

Scientists spot previously unknown colonies of emperor penguins in Antarctica

January 24 2024, by Christina Larson



This undated photo provided by the British Antarctic Survey in January 2024 shows adult emperor penguins with a chick near Halley Research Station in Antarctica. Scientists have spotted previously unknown colonies of emperor penguins in new satellite imagery. At least some emperor penguins are moving their colonies as melting ice from climate change threatens breeding grounds. The British Antarctic Survey said Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2024, that the four newly found colonies likely existed for many years, but scientists hadn't previously spotted them. Credit: British Antarctic Survey via AP

Previously unknown colonies of emperor penguins have been spotted in new satellite imagery.

Emperor penguins, considered "near threatened" with extinction, are the world's largest penguins. They raise their chicks in Antarctic winter on patches of frozen sea ice. But if the ice breaks up before the chicks have fledged, most will die.

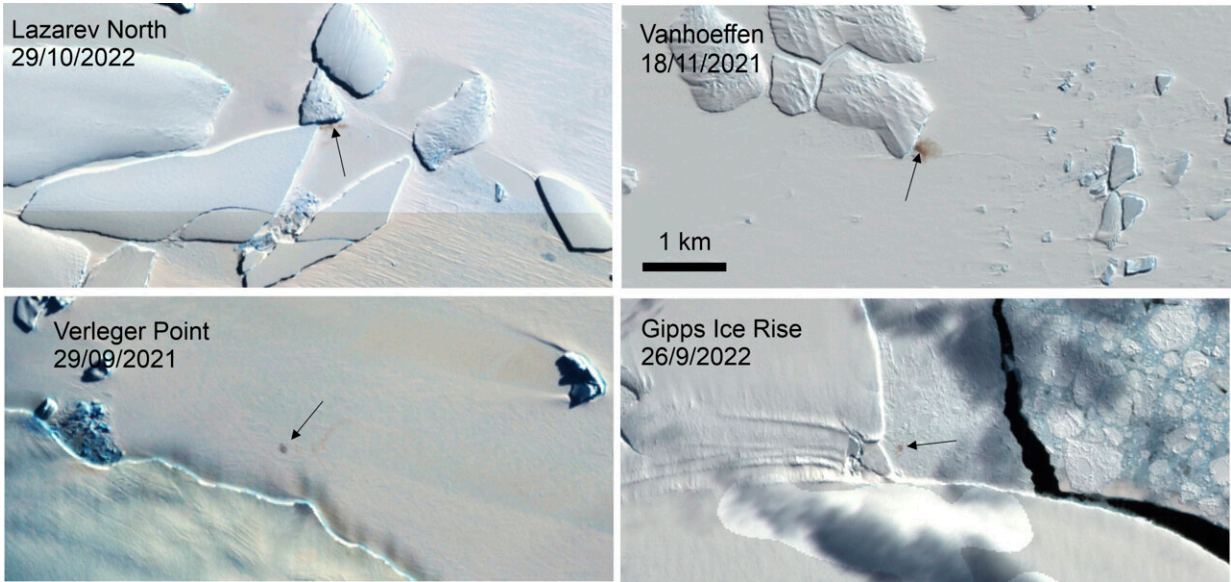
At least some [emperor penguins](#) are moving their colonies as melting ice from [climate change](#) threatens breeding grounds, according to research released on Wednesday.

One penguin colony near Halley Bay appears to have moved around 30 kilometers (19 miles) to the east, said Peter Fretwell, a researcher at the British Antarctic Survey. He said unstable conditions beginning in 2016 had made the old location perilous.

"Emperor penguins have taken it upon themselves to try to find more stable sea ice," he said.

The four newly found colonies likely existed for many years, but scientists hadn't previously spotted them, said Fretwell. They are mostly small colonies, with less than 1,000 breeding pairs each, he said. Scientists currently know of 66 emperor penguin colonies.

The newly spotted colonies don't greatly change overall [population estimates](#)—currently less than around 300,000 breeding pairs—but they help scientists understand where penguins might be moving, said Fretwell.



This combination of satellite images provided by the E.U.'s Copernicus program via the British Antarctic Survey in January 2024 shows four new emperor penguin colony sites in Antarctica. Scientists have spotted previously unknown colonies of emperor penguins in new satellite imagery. At least some emperor penguins are moving their colonies as melting ice from climate change threatens breeding grounds. The British Antarctic Survey said Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2024, that the four newly found colonies likely existed for many years, but scientists hadn't previously spotted them. Credit: Copernicus/British Antarctic Survey via AP



This 2008-2009 photo provided by the British Antarctic Survey in January 2024 shows an adult emperor penguin and chicks on the sea ice at Halley Bay. Scientists have spotted previously unknown colonies of emperor penguins in new satellite imagery. At least some emperor penguins are moving their colonies as melting ice from climate change threatens breeding grounds. The British Antarctic Survey said Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2024, that the four newly found colonies likely existed for many years, but scientists hadn't previously spotted them. Credit: Richard Burt/British Antarctic Survey via AP

It's unclear if any of the newly identified colonies could be breakaway groups from other larger colonies, said Daniel Zitterbart, a penguin researcher at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, who was not involved in the study.

But it's clear the [breeding sites](#) are in flux and a warming world means more "penguins will be on the move," he said.

More information: Peter Fretwell, Four unreported emperor penguin colonies discovered by satellite, *Antarctic Science* (2024). DOI: 10.1017/S0954102023000329 , doi.org/10.1017/S0954102023000329

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