

# First Contact: Emperor penguin colony receives first ever human visitors

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Credit: International Polar Foundation

(Phys.org)—Three team members from Belgium's Princess Elisabeth Antarctica polar research station are the first humans to have ever visited and photographed a newly-discovered 9,000-strong colony of emperor penguins on Antarctica's Princess Ragnhild Coast.

Researchers from the [British Antarctic Survey](#) and the US National

Environment Research Council first discovered the colony of 1m-tall emperor [penguins](#) using satellite imagery, and published the location in a 2009 paper "Penguins from space: faecal [stains](#) reveal the location of [emperor penguin](#) colonies". However, the colony's existence was unconfirmed until expedition leader Alain Hubert and station, chief mechanic Kristof Soete from Belgium and Swiss mountain guide Raphael Richard travelled to the colony in early December 2012.

"Since we started operating along Princess Ragnhild Coast we have encountered so many emperors penguins that I was convinced that a colony must be installed somewhere in the east", said Hubert.

"I knew from last year's satellite study that there could potentially be an emperor colony east of Derwael [ice](#) rise. Because we were operating not far from this the satellite location, I decided to force the way and try to access to this remote and unknown place. The surprise was even more than all I could have expected or dreamed about: I realised while counting the penguins that this was a very populated colony. "

"It was almost midnight when we succeeded in finding a way down to the ice through crevasses and approached the first of five groups of more than a thousand individuals, three quarters of which were chicks. This was unforgettable moment!"

Hubert and Soete were part of a team supporting scientific research on the Derwael Ice Rise, some 50km from the [colony](#), and 250km from Princess Elisabeth Antarctica. The projects carried out at the site included IceCon, which aims to gain a better understanding of the rate of the loss of ice – now and in the past - from the [Antarctic ice sheet](#) in the Dronning Maud Land area. The Be:Wise project aims to improve understanding of ice-shelf flow dynamics by focusing on the buttressing role of ice rises and pinning points – small offshore mountains which support Antarctic ice shelves from underneath.

Princess Elisabeth Antarctica is the world's first zero emission polar research station, and is operated by the International Polar Foundation, in partnership with the Belgian Polar Secretariat. Princess Elisabeth Antarctica's design and construction seamlessly integrates passive building technologies, renewable wind and solar energy, water treatment facilities, continuously monitored power demand and a smart grid for maximising energy efficiency. Located in East Antarctica's Sør Rondane Mountains, Princess Elisabeth Antarctica welcomes scientists from around the world to conduct research in this little-studied and pristine environment.

**More information:** The coordinates for the Ragnhild Coast colony are 27.24713, -69.96615

Paper: Penguins from space: faecal stains reveal the location of emperor penguin colonies - Peter T. Fretwell and Philip N. Trathan  
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 009.00467.x/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-3113.1009.00467.x/abstract)

Provided by International Polar Foundation

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