

2010-2011 Weekly Field Reports

Copacabana, King George Island

Volume 7
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Science report:

1. Penguins: The first Adélie penguin chick at Copacabana hatched this week on Friday, 26 November, and was shortly followed by chicks appearing in our study sites. Adélie penguins are much more synchronous in their breeding chronology than gentoos. While it may take three weeks for the majority of the gentoo chicks to hatch, we are expecting to see the bulk of the Adélie chicks emerge from their shells within the next two weeks.

We have nearly retrieved all of our early season PTT tags. Our final Adélie female is currently making her way back from the Weddell Sea. Unfortunately her return has been too tardy and her mate had to abandon their nest. Adélie females on average take 10 to 14 days for their first post-laying foraging trip. We have observed both ends of the spectrum this season, seeing some females only three days after their departure and others upwards of 18 days. During this time the male incubates the egg, continuing the fast he began when he first arrived at his nest site. This courtship fasting usually lasts three weeks before the female lays her eggs, and males have endured a minimum five-week fast by the time their mates return to relieve them at the nest.

2. Skuas: Skua activity continues to increase everywhere. At Copacabana, the first eggs were laid on Monday, 22 November, when the skuas that nest at the hut and another Copacabana pair with a penguin territory laid their first eggs. Several other brown skua pairs, all with penguin territories, initiated clutches later this week. Skua pairs with penguin feeding territories are usually the earliest to return and the first pairs to lay, which follows from their having access to plentiful food in the penguin colony.

In Backcountry, where mostly South Polar skuas breed, we had a few new nests. Every active territory from last year, as well as some previously inactive territories, has at least one bird occupy their territories.

Currently it looks like it's going to be a fairly bustling skua year. At Copacabana, Point Thomas and in the Backcountry there are pairs of skuas looking to carve out previously un-established territories. Anecdotally, there seems to be a greater number of un-banded birds, many moving into territories and replacing the previous year's holder, suggesting that there is an influx of birds originating from areas other than the one covered in our study.

4. Seals and Whales: We saw three humpback whales this week feeding near shore, closer to the entrance of the bay than our sighting last week.

Our weekly seal census of the beaches from Copacabana to Point Thomas yielded two elephant seals and one Weddell seal. Often there is a bit of a lull between the end of November and mid-December in seal sightings. The elephant seals have completed breeding and weaned their pups and the fur seals have not yet started to arrive.

5. Other: It appears that the white-rumped sandpipers we saw earlier in the season may be sticking around for a bit. We saw them twice this week and, although they are not color-banded, we do not get large numbers of shorebirds passing through, so the probability that they are the same individuals is high. We've observed them eating red algae in the wrack line.

Camp Activities:

Mike Polito arrived this week, and Sue Trivelpiece left for home. Mike is a PhD student working primarily on stable isotopes and penguin diet. Copacabana is the control site for his study; the diet samples collected here corroborate his stable isotope data collected from tissue and eggshells.



Weekly Weather:

Our regular pattern of wind, wind and more wind was broken this week by a spell of snowy weather coming at us out of the Weddell Sea. Temperatures continue to hover around freezing so any snow that accumulates often melts within 24 hours of falling. Mike brought a new anemometer with him, and we look forward to including wind speed in next week's summary.

The 2010-11 Copa Field Team:

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