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The March of the Penguins
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From the Ocean to the Mating Grounds

Each winter, thousands of Emperor Penguins leave the ocean and start marching to a remote place in Antarctica for their breeding season. Blinded by blizzards and strong winds, only guided by their instincts, they march to an isolated region, that does not support life for most of the year.

We're not sure how they find their way. Perhaps they're aided by the sun. Or perhaps it's part their DNA since they've done this for thousands of years.

The Emperor Penguins of Antarctica are the tallest and largest breed of penguins. In fall, only those penguins that are of breeding age, i.e. 5 years and older, leave the ocean to walk to their breeding grounds. There, they start looking for a mate and hope to hatch a chick.

Weather report

They walk 70 miles across the frigid ice desert of Antarctica to get to their breeding ground.

Temperatures are 80F below zero.

Winds are 100 miles per hour.

So, why do they breed there?

Why do they walk 70 miles across the ice desert, and suffer harsh weather conditions and dangers?

The real reason, why they come here to mate, lies beneath their feet. The ice is much thicker here. So it can withstand the weight of many penguins. It will stay solid until summer. It will keep their young from falling into the water. The ice here is solid year round and there is no danger of the ice becoming too soft to support the whole colony. The remote location is safer as it's far from predators in the water.

The dating scene

So how does the dating scene work? We're not sure what they're looking for in a partner, but we know that they're looking. And when they find someone they stay next to them almost still, and it's obvious that they've found their mate.

Penguins are a monogamous species. Well, at least during the mating season for the year. Next year they might choose someone else. Every season all bets are off. They practice serial monogamy.

Female competition

Males are fewer than females. So competition is intense among females. When a male is taken, it's not unusual that another female might try to interrupt the courtship. The males don't mind that and wait for the fight to settle down. Within only a few weeks most penguins have found what they're looking for!

Hatching the egg

After the female lays the egg, she passes it on carefully to the male. Curiously, it is the male that tends to the eggs for two months and keeps it warm. Even brief exposure to the freezing temperatures can be deadly to the chick in the egg.

Feeding the new chick

The female then heads back to the ocean to feed herself and store more food for the unborn chick, that she'll come back to feed. This is a dangerous journey. The mother is exhausted since she hasn't eaten in two months. She's lost almost 1/3 of her weight. And there are predators in the water, that have been waiting for their return to sea, only to hunt them.

This is a treacherous journey not only for the mother but also for the chick, and the father. If the female does not come back in time, the chick could starve to death. The father will have been starving, too. Sometimes they might even abandon the chick to go back to the ocean and feed himself. He'd have no other choice.

Loss and stealing chicks

Some newborn chicks never make it through the winter. They may die from the cold, or from a predator, or from hunger, if their mother never returns, or returns too late. The loss is so unbearable to the mother that she will sometimes try to steal someone else's chick. But the group won't allow it.

Re-uniting with the family

Penguins rely solely on their sounds to recognize their mate. They call their mate and wait to hear back from them. That's how they find each other. They don't rely on their sight. Though the sound of all the shrieks is deafening and blends with the rest of the calls in the tribe, they somehow recognize their mates' song and reunite with them.

The fathers go back to feed

After the return of the mothers, it is the fathers' turn to go back to sea and feed. Taking turns in feeding and fetching food allows the parents to care after their chicks, until they're old enough to walk the distance to the ocean and to swim in it.

Chick penguins go to sea

After about 9 months, the ocean is only a few hundred yards from the breeding ground, as the ice will have melted. For a few more weeks the chick penguins remain completely unsupervised and independent. Their parents depart on their own to the ocean and they may never see them again, after they just risked their lives raising their young. When the chicks grow stronger and get thicker feathers, they're ready to leave the place where they were born, walk back to the ocean and take the plunge even though they've never swam before.

Sources:

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The March of the Penguins (the Movie)