



# species factsheet

## | species introduction |

**Common name:** King penguin

Scientific name: *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

King penguins are the second largest penguin species. They typically weigh 12 – 15kg and are approximately 90cm in length. They have distinctive yellow/orange patches on either side of their face and at the top of their chest. King penguins are found on sub-Antarctic islands including the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. Colonies are also present on islands off the coast of South Africa and Australia. Like the Emperor penguin (the largest species of penguin) the females only lay one egg. This egg is passed back and forth between the parents on their feet as both birds share in the incubation of the egg and rearing of the chick.



## | status in the wild |

King penguins are currently categorised by the IUCN as being Least Concern. The wild population appears to be increasing with numbers in many of the colonies rising. King penguins have been re-colonising areas where they were previously exterminated. The main breeding colonies are found on the islands of South Georgia, Crozet, Prince Edward, Kerguelen, Macquarie and Heard, which all lie close to the Antarctic Convergence. There is also a small breeding colony on the Falkland Islands.

## | species reproduction |

King penguins come together to establish very large breeding colonies on flat areas close to the sea. The birds change partners over their lifetime but once they have chosen their partner for a specific breeding season, they normally stay together until the chick is fully grown. King penguins start their breeding season between September and November and

eggs are laid any time from November to March. Chicks hatch approximately 56 days after the egg is laid and can take 48 – 72 hours to emerge from the shell. The newly hatched chicks are held on their parents' feet for the first 30 – 40 days until they can regulate their own body temperature. At that stage they start exploring the world around them but return to their parents' feet to feed and sleep.

As the chicks get older they start to form crèches with other chicks. This allows both adults to go off to sea on more prolonged foraging trips. King chicks stay in their breeding colony over the winter and the parents return every 3 to 4 weeks to feed them. When the chicks are between 12 – 15 months old they start to lose their distinctive brown down and moult into their first juvenile feathers. At this stage they are waterproof and leave their breeding colony for a life at sea. They will not return until they are ready to breed at approximately 3 – 4 years old.

Once the chicks are fully independent, the adults will go through their own moult and then start another round of courtship. Whilst most penguin species breed annually and therefore all the chicks hatch at around the same time, kings are different. The time that the chicks remain dependent on their parents mean that kings can only breed twice in a three year period. A bird that has bred early on in the first year will be ready to breed later in the second year but will not be in a position to breed in the third year as it will still have a chick to care for.

### **| species habitat |**

Outside of the breeding season king penguins spend the majority of their time at sea. Their breeding sites tend to be in flat open areas close to the sea and on or near a sandy beach.

### **| species food |**

Kings are offshore feeders so will swim a considerable distance to feed. They actively pursue their prey and dive to depths of 150 – 300m to catch fish and occasionally squid.

### **| threats |**

Despite king penguins being a popular tourist attraction in the Falkland Islands, the human impact on the population is low as the birds are tolerant of humans (as long as they do not come too close). The other threat kings are facing is to their food supply, with a decrease in available fish caused by commercial fishing and as a result of global warming.

### **| conservation |**

King penguins were previously hunted for eggs, blubber, oil and feathers. Now these birds are protected their numbers are increasing and therefore there are no major conservation initiatives on-going at this time.

### **| find out more |**

IUCN red list <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/106003848/0>

International Penguin Conservation Work Group <http://www.penguins.cl/king-penguins.htm>

Falklands Conservation <http://www.falklandsconservation.com/projects/king-penguins>

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For more information go to [www.poletopolecampaign.org](http://www.poletopolecampaign.org) or email [info@poletopolecampaign.org](mailto:info@poletopolecampaign.org)