

Tales from the bush

Freak show



Lewis knew it was going to be cold in the sub-Antarctic, but he hadn't expected such a frosty reception.

I am travelling to an archipelago to the south of the roaring forties in the Indian Ocean, within the realm of the sub-Antarctic. I know it's going to be cold, but the hostility of the atmosphere that greets me on arrival still comes as a shock.

The tiny community here is a precarious blend of military personnel and field biologists. Soldiers and scientists are very different species, and neither is endemic to these remote islands. They were released in tandem some 40 years ago in the hope they would each find a suitable niche and form an amicable, symbiotic relationship. In contrast, however, the reality is more akin to a Darwinian survival of the fittest.

I am here to study king penguins, and my remit is to uncover the mystery of how these birds are able to dive 400 metres on one breath and without being crushed by the water pressure. To many of the military, however, scientific work on Crozet is a waste of time.

It is Boxing Day 2004, a few days after my arrival, and it is the middle of the penguins' egg-brooding season. In blustery, wet conditions, I descend the icy slope to the beach. The penguins are crouching on their eggs in endless rows across the sand, protecting their embryonic chicks from the elements. Giant petrels patrol among the brooders, looking for slackly guarded eggs or parents weakened by their prolonged stint ashore without sustenance.

The scientists at the beach are also crouching, but on stools and large stones. Patrolling among us are khaki-clad combatants, sneering at our

ludicrous activities, such as feeding defrosted sprat to young penguins. They are waiting for an indication of weakness, a chance to ridicule a researcher for showing signs of weariness in the merciless weather that racks the island.

"Hey, how about this?" cries a voice to my right. A particularly tough-looking soldier is kneeling down, his neck and shaven head craned forward into the mouth of a female elephant seal whose jaws he has prised open. He turns his head, still encompassed by her jaws, to smirk triumphantly at his pals and then at us.

With a flourish he retracts his head and twists out of reach as the seal's mouth snaps shut on empty air. The thick blubber on her body ripples as she lumbers, clearly distressed, towards the safety of the nearby shoreline.

The military muscle is officially at the beach today to prepare important freight that is being sent to a nearby island. "All science is suspended immediately," barks the soldier. Many of us are mid-way through experiments or observations, but our muffled cries of indignation are brushed aside. We break early for lunch and moan among ourselves back at base.

On our return to the beach, things have changed dramatically. A freak wave hit the bay around midday, and the water level at the shoreline has risen by several metres. Large breakers are battering the top of the wharf where the freight is being prepared, and the returning ebb is dragging many of the crates into the ocean. As the pouring rain beats down, the tough soldier beats his fist against a forklift truck. The situation is beating him. The now sinking freight is beyond retrieval.

After breaking on the shoreline, the surging water also crashes down on the penguin colony. Though mercilessly battered by the towering waves, the penguins stand resolutely over their eggs, defending them heroically. My body tingles at the sight of these animals' stoicism. They are the ones soldiering on, the true tough guys of the island.

Later, at dinner, a brief explanation is given for the freak event. All that's known, we are told, is that it was caused by particularly strong seismic activity earlier in the day in the distant vicinity of Indonesia.

King penguins resolutely guard their eggs from freak waves hitting the shores of the island. Only later do the scientists find out the real damage the waves have caused in the Tropics.

Both photos by Lewis Halsey

