

Penguins wander far, but come home to mate

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By Joshua Melvin

A species of remarkably faithful penguins may have found the secret to monogamy – plenty of time spent very far apart.

A group of southern rockhopper mums and dads were hundreds – in one case thousands – of kilometres away from each other when not making babies, according to a study released on Wednesday (local time).

Yet when the birds returned home to New Island off the coast of Argentina they managed to find each other and mate, according to findings published in the prestigious *Biology Letters* journal.

While their reunions may have been sweet, they were decidedly short, with the penguins together for just under a quarter of the year.



"In these extremely faithful animals – the pair bonds for breeding may last all life long in this species – the partners may actually be separated by hundreds to thousands of kilometres at sea," researcher Jean-Baptiste Thiebot said.

The birds engage in an incredible variety of behaviour including "divorce" and home building that might seem very familiar to humans.

Once back on land in October after six months or so at sea, the penguins got straight to the business of mating, egg-laying and incubation, all of which kept them busy for about a month.

There was no lingering over the kids here, as the rearing of the chicks took up another roughly 70 days before the parents split up in April.

Given the risk the animals could lose each other for good by going their separate ways in the wild, the researchers wanted to see if the creatures would make an effort to stay close together outside breeding season.

"Divorce" happens among the penguins, but it is rare to find two ex-partners breeding with somebody new, Thiebot said.

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