

a Forest & Bird Wellington Branch project

Newsletter

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April–May 2019

IT'S CATASTROPHIC!

By late summer to early autumn, adult kororā (Little Blue Penguins), have raised their chicks and had a few weeks at sea.

Almost all birds moult over a period of time and can continue their normal activities even while looking a

little ragged with a few feathers missing. Not so for penguins. Their feathers are their warmth and their waterproofing. When they dive, their closely meshed feathers compress and give a watertight layer, without which their skin would get wet and they would soon die from heat

loss. So a good, sound set of plumage is essential.

February and March are a time of plenty. Fish fry and other young marine creatures are present in large numbers after the breeding season. The adult kororā cash in on the bonanza and gorge on as much food as possible – and with good reason. They are entirely at sea during this time, not returning to land at all until the time is right to come ashore to moult.



Ready to moult and looking peeved



Part way through & feeling grumpy

All penguins undergo a 'catastrophic moult'.

Within a couple of weeks they shed all their old feathers and grow a complete new set which they preen and get in top condition before they head back to sea. During this time they neither eat nor drink, as they are not waterproof until their new suit has arrived. They need a really good reserve of energy in the form of fat to accomplish this.

The nestboxes that Places for Penguins (PfP) has located around the Wellington coast provide a secure sheltered space, and moulting birds often use them as a hideaway. When they arrive, most of them look pretty normal, although some have brownish rather than slate-blue feathers. Once they start to moult

however, look out! Every feather gets pushed out by a new one and they end up with a layer a few centimetres deep in the box. According to the South Australian government website, kororā have about 10,000 feathers, which are 3-4 times more densely packed than on flighted birds. All the old feathers end up in the nestbox. If a quick glance at the entry tunnel reveals a scattering of penguin feathers, a kororā is either inside or has left recently. Sometimes a box is used by more than one bird together or one after the other to moult – that's a lot of feathers.





New suit and ready to go

During the moult most kororā are, or at least look, pretty grumpy. Some seem to shed almost everything over a short period. Others take their time, but either way, the new feathers that emerge are clean, and darker than old ones. The birds look fresh and neat when they have completed their moult and take once more to their real home, the sea.



Moulted breast and dorsal feathers

WHERE KORORA FIT IN THE TREE OF LIFE

Taxonomy is the science of naming and sorting organisms into groups based on their evolutionary history. The groups start broad and become more specific, and each level of group has a special name. Starting from the most broad, the groups are called Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species. Kororā belong to the following groups:

- **Domain:** *Eukarya*. Kororā belong to a domain called the Eukaryotes, which basically means that they aren't bacteria or other single-celled creatures!
- **Kingdom:** Animalia. This is probably one group that you • recognise. Kororā belong to the animal kingdom, which includes almost every creature that you can see that moves, and even sea sponges and coral!
- Phylum: Chordata. Chordates are those animals that have a stiff chord running down their back during development, usually taking the form of a spine. This group includes mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish.
- **Class:** Aves. Aves is the group commonly known as birds! These are chordates that developed from winged dinosaurs, and are now the only remaining dinosaurs on earth. Birds are a diverse group of roughly 10,800 species, split into 39 orders. These orders are not of equal size, with some having only one species, while the largest boasts over 6,000 species.
- Order: Sphenisciformes. Penguins belong to the order Sphenisciformes. The next closest group is the Procellariiformes, or tube-nosed seabirds, which includes albatrosses, shearwaters, and petrels. Penguins shared a common ancestor with this group around 60 million years ago. A fossil of an early penguin ancestor called Waimanu (a Māori word meaning water-bird) was found in Canterbury. It was found to be around 60 million years old, so it gives us a glimpse of what these ancestors might have looked like as they began to take a different path from the tube-nosed seabirds. Penguins are separate from ducks and other water birds like grebes, which shows that adapting to an aquatic



The levels of taxonomy (Wikimedia commons)



The ancient penguin ancestor 'Waimanu' (Wikimedia commons)

lifestyle is something that has developed many times within different groups of birds. Penguins can however boast being the most adapted to life underwater than any other bird!

- **Family:** *Spheniscidae.* This is the only family within the order *Sphenisciformes*, and therefore contains all the penguin species alive today. Depending who you ask, there are between 17 and 20 species of penguin, split into five main groups. The groups are the Great Penguins, Brush-tailed Penguins, Little Penguins, Banded Penguins, Crested Penguins and *Megadyptes* (the genus of Yellow-eyed Penguins).
- **Genus and Species:** Genus and species are used together to give each different organism a unique name. Kororā are part of the *Eudyptula* genus, and have the species name *minor*, so we end our journey at the scientific name of one of our favourite Wellington taonga: *Eudyptula minor*.

THE GREAT PENGUIN MIGRATION

21 years ago, Nicky fell for a special guy. She was visiting New Zealand on a cycle tour of the South Island. He lived in Oamaru and she met him while passing through. She struggled to leave the town and kept going back to spend time at his place. He was handsome, although more than a tad overweight, and his nose was a bit on the big side, but love is blind. Finally, the urge became too much, and she bought him. How she managed to carry a half metre high, heavily-built fluffy penguin remains a mystery, but keep him she did.

Named Peng, he was her first, and all these years later they are still a couple, but things have changed in their relationship. Slowly at first, other penguins moved in and the collection began to grow. By the time they moved to New Zealand in 2015 there was a colony of a few hundred, mainly stuffed and fluffy but in myriad forms and colours. But once settled in Wellington, Peng discovered Trade Me and started rescuing unwanted and unloved penguins from houses and baches nationwide. Numbers grew steadily until 2018 when the unexpected happened.



Another extinct penguin relative 'Icadyptes' (Wikimedia commons)



Nicky and Peng



The upstairs crew posing for a team photo

It's hard to imagine a more ardent penguin collector, but there was one, and only a few kilometres away in Kilbirnie. In June 2018 Places for Penguins published an article about Lynn, who had a similar obsession. Over some 22 years she'd amassed a vast collection of

close to 2,000 penguins, but their time had come. Lynn was moving out of her spacious house to live in smaller accommodation. Her penguins had to find a

new home. The article was read by Nicky who got in touch and a deal was struck. In late 2018 the great penguin migration occurred. Almost the entire collection migrated to Ngaio to join Nicky's existing 800 or so.



The acrobat colony

'The boys', as they are known, are mainly in one large room, lining both long walls. Shelving units

snugly house well over 2,000 of them. In other parts of the house, smaller colonies live harmoniously in groups of a few, up to groups of a hundred. There is even a retirement home for the elderly penguins. Some of the metre-high emperor penguins stand guard. Malcolm and Ross look after the upstairs crew in the living room.

Colonies are sorted in various ways. There is a blue colony, a knitted group, a huddle of acrobats. Some are sorted by species, by colour, or by purpose, such as household objects, including penguin measuring tapes, money boxes or backpacks. There are inflatables (good for taking on travels), a whole section of Christmas





penguins including some that dance and sing, and every conceivable and indeed inconceivable stuffed penguin. The combined collection is estimated at almost 3,000 birds, but a stocktake is due. Nicky's niece will be recruited to do a headcount at the next possible opportunity.

When the collections were combined, they needed to be sorted, grouped and redistributed, which took weeks. And you'd think enough would be enough, but no. Slightly sheepishly, Nicky admits there have been over 30 more Trade Me rescues since the great penguin migration.

Nicky, Peng and the main room boys

And so the collection lives on, still growing. The huge ones pose a problem in that they exceed the maximum size accepted by

courier companies. Nicky gets around this by getting friends and colleagues travelling to other places to call by a vendor's house to collect them. One of the big guys needed a relay of four car trips to get from Christchurch to Wellington via Nelson.

For the penguins, it is paradise. They are well looked after. They have learned to live happily together, one species with another. There is no squabbling or raucousness, just penguistic harmony. And there's always space for more friends if there are any penguins out there needing a new home!

NEXT WORKING BEE!

When: This Sunday 26 May, between 10.30am and 12 noon.

Where: At the "Outcrop", 150m north of Seatoun Wharf, opposite Beerehaven Steps. See the map below for more guidance.

Getting there: On Sundays, bus no. 2 runs every 15 mins from Karori to Seatoun via the city centre. From Seatoun it's a few minutes' walk to the outcrop by Beerehaven Steps. There's a moderately-sized car park right next to the outcrop for cyclists and motorists.

What we are doing: We are creating future nesting habitat for little blue penguins. This site used to be covered in weeds, especially some huge lupin trees. Thanks to our volunteers' efforts over several years, it's now a lot less weedy and the natives are thriving. We have several hundred plants to get planted on Sunday — please come along and help — all welcome! (Parents please note: the site is next to a moderately busy road. Children are welcome, but you will need to supervise them closely in view of the amount of traffic there can be on a Sunday morning.)

What to bring: Please bring a garden fork if you have one. We will provide gloves and other tools to use. Refreshments will be provided. For more information contact placesforpenguins@gmail.com or visit our Facebook page.



Imagery from Google Maps

Text and photos by members of the PfP management team, except where otherwise credited.

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