

Level 3 Non-fiction – Fantastic Penguins

Most people picture penguins in Antarctica, hanging about on the ice. We don't imagine them zipping across waves or scaling sea cliffs like mountaineers. And we're even less likely to imagine them living in rainforests or the tropics. Yet penguins do all these things – they're unlike any other birds on the planet.

Penguins arrived on the scene around 60 million years ago. Some species, like the kumimanu, came and went. Fossilised remains of this huge penguin tell us it was over 160 centimetres tall. That's as tall as some people (even the emperor penguin – our largest living species – is 40 centimetres shorter).

Penguins are found only in the Southern Hemisphere. Sometimes, Galapagos penguins swim across the equator when they're out fishing – but they always return south. So what do penguins have against the Northern Hemisphere? Predators. There are far too many of them for a flightless seabird. In the Southern Hemisphere, there's a lot less to worry about – except seals, sharks, orca ... and of course people, the biggest threat of all.

Penguins can survive all kinds of habitats. Emperor penguins raise their chicks in Antarctic blizzards, where temperatures can drop to minus 40 degrees Celsius.