

# MAJESTIC *and regal*

WITH THEIR VIBRANT PLUMAGE, IMPRESSIVE STATURE AND MAJESTIC NATURE, KING PENGUINS ARE MESMERISING ANIMALS TO WATCH. THEY HAVE INCLUSIVE SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG THEIR CLOSE-KNIT GROUP AND THEY ARE DEDICATED PARENTS TO THEIR YOUNG.

**What do they look like?** King penguins are one of the most visually-stunning creatures in Antarctica – with their bright yellow-orange features on their upper chest, orange tear-drop shaped ear patches and grey-black backs. Kings are the second largest penguin, behind the Emperor species, reaching a height of 85 to 95 centimetres and a weight of about 14 to 16.5 kilograms.

**What is so special about them?** King penguins have adapted excellently to their extreme living conditions and they are equipped with an array of special features.

King penguins have a streamlined body to minimise resistance while swimming and their wings are stiff, flat flippers that allow them to move through the water at speeds of up to 10 kilometres per hour.

These special birds have two different and extremely effective insulation methods. King penguins have layers of feathering to keep them sheltered from the elements, with an inner layer of down feathers acting as heavy-duty insulators and the outer layer being waterproofed by a cover of oil, not unlike the feathering of a duck. In addition, they also have a complex heat exchange system in their nasal passageway that allows them to recapture 80 percent of the heat that would normally be lost every time they exhaled.

Like most penguins, Kings are able to drink salt water because of their supraorbital gland. It filters excess salt from the blood stream through a capillary just above their eyes and expels that salt through their nose.

They also have specialised tongues covered with lots of small spines that all point backward into the throat, so that when they catch a fish it is gripped by the spines and cannot escape.

**“King penguins do things the hard way when it comes to producing offspring, as no other bird in the world has a longer breeding cycle.”**

**What is their breeding cycle?** King penguins do things the hard way when it comes to producing offspring, as no other bird in the world has a longer breeding cycle. The ritual of courtship, egg laying, egg hatching and fledging the chicks takes between 14 to 16 months. Due to this long process and the fact that they lay only one egg at a time, King Penguins typically only breed two years out of three, between the months of November and April.

Among the most dedicated parents in the penguin family, their eggs are incubated on the adult's feet using their body heat as protection from the cold. Both parents share the incubation duties over about 8 weeks. Once hatched, the dark brown-grey down feathered chicks remain under the care of adults until they moult into their waterproof layer of feathers. They go to sea at the age of 10 to 13 months.

King penguins are serially monogamous - meaning they remain faithful to a single mate each year.

**Where are they placed in Antarctica's food chain?** While their most popular delicacy is Lantern fish, King penguins occasionally eat squid, small pelagic fish, krill and other crustaceans. They feed by pursuit-diving and using their flippers to fly underwater.

As well as thinking about where to find food, King penguins need to make sure they are not someone else's next meal. At sea, their main predators are Leopard seals and Orcas, while on land they need to be careful of opportunistic shore birds who take eggs and young penguins, such as Giant petrels, skuas and sheathbills.

**Where do they live?** King penguins forage for food at the Antarctic Polar Front, where the Southern Ocean waters meet the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans. They breed on the many sub-Antarctic islands, including the Australian-managed territory of Macquarie Island.

These penguins are a close-knit bunch – forming dense colonies that can number up to several tens-of-thousands of breeding pairs. They prefer level ground near the sea and occupy beaches, valleys and moraines free of snow and ice. With an average lifespan of about 20 years, the current population of King penguins south of the Antarctic Polar Front is estimated at three million.



## fast facts

**NAME:** King penguin (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*) **Height:** 85 to 95 centimetres **Weight:** 14 to 16.5 kilograms  
**Population:** 3 million estimate **Lifespan:** 15 to 20 years **Features:** Bright yellow-orange necks, orange tear-drop shaped ear patches and greyish black backs