

Explorer's study of 'sexually depraved' penguins unearthed

10 June 2012



Levick's notebook on the sexual habits of Adélie penguins written in 1911.

He risked freezing or starving to death on a doomed expedition to the South Pole 100 years ago -- but for George Murray Levick, the real horror lay in the twisted sexual mores of the Adélie penguin.

London's [Natural History Museum](#) has unearthed a landmark study by Levick, a scientist with the ill-fated 1910-13 Scott [Antarctic Expedition](#), detailing the birds' sexual shenanigans, the Guardian newspaper reported on Saturday.

Homosexual acts, sexual abuse of chicks and even attempts by male penguins to mate with dead females are recorded in Levick's paper "Sexual Habits of the Adélie Penguin", which had been lost for decades.

Edwardian Englishman Levick was so horrified by his own findings that he initially recorded them in Greek to make them inaccessible to the average reader.

Male penguins gather in "hooligan bands of half a dozen or more and hang about the outskirts of the knolls, whose inhabitants they annoy by their constant acts of depravity," he later wrote in the paper in English.

To this day, Levick is the only scientist to have studied an entire breeding cycle at Cape Adare after he spent the Antarctic summer of 1911-12 there, the Guardian said.

Captain Robert Scott and four others perished after reaching the [South Pole](#) on January 17, 1912 -- only to find Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had beaten them to it more than a month earlier.

But Levick survived, despite having been forced with five others to spend an entire [Antarctic winter](#) in an ice cave with few supplies after the expedition ship, Terra Nova, was blocked by ice on its way to rescue them.

Back in Britain, he published a paper called "[Natural History](#) of the Adélie Penguin", but his findings about the species' astonishing [sexual behaviour](#) were considered so shocking that they were omitted.

This material was used for a short separate study, "Sexual Habits of the Adélie Penguin", that was privately passed around a few experts.

The groundbreaking paper -- which came around 50 years ahead of the next study on the subject -- had been lost until the recent discovery of a copy by Douglas Russell, curator of birds at the Natural History Museum.

Russell has had the paper published in the journal Polar Record along with an analysis of Levick's work, the Guardian said.

Russell told the Guardian's sister Sunday newspaper, The Observer, that the penguins' sexual inexperience is to blame for the antics that so disgusted Levick.

"Adelies gather at their colonies in October to start to breed. They have only a few weeks to do that and young adults simply have no experience of

how to behave," he explained.

"Hence the seeming depravity of their behaviour."

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