

Counting emperor penguins

We have been monitoring the emperor penguin colony at Taylor Glacier (~ 90 km west of Mawson Station) since 1988. Our aims are to find out how many pairs of emperor penguins decide to breed each year and also how many chicks they manage to raise. That means we have to count the penguins on two occasions each year: in winter when they males are incubating their eggs, and in spring when the chicks are getting ready to fledge (leave the colony).

Winter is the best time of year to find out how many pairs are active in a season because only the males are in the colony taking care of their eggs. The females are in the pack-ice feeding. Each male represents one breeding pair so all we have to do is count them!

We do that by taking overlapping photographs of the whole colony. At Taylor Glacier, that is relatively easy because the colony is located on land and next to a rocky ridge from where we take the pictures. One has a great overview from there. The only problem is that one has to sit very still in very low temperatures.

Once the images are taken, we download them to our computer and put them together like a puzzle. Then we can mark each penguin with a coloured dot and count the whole lot.

The great thing about photographs is that we can count the penguins with great accuracy and we have a record that can be checked in future. And the best part is that we don't have to disturb the penguins!!

