

2010-2011 Weekly Field Reports

Copacabana, King George Island

Volume 5
November 14, 2010

1. Penguins: Female Adélie penguins are returning in greater numbers now to relieve the males, which have been incubating the eggs since they were laid, on average 10-14 days ago. The female goes to sea soon after laying the two eggs to replenish her stores after fasting for almost three weeks. When she returns, the male will then go to feed for about 7-10 days. After this, the trips will get shorter until they are exchanging at the nest daily by the time the chicks hatch.

Many known-age Adélie and gentoo penguins are breeding, as well, and being followed daily. We identify these by the bands they received as chicks, and this enables us to determine if there are any age-related differences in behavior or reproductive success.

The gentoo penguins continue to change at their nests daily, one member of the pair going out to feed at first light, then returning within 10-12 hours to relieve its mate. The first chick is due any day now.

2. Skuas: Regular checks of Copacabana skua breeding territories continue and most of the territories are now occupied; we are now waiting for the eggs to be laid. The first skua egg is usually found during the 3rd week of November, so we expect to find one soon. In addition to monitoring the pairs for reproductive success, we also collect their feces throughout the breeding period, to determine what they are eating. These samples will be sent back to California to be analyzed, specifically to look for any fish otoliths (ear bones), which can be used to determine not only the type of fish eaten, but also the size.

The male skuas “courtship feed” their females to help them get into egg-laying condition. Not only is this a good method for sexing the birds, we also can see what the male is feeding on. Recently we have observed some of our brown skua males with penguin territories feeding their females fish, so it will be interesting to find out what type of fish they are catching when their feces are analyzed.

The first of the regular mid-week Point Thomas skua checks was completed Thursday, 11 November. These will be completed throughout the season, in addition to the regular weekend checks. Most of the territories have a least one member of the pair present, and the majority of these are the same as in previous years. The pairs that hold penguin feeding territories are back and defending their colonies; however, a few of these have new mates so we are waiting to see if they will be successful, as the first year a pair is together often results in poor reproductive success.

The first Back-Country skua check was also completed Saturday, 13 November. Most of the territories had at least one bird, and many had both members of the pairs from previous years in attendance. Most of these are south polar skuas, which usually arrive, and therefore breed, later than the skuas near the penguins.

3. Sheathbills/Giant Petrels: The one banded sheathbill, “Rasta,” which has bred at Copacabana in the past, is still around and has been seen with an unbanded mate, both in the penguin colony and at its old breeding cavity on Copacabana Rock. We hope this is an indication that they may breed this year. Last year, the cavity was snowed in for most of the season, so there were no breeding attempts made.

The first giant petrel egg was seen on Wednesday, 10 November. Giant petrels lay only one egg, which they then incubate for almost two months. The chicks will hatch in early January and, after a prolonged chick-rearing period, will finally fledge



in April or May, long after we leave. Juvenile giant petrels remain at sea, feeding and circumnavigating the southern oceans for at least two to three years before they are seen again at their breeding grounds. The age at first breeding is usually five to seven years old. We have many known-age breeders at Copacabana that were banded as chicks many years ago. It is thought that giant petrels may live as long as 50-60 years.

4. Seals: The weekly seal census had only two seals for the whole coastline from Copacabana to Point Thomas: one fur seal and one elephant seal. One leopard seal was sited patrolling just off Copacabana Beach.

5. Other: The first black-bellied storm petrel was heard on Wednesday, 10 November. These birds nest in cavities in the rocks and scree among the hills around Copacabana and Pt. Thomas. Wilson's storm petrels also breed in the area, but none have been seen or heard yet.

Weekly Weather:

Temperatures have mostly been above freezing. Days have been a mix of rain, snow, and clouds, with occasional sun. Windy conditions have prevailed for most of the week, often reaching speeds above 30 knots (as determined by the sound the wind generator makes when wind speeds exceed 30 knots). The new anemometer will be coming soon, at which time we'll be able to measure the wind speed more accurately.

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