

All-Black Penguin Is 'One in a Zillion'



As a ship traveled slowly along the coast of an island near Antarctica, passengers stared in awe at what they saw. A large colony of King Penguins -- thousands of them -- wobbled about the island as the boat passed by. As passengers scanned the scene, a few of them noticed an unusual sight. In a sea of black-and-white, one penguin stood out from the rest. From its head to its feet -- front and back -- the penguin was all black.

Penguins have no natural fear of humans, so some of the passengers were able to get off the boat. One passenger, Andrew Evans, sat on the ground in front of the penguin and took pictures of it. From his close-up view, the all-black penguin seemed to be in excellent health, Evans said. It seemed to fit in well with the other penguins. It even appeared to have a black-and-white mate.

While some people have reported seeing all-black penguins before, scientists say this is the first proof they have that such birds exist. "This is astonishing," said bird expert Allan Baker when he saw pictures of the penguin. "It's a one in a zillion discovery."

NEWS WORD BOX

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So how did this rare penguin come to be? Baker explains that a natural pigment called *melanin* is what makes some of a penguin's feathers black. Penguins can have varying amounts of melanin, Baker says. About one in every 250,000 King penguins can be mostly black, but even those penguins always have patches of white. Until now, that is. This is the first *all black* penguin Baker has ever seen. The penguin must have a very high amount of melanin in its body, he says.

King penguins can be found across a handful of islands in southern parts of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The islands are located where cold and warm waters mix, which makes them perfect feeding grounds for Kings. Antarctica's South Georgia Island, where the all-black penguin was found, is home to several million penguins.

MORE FACTS ABOUT KING PENGUINS

- King Penguins are the second largest penguin species. A King can grow to be three feet tall and weigh up to 35 pounds. Only the Emperor penguin is larger.
- Kings are the deepest-diving penguins. They can dive more than 700 feet for food.

THINK ABOUT THE NEWS

Imagine you were a passenger aboard the ship. Write a letter to a friend. In your letter, describe your feelings when you first saw the all-black penguin.