

“Noah Strycker is going places, and he is taking us along for the ride. There is something fundamentally sunny about *Among Penguins*.

This book will be a fan favorite for years to come.”

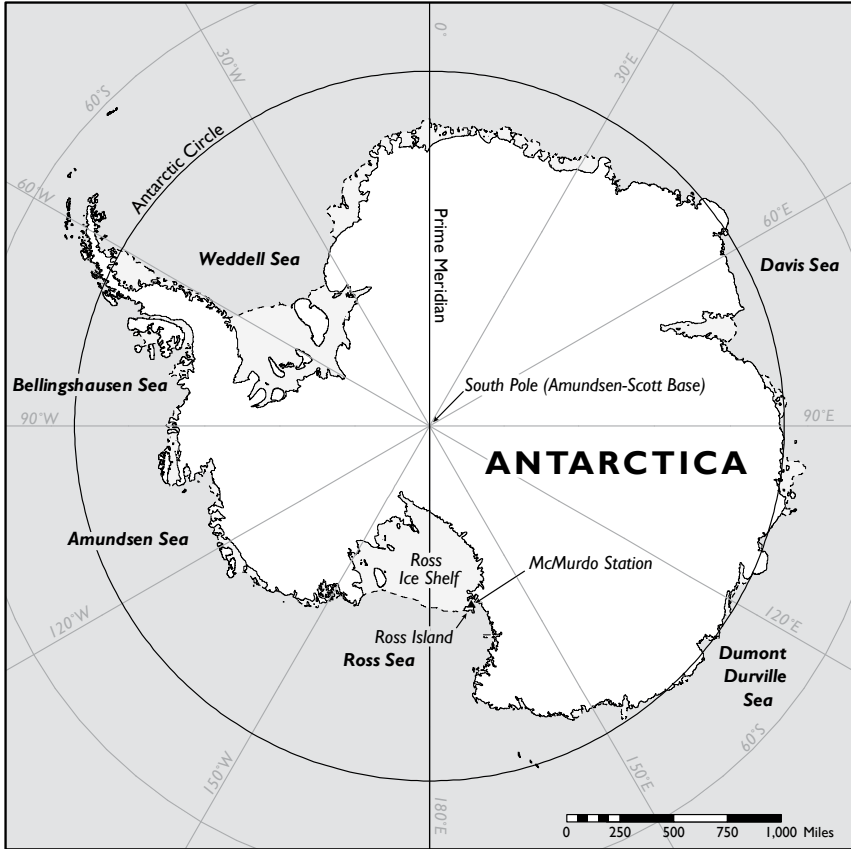
—TED FLOYD, Editor, *Birding*

# AMONG PENGUINS

A Bird Man in Antarctica



NOAH STRYCKER



Map by Grace Gardner

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# 1. Whiteout



Kirsten, Michelle, and I leaned over the digital weather display as all hell broke loose.

“Seventy-five!” I gloated. An invisible freight train rammed the side of our tiny Antarctic hut, shaking the building to its icy foundations.

“Feels like we’re about ready for liftoff,” Kirsten said. She was resting in a metal folding chair, arms loose on the plastic table, which was elegantly crammed between reinforced bunk beds and a propane stove. With long fair hair, an athletic build, and a no-nonsense approach to rugged conditions, Kirsten Lindquist was tougher than most young women, was nicer than most tough chicks, and knew more about penguins than most other blonde Californians, except maybe the one sitting adjacent.

“We’ve got a blizzard on our hands, all right,” agreed Michelle from the next chair over. Slim and strong, with wisps of blonde falling from under a soft hat, Michelle Hester commanded this tiny field station. Right now she was reclining in stripped-down cold-weather gear, finishing a delicious pancake breakfast.

7

The famous Antarctic wind was kicking into action. All morning, it had not dropped below fifty miles per hour, and each gust peaked a little higher than the last. Penguins and humans were in for a real storm.

I scanned the display as I munched a frozen Hershey’s bar. “Fifteen below,” I remarked, unimpressed. “Wonder what the wind chill is?” Flipping a couple buttons on the weather computer gave a quick answer. The effective air temperature, with wind factored in, was close to forty degrees below zero. It wasn’t worth thinking too hard about.

“Eighty!” interrupted Michelle.

Our field hut, the size of a double-wide restroom, rocked and shuddered in the onslaught. Though the tiny structure was permafrosted to its foundation, and had already withstood a couple decades of Antarctic storms (with windblown stones embedded in the south wall to prove it), this was a bit unnerving.

I thawed my mouthful of chocolate, and continued to stare at the numerals measuring wind speed. Kirsten, Michelle, and I, sitting in front of the display, could not tear our eyes away. The weather monitor was hypnotizing, transfixing—better than television, even if we had had a TV. It was like staring into a fire.

Michelle ate her pancakes thoughtfully. As an established biologist and ecologist, she could reflect on an accumulating stack of conservation credentials in far-flung areas, including tracking albatrosses in the Pacific, documenting exotic species in the Lesser Antilles, and, perhaps closest to her heart, overseeing Oikonos, a nonprofit organization dedicated to understanding and preserving ecosystems in a variety of landscapes. She'd been to Antarctica before, and lived in this same hut in prior seasons.

8 “One time,” Michelle said, “I was trapped in here for forty-eight hours straight while the wind did not dip below a hundred. In that storm, we recorded a peak gust of a hundred forty-two miles per hour. That was crazy. We had to use a chamber pot because it was too dangerous to go outside to reach the outhouse.”

She lifted a strand of hair over her ear, staring at the weather monitor. Michelle was a veteran here while I was a newcomer in my first field season. I struggled to comprehend such a blizzard. Holy crap, it must have been insane. If the wind was battering us now, just imagine a gust twice that strong.

In distraction, I bit a too-hasty chunk of Hershey's. Ouch. The frozen bar broke into dangerously pointy shards, and one piece pricked the roof of my mouth. In Antarctica, we consumed chocolate the way porcupines mate—very carefully. I delicately probed the sore spot with my tongue.

Outside, the wind roared.



A thirty-mile-per-hour gust might force a stutter-step as you walk normally. At fifty, you can lean into the wind, and at seventy-three miles per hour the storm officially becomes a hurricane. Around a hundred, you can't stand up without holding on to something solid. Closer to a hundred fifty, the wind might actually pick you up and blow you away.

I pulled my gaze from the weather computer and glanced out our tiny window. Things looked pretty fierce outside—the wind was kicking up snow crystals, and a whiteout seemed imminent. Flying snow already blotted out the sun, casting a gray gloom.

We were caged inside the hut. It was too dangerous to venture down to the penguin colony.

“Wonder how the penguins are doing,” I mused aloud.

“They're fine,” said Kirsten, shifting positions on the squeaky metal folding chair. “Penguins are made for this stuff.” Kirsten, like Michelle, was used to tough field conditions, as evidenced by several trips to survey seabirds from commercial ships in the north Pacific, in between banding songbirds at Point Reyes Bird Observatory near San Francisco. She had also spent a previous season in Antarctica, doing her job with such capable assurance that project leaders invited her back for another round of penguin studies. Inside the hut, she had stripped to fuzzy mid layers, hanging her bulky jacket and wind pants neatly on a hook. She wore a typical hint of a smile.

9

“Yeah,” agreed Michelle, “they hunker on their nests, streamline their bodies to the wind, and ride things out.”

“They must really hate this weather, though,” I said.

Michelle took another bite of pancake. “The only issue is that when enough snowdrifts pile up, penguins can get buried as they incubate eggs. They won't leave their nest, and, in the worst storms, a few sometimes suffocate. But I wouldn't worry too much about penguins—for them, this is home. They're pretty tough.”

The three of us regarded each other at point-blank range inside our nine-by-fifteen-foot indoor space, thinking about the birds

out in the blizzard. Less than a mile from our hut, more than a quarter-million Adélie Penguins were enduring the unchecked storm. I shivered involuntarily. Even if they were accustomed to being out in bad weather, could they really enjoy it? I tried to picture all those penguins huddled in blinding snow. I, for one, was glad to have a propane heater and four sturdy walls.

“We just hit eighty-five!” Kirsten said.

Michelle’s eyes flicked across the room to glance through a tiny, frosty window, and she looked suddenly nervous. “Better check on the tents,” she said.

Conditions outside the window were approaching chaos. Two days before, several inches of fresh powder had accumulated in a rare snowfall. Now, all that loose snow was airborne. Driving winds lifted it right off the ground. The effect resembled something between an Afghan sandstorm and the interior of a ping-pong ball. Energy and motion overwhelmed the senses, and visibility dropped to just a few feet. Inside the storm, day turned to evening.

10 A couple of yellow tents were barely visible out in the gloom, providing the only color in a gray-and-white landscape. Fabric snapped hard as each gust slammed home, but the tents were holding up—so far. Scott tents, specially designed for Antarctic expeditions, are made of a welded aluminum frame draped with two heavy layers of cloth and an entrance tunnel. They are rated to eighty-mile-per-hour winds; anything beyond that is dangerous territory.

Though unheated and relatively exposed, the tents afforded a measure of privacy, so each of us had our own to sleep in. After all, we three were crammed together here, isolated from civilization, for three months. We got along very well, but everyone needs some room to stretch out.

“We should probably check the ropes,” Kirsten said.

Michelle and I nodded. Each tent was tethered, held by rocks, and frozen to the ground, but the tethers could always bear tightening, especially the top ropes.

“Let’s go before this gets any worse,” Michelle said. She quickly wiped her plate with a paper towel and began pulling on layers of clothing. Kirsten and I followed suit. Inside the hut, the three of us had barely enough space to stand simultaneously, and getting dressed required coordination. My half-eaten Hershey’s bar rested on the table.

I was already wearing two pairs of long underwear, pants, synthetic socks, and two thermal shirts. On top of this, I added another heavy shirt, special wind pants, a bulky down jacket, balaclava, two pairs of gloves, a radio harness, and ski goggles. I slid my feet inside specialized white bunny boots, designed to insulate against extreme temperatures. Generally, Antarctica is only cold if you don’t pile on enough layers—as the saying goes, there is no bad weather, only bad clothing. Dressing for the outdoors meant at least ten minutes of preparation. Inside the hut, the heater provided some comfort, but heading into the storm required full cold-weather gear.

Of course, penguins are always ready for the cold. Their plump bodies are covered with insulating blubber, like a whale’s. Compared to them, my own insulation was virtually nonexistent; my lean body is more like an antelope than a penguin.

“Ready?” Kirsten asked, smiling.

“As ever,” I muttered, fully prepared to face my first blizzard. I gripped the door handle firmly, turned it, and pushed outward, abandoning the safety of the hut, not quite expecting what came next.

The door almost ripped off its hinges. Wind caught the surface like a sail, and I just hung on, muscling into the raw elements. I gasped. The strong force and pressure of the air inhibited normal breathing, especially since it was so cold and dry. I was glad for the ski goggles. Sunglasses would have been whipped off my face. The hem and hood of my red parka attempted to lift me into the heavens, and I reflexed into an instinctive crouch. Talking was impossible, so Kirsten, Michelle, and I communicated mostly in gestures, pointing and nodding. We dropped to all fours and

angled away from the hut, following a lifeline rope tied between the building and my sleeping tent a hundred yards downhill, slowly drifting into a murky, swirling, gray, exposed gloom.

I crawled with deliberate movements, gripping scattered volcanic rocks to avoid rolling and sliding off course. Each gain was hard fought. Snow and ice particles skidded through the air and chafed like sand on my exposed cheeks as I followed the dim outline of Michelle in front, working across the open space between the hut and my tent.

I wished I were a penguin. A penguin's low center of gravity and crampon-like toenails keep the bird planted firmly on ice. In this wind, we were being blown all over the place. It was impossible to stay steady without at least one hand touching the ice for support, and the general noise and motion made it hard to concentrate.

It's difficult to describe the interior of a subzero hurricane because the experience involves so much disorientation. Imagine standing on the roof of a car traveling a hundred miles per hour on the freeway, in a blizzard, while wearing twenty pounds of insulation, and you begin to get the idea.

12 As my tent emerged into view, we realized we were on a salvage mission. Michelle crawled up to the teepee-like canvas structure, trying to catch a breath on the lee side, but the shelter had collapsed and provided little respite from the blizzard. My \$3,000 Scott tent was trashed. The power of driven air had almost completely flattened it. A three-foot-wide hole gaped in one side. Through this hole, twisted and jagged pieces of metal were visible. The inch-thick aluminum support poles had bent and snapped like toothpicks. Only a frozen ground cloth and rocked-in supports had kept the tent from being blown across limitless miles of barren ice into oblivion. I couldn't have inflicted the same damage myself. Where my head had been sleepily pillowed two hours before, metal and torn canvas heaved viciously.

In an instant, the wind smashed me off my feet. I avoided being shot like a wrecking ball through the tent's walls by grabbing for and desperately grasping a sharp rock, scrabbling for a stronger

foothold. “Come on, is that all you’ve got?” I shouted. The wind swallowed my voice like a teardrop in a swimming pool.

Wind sounded a full broadside in my ears, whistling and roaring like a banshee. We secured the wreckage of my tent as best we could, but there wasn’t much to be done apart from grabbing my sleeping pad and bag; the tethers and rocks were already taut. The structure just wasn’t designed to take this kind of abuse.

Michelle and Kirsten, judging phase one of our mission complete, began to retrace their way along the life rope, navigating toward their own sleeping tents. I lingered for several moments in an enforced crouch next to my demolished tent and watched them pick their way carefully, buglike, across the rock and ice. Ferocious tendrils of snow crystals scudded along the ground like sand on an exposed beach, with the same erosive effect.

Hundred-mile-per-hour gusts whipped by. All I could do was flatten myself to the ice and wait for a lull. How did the penguins manage it? What kind of animal could thrive in these conditions? After all, this was a relatively minor storm. In winter, when the sun never rises above the horizon in Antarctica, blizzards could be fifty degrees colder. Few humans have ever visited this place in winter. Some of those who had made the journey were lucky to get out alive—others, not so fortunate. Meanwhile, penguins endure all seasons without a chink in their curious and engaging personalities.

13

Certainly, penguins would be out of place on the streets of a big city. In human civilization, thousands of miles away, they wouldn’t be able to find fish, argue over nest stones, or nap on an ice floe. They’d wander among city traffic without a clue. Penguins couldn’t be comfortable in our world, so why should we be comfortable in theirs? To seek and understand these birds, I had to leave one realm and enter another.

The storm raged, but I embraced it. After weeks of relatively benign conditions, I was at last experiencing life on the edge. With one double-gloved fist wrapped around a rock, I pumped

the other in the air. Shazam! This was it—fulfillment of a dream, risk and reward. Adversity and isolation were exalting. I wanted to capture this moment and paste it in a scrapbook.

Mostly, though, I wanted to feel like a penguin.



The storm raged unabated for thirty-six hours. Michelle, Kirsten, and I sat pinned inside the hut, listening to the wind batter our walls and noting its force on the digital weather monitor. During the blizzard, the wind never slacked below sixty miles per hour and frequently spiked over a hundred. Stronger gusts shook us like an earthquake. The noise was incredible. Even within the tight confines of the hut, we shouted to each other to get words across. After the first day, I couldn't remember what silence was like. Reality had shifted to a continuously screaming, howling, rattling state. The elements were in motion, and we were along for the ride.

14 Initially, the three of us tried to get some work done in the enforced captivity of the storm. After several hours of entering data and cleaning the interior of the hut, we ran out of productive things to do. We divided our entertainment between watching the hypnotizing weather monitor display and the drama out the window, where a chaotic whiteout obscured most of the view. At times, we couldn't even see the large rock five feet past the window glass. Flying snow particles blotted out sun, ground, and everything in between. Light barely penetrated the gray gloom. To venture out would have been asking for serious trouble.

So we stayed barricaded inside, and fretted about the weather.

Whenever the whiteout thinned, we watched my Scott tent, visible a hundred yards outside the hut's window. I was fascinated by its destruction. With the wind blowing straight through, the tent's skeleton of solid welded aluminum pipe snapped. The entire structure had collapsed, flattened and completely wasted.

Since our hut window was small, set high over the narrow aisle between bunks, only one of us could spy on my tent at any given

time. We rotated window positions, standing on tiptoe to elevate our chins over the sill, catching the action from the tiny indoor space.

I mourned the loss of my home. Kirsten's and Michelle's tents were invisible to us, since there were no windows on the windward side of the hut, where the glass would have been shattered. We later discovered that Michelle's tent also had been flattened, but Kirsten's had somehow survived the onslaught.

It was my turn to cook dinner. I seized the opportunity to spend extra time on a special meal, pouring my soul into a pot of delicious spaghetti, with a sauce packed full of tasty meats and veggies, sides of bread, and cheese. I even apportioned part of my personal spicy V8 to mix Bloody Marys. Salad, alas, was out of the question, since fresh produce was unattainable. We tried not to fantasize too much about iceberg lettuce.

The sizzling sauce and steamy, boiling noodles cheered our indoor setting considerably while the storm blasted outside. Soon, the three of us crouched around the tiny table, eating dinner together, as we did each evening. It was a familiar routine, except for the novel feeling of being inside a hurtling train.

"We'll have to order a helicopter to bring us at least one more tent," said Michelle, winding a long piece of spaghetti on her fork.

"Yeah," Kirsten said, "if this storm ever stops."

"Impossible to fly in these conditions," Michelle agreed.

"A helo would never even get off the ground!"

"Will they replace my tent?" I asked. "I mean, this hut is nice and cozy, but I do like my spot on the ice ..."

"I think so," Michelle said. "It might take a few days, but we should get an emergency resupply flight from McMurdo for the damaged equipment."

"That means mail!" said Kirsten.

"And freshies," I agreed, dreaming of tomatoes.

"Assuming we can talk someone into sending some on the flight," Michelle corrected. "Not a given in any circumstances."

Kirsten smiled. “It’ll sure be weird to have visitors out here. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to socialize with more than two other people at once.”

Ironically, the storm that so completely isolated us inside the hut would precipitate our next contact with the exterior, civilized world. Three days later, a helicopter would land with two new Scott tents, extra propane, a bit of mail, and—most important—a small box of fresh tomatoes and onions.



“Cape Crozier, against the largest ice shelf on Earth, in the shadow of an extinct volcano, and at the doorstep of the least human-affected stretch of ocean remaining on the planet, is one of Earth’s power spots. It’s refreshing to get Noah Strycker’s impressions of this place through his day-to-day experiences; he definitely had all his senses tested.”

DAVID AINLEY, author of *The Adélie Penguin: Bellwether of Climate Change*

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The year he graduated from college, twenty-two-year-old Noah Strycker was dropped by helicopter in a remote Antarctic field camp with two other bird scientists and a three-month supply of frozen food. His subjects: more than a quarter-million penguins.

The Adélie Penguins who call Antarctica home have been the subject of long-term studies—scientists may know more about how these penguins will adjust to climate change than about any other creature in the world.

With wit, curiosity, and a deep passion for his subject, Strycker weaves a captivating tale of penguins and their researchers on the coldest, driest, highest, and windiest continent on Earth. He recounts the reality of life in the Antarctic—thousand-year-old penguin mummies, hurricane-force blizzards, and day-to-day existence in below freezing temperatures—and delves deep into a world of science, obsession, and birds.



NOAH STRYCKER, an Oregon State University graduate, has studied birds around the world, including on Southeast Farallon Island; in the Kimberley, Australia; in Hawaii; in Panama; and in the Antarctic. He is Associate Editor of the American Birding Association’s magazine, *Birding*. He blogs at [www.noahstrycker.com](http://www.noahstrycker.com).

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