



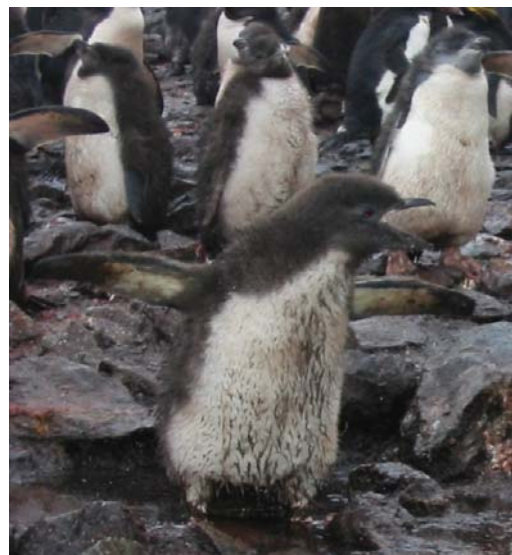
Autumn is the culmination of many events on Bird Island. For the most of the natural inhabitants autumn marks the completion of the breeding effort for another season. For the human inhabitants it marks the end of the busy summer period, the final ship of the season reducing the numbers from eight people to four until the following summer. Visually the most startling change is the slow transformation of the island, from the green state to its winter jacket of snow and ice.

The Departure Lounge

As the temperatures begin to drop and the days start shortening, so the wane of the island's wildlife occurs. The first of our study animals to leave for parts unknown are the Macaroni Penguins, a mere two months after hatching. Seemingly in the blink of an eye the little balls of fluff transform into fat fluffy skittles, before shedding their downy coats for the sleek feathers of adulthood.



From a hand's width across in size to a hungry adolescent in a month and a half!



The time from being left unguarded by the parents up until their first successful swim is one of the most dangerous periods in a Macaroni Penguin's life. The ever hungry Brown Skuas are always vigilant for the possibility of a weak individual that wanders from the colony, and the rapacious Giant Petrels often prey on young chicks, wading into the huddled groups of cowering youngsters seeking mutual protection, and dragging them out.

Fledging time is one of the most exciting of events on the island, an annual ritual of spending a night in the 'Love-shack', a small research hut near one of the colonies, and arising before sunrise to witness the first tentative flipper strokes is a memorable experience. Like sheep eyeing off a gate the juvenile penguins mass together at the waters edge, waiting for one to take the first plunge. As they enter the water the awkwardness of their swimming contrasts starkly with the grace of the adult birds gliding through the water. The juveniles must quickly submerge and head for the open

ocean as the Giant Petrels patrol the waters, snatching at unwary individuals that tarry on the surface.

Research into the penguins has become much less intrusive in the last few years thanks to installation of a gateway (see picture on right) that reads implanted transponder tags automatically.

This has been a fantastic development as it enables us to monitor these animals in new ways, and to obtain data previously impossible to collect and with minimal human interaction. Trip duration and colony attendance is automatically recorded and new information such as age at first returning to breed is now available.



The gateway, with an implanted adult inset

Unlike the penguins, the Antarctic fur-seal pups take plenty of practice before leaving the shores. Pupping occurs around mid-November to mid-December and swimming



sessions begin at the end of February. At first the little pups are coated in their black baby fluff and stay close to the shore, paddling in the shallows. Moulting into their sleek grey coats around mid-March they begin to venture further out into the bay, often the waters resembling a seething mass of rolling bodies and flippers.

The pups at this age are very inquisitive and are often intrigued

Fur-seal swim school

by the humans who wander amongst them. Many are quite happy with a scratch under the chin and playful stroke, but one of the seals on the island has taken this to a new level. Wendy is Bird Island's favourite inhabitant, and as you can see she obviously thinks that she belongs inside the base with the rest of residents!



The pups begin to leave the island in late March/ early April, prompted by the increasing duration of foraging

A blissfully happy Wendy!

trips taken by their mothers. Tracking of the adult females is achieved by using Satellite tags in conjunction with time-depth recorders, which provide dive information. As with the penguins many of the pups are being implanted with transponder tags to facilitate information on age of first returning, time of first breeding and total lifespan.

The last of the study animals to leave are the Black-browed and Grey-headed Albatrosses. The juveniles have the longest development period out of any of the island's avian inhabitants, except for the Wandering Albatrosses which take nine months to fledge from hatching, fledging around late April to early June. As with all baby birds the Albatrosses have their cute and fluffy stage, which is gradually replaced by the full feathered article as the season progresses.



A young Grey-Headed Albatross chick, still guarded by its parent

Surviving to fledging age is a huge achievement for the Albatrosses. After guarding by the parents has ceased, predation from the Giant Petrels and Skuas is relentless.



Feeding time for a hungry Black-browed Albatross chick

Even if the chicks avoid being eaten many starve despite the best efforts of the adults. In a good year 30% of the eggs that hatch may survive to fledge. In a bad year that figure can drop as low as 5%.

Food for these birds is mainly krill and squid which are both unpredictable in density and location. A regular cycle of peaks and crashes in the abundance of their primary food source severely affects breeding success. As part of the monitoring programme on the island diet samples are taken and analysed

from albatrosses, seals and penguins, to try and help understand the cycling of the Southern Ocean food chain. Results from dietary studies contribute to the recommendations issued by CCAMLR (Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) for fishing quotas in Antarctic waters.

The Residents' Lounge

Whilst the furore of biological activity reaches its climax, the human inhabitants of the island are preparing for major change. The coming of winter sees the number of personnel drop from eight just four, and after the 'Last Call' from the ship no outside contact is made for six months. In an emergency the quickest response would be around 5-7 days, for this reason all winterers on Bird Island are extensively trained in advanced first-aid, dentistry, and rescue techniques.



The summer team for 2003/4

The cycle of staff on the island follows a fairly set routine. During the summer period from October to April, scientists and technicians spend various periods on base carrying out their research or duties. During the winter period three of the four members are field scientists who run the monitoring programmes, with the fourth usually a technician.

The field scientists spend the longest continuous period (30 months) on the island, conducting a six month handover with the next employee at the end of this stint. This year consisted of one of the handover seasons.

It's a difficult experience to describe, the moment when the ship pulls away from the end of the jetty, taking people who you have lived particularly closely with for half a year, and the knowledge that you will not see any other people bar the three companions waving goodbye at your side for another six months. Excitement, sadness, apprehension, and expectation churn a knot of emotions in your stomach. I can only imagine how it will feel when it comes my turn to step off this island that will have been my home for two and a half years.



The final farewell

Winter promises to be a special experience. Those lucky enough to spend extended periods in Antarctica tell many stories of scenes and occurrences that will never be repeated. The next instalment will reveal how four islanders spend the 'holiday season' in splendid isolation.

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