penguin.”

“On our 10th anniversary,” I replied. “Ten for ten.”

It was then, in the shadow of the infamous prison, that we were inspired to see every species of penguin. And to spread the word about their conservation.

Penguins and prisons: In both epic and intimate ways, penguins are woven

into the fabric of our lives. In the great historical sweep of a nation and its heroes, and in the private dedication of a married couple, penguins console us and inspire us.

Who they are charges our imaginations. What we do matters to them and their future. If we cannot save penguins — cannot save what everybody loves — what can we save?



THE EMPEROR PENGUIN is the iconic penguin. In movies and documentaries, it is the defining image of a penguin and the symbol of Antarctica. It is “penguin-icity,” if you will.

But it is not easy to see. For Susan and me, finding an Emperor was an exercise in pure birding. Most people try to see Emperor Penguins by an expedition to a colony. It costs a lot,

## FIRST SIGHTINGS

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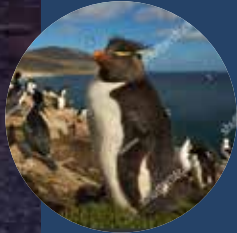


### KING PENGUIN

Least Concern

South Georgia Island

October 20, 2009



### SOUTHERN ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN

Vulnerable

Sea Lion Island, Falkland Islands

November 3, 2009



### EMPEROR PENGUIN

Near Threatened

Antarctic Sound

January 15, 2010



### AFRICAN PENGUIN

Endangered

Robben Island, South Africa

June 10, 2011



### FIORDLAND PENGUIN

Vulnerable

South Island, New Zealand

November 21, 2014



### ERECT-CRESTED PENGUIN

Endangered

Antipodes Island, New Zealand

November 29, 2014

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Chinstrap Penguin and chick



Norther Rockhopper Penguin Gough Island

involves icebreakers and helicopters, and there's no guarantee. We've spoken to a number of people who spent a small fortune and struck out.

I developed another strategy. Interviewing guides, I learned it's possible to see Emperor Penguins as they sit on icebergs and drift through the Antarctic Sound, at the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula.

On one of our visits to the Antarctic Peninsula, we decided to try to find a drifting Emperor. It's rare but possible.

Here's what happens. In the Weddell Sea, just south of the Antarctic Sound, a colony of Emperor Penguins uses Snow Hill Island for breeding. When the ice breaks up in the Antarctic summer, juvenile penguins are sometimes "trapped" on a piece of ice as it drifts away, not yet ready to swim, apparently. Currents carry the ice and penguin into the Sound, where it drifts westward.

As our ship passed through the

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Antarctic Sound, we went to the bridge to watch.

Just before arriving at the Argentine research base Esperanza, while sorting through hundreds of Adélie Penguins, we spotted a larger, solitary penguin on an iceberg the size of a yacht. I ran through the diagnostic list: size, indistinct "ear patches" forming on its head. It was either a King or an Emperor. It had a slightly decurved bill and — yes! — black feet.

Photographs confirmed it was an Emperor Penguin.

As much as I loved the sighting, I still want to see a colony. I want to see those gorgeous adults and the incomparable chicks. But no apologies. We watched the juvenile Emperor drift out of sight behind us, lost in the ice, and we danced across the upper deck.



WE'RE REGULARLY ASKED two questions: what is our favorite penguin, and what

did we learn from our quest?

Our favorite species is no doubt the King Penguin. Its size and markings are breathtaking, with glorious gold accents on head and chest. One birder from northern England called it "the most bonny bird of all." Plus, South Georgia and Macquarie islands, two strongholds, are among the wildest, most beautiful places on earth.

But we have to say a word for the more common Gentoo Penguin. We especially love its playfulness in the water.

Our favorite place to watch Gentoos is in the Falkland Islands, especially "The Neck" on Saunders Island and on Sea Lion Island. We've spent unforgettable afternoons on the beach, watching them catch waves and surf to shore, then swim out to do it again. One pair of Gentoos tumbled in turquoise waves. Three others leapt in synchronized displays.

We learned two big lessons from our quest. The first was utterly unexpected:

how much we enjoyed the people we met. Birders with global lists of 8,000 species were generous with their knowledge.

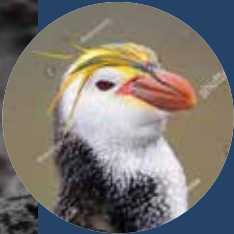
We even met a couple who share our passion for penguins and are also on a quest for all 18. Jude and Andrew have become dear friends.

From penguins, we learned it is impossible to be unhappy in their presence. Playing in the waves, caring for their chicks, or braying their "ecstasy call" — they're a joy to be around. Susan and I have a term for this feeling. We call it the "penguin glow." Once you've felt it, you can never let it go. 🐧

*Charles Bergman is a professor of English at Pacific Lutheran University. In past issues, he has written about Vaux's Swift, Red Crossbill, Spotted and Barred Owls, and Tufted Puffin. His most recent book is A Penguin Told Me a Secret.*

## FIRST SIGHTINGS

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### ROYAL PENGUIN

Near Threatened  
Macquarie Island,  
Australia  
December 4, 2014



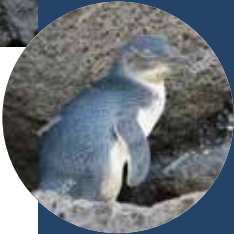
### YELLOW-EYED PENGUIN

Endangered  
Auckland Island,  
New Zealand  
December 7, 2014



### SNARES PENGUIN

Vulnerable  
Snares Island,  
New Zealand  
December 9, 2014



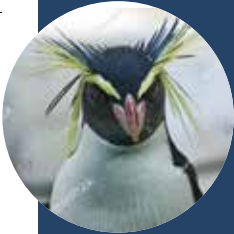
### LITTLE (FAIRY) PENGUIN

Least Concern  
Stewart Island,  
New Zealand  
December 13, 2014



### HUMBOLDT PENGUIN

Vulnerable  
Islas Ballestas, Peru  
January 30, 2015



### NORTHERN ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN

Endangered  
Gough Island  
April 8, 2017