

EMPEROR PENGUINS

Wild Emperor penguins are only found in Antarctica. They breed and raise their young mostly on fast ice, a floating platform of frozen ocean which is connected to the land or to ice shelves. From birth, they spend their entire lives in and around the Antarctic ice, although very rarely vagrants have turned up off the coast of New Zealand.



Emperors are the biggest of the 18 species of penguins found today, and one of the largest of all birds. They are approximately 120cm tall (about the height of a six-year-old child) and weigh in at around 40 Kg, though their weight does fluctuate dramatically throughout the year.

Emperors are the least common Antarctic penguin, with global population estimates of 265,500-278,500 breeding pairs. Emperor penguins live in groups, often of at least 5,000, that are called colonies. Some emperor penguin colonies are so large they can be seen from space. The largest is thought to be the colony at Snow Hill which consists of 4,000 breeding pairs of penguins and, eventually, their chicks.

Emperor penguins can climb steep ice cliffs and have been known to breed up on ice-shelves, if the sea ice below fails. Since 2016, Antarctica has seen the four years with the lowest sea ice extents in the 45-year satellite record, with the two lowest years in 2021/22 and 2022/23. Between 2018 and 2022, 30% of the 62 known emperor penguin colonies in Antarctica were affected by partial or total sea ice loss. Although it is difficult to immediately link specific extreme seasons to climate change, a longer-term decline in sea ice extent is expected from the current generation of climate models.



Despite the efforts of organizations and Government authorities to encourage the formation of Marine Protected Areas to protect their habitat, this is insufficient and it does not mean they will be protected if human beings do not become aware of climate change and global warming.