

A king penguin and a wedding anniversary inspired a couple to see all 18 species



Charles Bergman and his wife set out to see all 18 species of penguins, including the Magellanic penguins in Argentine Patagonia. (Charles Bergman)

By **Andrea Sachs**

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To the untrained eye — and even a trained one — penguins look alike. But for Charles Bergman, one king penguin stands out. On a trip to the island of South Georgia in 2011, the seabird approached the nature photographer and writer, threw its head back and released a sound that Bergman describes as a kazoo. It emitted the sound over and over, like a tipsy reveler at a New Year’s Eve party. After completing its vocal performance, the penguin looked at Bergman and waited for a reply. Bergman has spent more than a decade searching for the correct response to that penguin’s query, a pursuit he documents in his book, [“Every Penguin in the World: A Quest to See Them All,”](#) which came out last spring. He and his wife, Susan Mann, traveled thousands of miles, often to inhospitable destinations, to see all 18 penguin species — a listening tour, of sorts. “Animals are talking to us. They are calling us,” the retired English professor writes. “We have only to learn to listen.” We recently spoke with Bergman, who lives in Steilacoom, Wash., about his penguin mission and what lessons he has learned since that fateful meeting with a king.



Bergman's book, "Every Penguin in the World: A Quest to See Them All," documents his epic trip. (Sasquatch Books)

Q: Tell us about your early interactions with penguins, including the life-changing one.

A: The first penguin was a Galápagos penguin in the Galápagos Islands [in 2003]. The coolest part was getting to swim with them. That got me interested in penguins, but the encounter that hooked me was with a particular king penguin on South Georgia Island, about 900 miles off the coast of Argentina. I was trying to photograph a group of penguins on the shoreline with mountains behind them covered in snow. I was crawling toward them, and as I lay there, I realized that a penguin was at my feet. It was pecking at my boots and pulling at my pants with its beak. Pretty soon it

was right beside my face, looking down at me. It raised its beak and gave out a penguin call. It was an identity call. In these huge groups of penguins — king penguins can breed in colonies with 250,000 pairs — they find each other by their call. So when they call like that, they are saying, "This is who I am. I am here. Who are you?" I was having a conversation with a penguin, and it expected me to call back and say who I was. The book is an answer to that penguin: Who am I in relation to this penguin?

Q: How did you land on the idea of seeing all 18 species?

A: The response to that king penguin could have taken a number of different forms. But a year and a half later [in 2011], on Robben Island in South Africa, my wife and I volunteered with a program that researches African penguins. We spent two weeks helping scientists capture, weigh and measure baby penguins. We did it over our anniversary and realized that it was our 10th wedding anniversary and our 10th species of penguin. There was something about the symmetry of that moment that made us commit to seeing them all. We were going to go for all 18.

Q: Some penguins are accessible and others live in remote locations. How would you rank them in terms of easiest to hardest to see?

A: African penguins are "urban" penguins. Just go to Cape Town and you can find them on nearby Boulders Beach. The little penguins in Australia and New Zealand are quite easy to see. The Magellanic penguins in Tierra del Fuego, Chile, and Argentina are quite easy to see. If you go to the Antarctic Peninsula, you can get three or four penguin species pretty easily. Beyond that, there's South Georgia and the Falklands. Expedition cruises go there. Then you move to another level: New Zealand and sub-Antarctica. The erect-crested penguin is endemic to the Bounty Islands and the Antipodes Islands; the royal penguin is found only on Macquarie Island; and the Snares penguin is only on Snares Islands. An expedition cruise visits all of these islands.

I have a scale of 1 to 5, and the No. 5 hardest are the emperor penguin and northern rockhopper. The emperor penguins because the only way to maximize your chances of seeing them is on a trip that specifically goes to a colony of emperor penguins. You will have to travel during the late Antarctic winter or early spring and be on an icebreaker. The northern rockhopper is only found on the Tristan da Cunha Islands, halfway between Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro. It is in the middle of nowhere. We went with a company that was repositioning its boat from Antarctic waters to Arctic waters. We spent five weeks traveling up the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, stopping on South Georgia Island, Tristan da Cunha Islands, Saint Helena Island, Ascension Island and Cape Verde. Five weeks for what amounted to a half-day with rockhoppers.



Charles Bergman and his wife, Susan Mann, commune with emperor penguins on Snow Hill Island near Antarctica. (Jude Tasker)

Q: *When visiting their habitat, what's the best approach to viewing them?*

A: When you get on shore, there's a lot going on, and it's hard to orient yourself. I will walk quietly down the beach, among the penguins, and take in the scene and the situation. I will find a place where I can sit and get a sense of what the penguins are about. Then I will wait for the penguins to tell me what kind of experience I will have with them. It sounds funny, but it's true. For example, on Saunders Island on the Falkland Islands, I was in an area called the Neck, a little isthmus. I was watching them play in the surf all afternoon when this great sunset started to appear. I thought I would photograph the colony of Gentoo penguins watching the sunset. I was busy setting up the camera gear and looked up and the penguins had all turned around and were looking at me. I had become the show. It was a better photograph because their silvery white fronts were facing me and they lit up under the burning orange sky.

Q: *Any tips for photographing them?*

A: The nice thing about photographing penguins is that it's easy. They're so accessible; you don't have to hide. Many of them like to go to the ocean in the early morning and come back in the early evening. You can get beautiful light effects [during these times]. Photograph their interactions with each other, adult couples and babies. Their power to evoke emotion is one of their key features.

Q: *Could you pick up on the unique personalities of each species?*

A: They often announce their differences immediately. My favorite example is the royal penguin on Macquarie Island. When we got off the Zodiac, 50 to 100 of them greeted us on the shoreline. If I tried to photograph them, they would put their head right in the lens. We would walk down to the beach, and they would accompany us, an entourage of royal penguins. They are the friendliest penguins by far. And Gentoo penguins are extremely playful.

Q: *Why are humans so enamored of penguins?*

A: First, they're just cute. Then you put them in these great scenes, and they're extremely photogenic. But what it comes down to is that they remind us of us. There is an anthropomorphic quality about them. They are like children and they evoke a parental affection in us.



A pair of king penguins touch flippers on Macquarie Island, between New Zealand and Antarctica. (Charles Bergman)

Q: *How are penguin populations faring?*

A: There are 18 species, and of those, 10 are listed as endangered or vulnerable to extinction. Four more species are listed as near threatened and may well become endangered in coming years. The list of endangered penguins includes a lot of our favorites: rockhoppers, African, yellow-eyed, Galápagos, Humboldts. Galápagos penguins may have only 1,200 penguins left. The African penguin is down 95 percent or more in the last century. It's a really harrowing situation.

Q: *What are the main threats to their survival?*

A: Egg and guano collecting was a problem, but not so much now. Oil spills, especially for penguins in urban areas, like African penguins. Different kinds of offloading of waste and garbage in the water — really a problem. A lot of work has been done on these issues, and some good progress has been made. Right now, I think climate change, fishing and krill harvesting are the biggest problems.

Q: There are currently 18 species, but could that number go up?

A: When we started, we committed to seeing 17, because there were only 17 recognized species. But when we were nearing the end, an 18th species emerged. It's not that a new one evolved, but [BirdLife International](#) and scientists studying genetics split the rockhopper into two species: the northern rockhoppers in Tristan da Cunha and the southern rockhoppers in the Falklands. Another population of rockhoppers referred to as eastern rockhoppers is considered the same species as the southern rockhopper, but in a few years it could be considered its own species. So that would be 19. And there's talk that Gentoo penguins will be split into two or three different species.

Q: If the number increases, will you have to embark on a second quest?

A: I took careful track of the subspecies, so we're in pretty good shape. There's a chance that they will make a very isolated group of Gentoo penguins on the Kerguelen Islands its own species. We haven't seen those and would have to figure out how to get there.

Q: Since your meeting with that king penguin, how has your view of penguins evolved?

A: Penguins, with their beauty and vulnerabilities, deepened our love of the planet and its creatures. Their combination of joy and calm is unique. My wife and I call it the "penguin glow." That quality is magic and something you want to hold onto. It gives them a special power over our imaginations and our hearts.