

THE EMPEROR'S EGG

Down at the very bottom of the world, there's a huge island that's almost completely covered in snow and ice. It's called Antarctica, and it's the coldest, windiest place on earth.

The weather's bad enough there in summer, but in winter it's really horrible. It's hard to imagine anything actually living there.

But wait...
what's that shape over there?
It can't be.
Yes!

It's a penguin!
It's not just any old penguin either.
It's a male Emperor penguin
(the biggest penguin in the world),
and he's doing a very important job.
He's looking after his egg.

He didn't lay it himself, of course.

His mate did that
a few weeks ago.

But very soon
afterwards
she turned round
and waddled off
to the sea.

That's where female Emperor penguins spend most of the winter – swimming about, getting as fat as they can, eating as much as they can, and generally having a very nice time (as far as you can tell)!

Which leaves
the father penguin

stuck on the ice with
his egg.

Now the most important thing about egg-setting is stopping your egg from getting cold.

That means it has to be kept off the ice and out of the wind.

And what better way to do that than to rest it on your feet and tuck it right up under your tummy?

Which is just what the father penguin does.

And that's how he'll stay for two whole months, until his egg is ready to hatch.

Can you imagine it?
Standing around in the freezing cold with an egg on your feet for two whole months?

What's more, there's nothing for the father penguin to eat on land.

And because he's egg-setting, he can't go off to the sea to feed.

So that means two whole months with an egg on your feet and no supper!
Or breakfast
or lunch or tea.

I don't know about you

but I'd be very very miserable.

Luckily, the penguins don't seem to mind too much. They've got thick feathers and lots of fat under their skin to help keep them warm.

And when it gets really cold and windy, they all snuggle up together and shuffle over the ice in a great big huddle.

Most of the time the huddle trundles along very very slowly.

But sometimes, when the penguins get to a particularly slippery slope... they slide down it on their tummies, pushing themselves along with their flippers, always remembering to take care of their egg – and trying hard not to bump into each other.

And that's how the father penguin spends the winter.

Until one day he hears a chip, chip, chip.

His egg is starting to hatch.

It takes a day or so, but finally the egg cracks right open and out pops a penguin chick.

Now the father penguin has two jobs to do.

He has to keep the chick warm and he has to feed it.

But on what? The chick is too small to be taken off to sea to catch food,

and it can't be left behind on the ice.

Well, deep down in the father penguin's throat there's a pouch where he makes something rather like milk. And that's what he feeds to his hungry chick.

The father penguin can only make enough milky stuff to feed his chick for a couple of weeks.

But just as he's about to run out, a dot appears on the horizon.

It gets closer and closer and yes!

It's mum!

She starts trumpeting "hello" and the father penguin starts trumpeting "hello" and the chick whistles.

The racket goes on for hours and it really does sound as if they're incredibly pleased to see each other

As soon as things have calmed down, the mother penguin is sick – right into her chick's mouth!

Yuk, you may think.

Yum, thinks the chick.

And it gobbles the lot down.

It's the mother's turn to look after the chick now, while the father sets off to sea for a well-earned meal of his own.

About time too!