

Regional Guide – Wildlife

Falklands, South Georgia, and the Antarctic Peninsula

Birds

Penguins

Penguins are the stars of the Antarctic wildlife experience. Though several species can be found throughout the Southern Ocean, **five are commonly seen** on the Antarctic Peninsula and sub-Antarctic islands:

- **Gentoo Penguin:** Recognizable by its bright orange bill and white head stripe. Gentoos are the fastest-swimming penguin and nest in large, noisy colonies.
- **Adélie Penguin:** Named after the wife of explorer Dumont d'Urville, this species has a classic tuxedo look with a white eye ring and is often seen on sea ice.
- **Chinstrap Penguin:** The world's most abundant penguin, easily identified by the thin black line under its chin.
- **King Penguin** (South Georgia & Falklands): Second in size only to the emperor penguin, with striking orange-gold markings and a tall stature.
- **Macaroni Penguin:** A crested species with vivid orange-yellow eyebrows, often seen in sub-Antarctic regions like South Georgia.

Seabirds

Antarctica hosts a diverse array of seabirds adapted to life in harsh conditions.

- **Albatrosses:** Especially in the Falklands and South Georgia, you may spot wandering, black-browed, or grey-headed albatrosses, gliding on wingspans of up to 3.5 metres.
- **Petrels:** Including the giant petrel, cape petrel, and snow petrel, these scavengers and surface feeders are common sights around ships and landings.
- **Skuas and Sheathbills:** Opportunistic feeders often seen scavenging around penguin colonies. The Antarctic skua is particularly bold and may be seen harassing other birds for food.

- **Cormorants (Shags):** The Antarctic shag, with its vivid blue eye-ring and orange facial patch, is often seen nesting in coastal cliffs.

Marine Mammals

Seals

Six species of seal can be encountered in Antarctic waters:

- **Weddell Seal:** Often seen hauled out on fast ice, these calm seals are known for their underwater vocalizations and large eyes.
- **Crabeater Seal:** Despite their name, these seals feed primarily on krill. They are one of the most abundant large mammals on Earth.
- **Leopard Seal:** A top predator, this sleek and powerful seal feeds on penguins and other seals. It has a long reptilian head and spotted body.
- **Elephant Seal** (South Georgia): The largest of the seals, males can weigh over 3,500 kg. Their deep roars and beach fights are an unforgettable sight.
- **Fur Seal** (South Georgia & Falklands): Smaller and more agile, these seals were once hunted for their luxurious pelts but have since rebounded in numbers.
- **Ross Seal:** Rare and elusive, typically found deeper into the pack ice. Unlikely to be seen, but still worth noting.

Whales

Whale sightings are common in the summer months as they feed in nutrient-rich waters:

- **Humpback Whale:** Known for breaching, tail-lobbing, and cooperative bubble-net feeding.
- **Minke Whale:** Smaller and more elusive, but frequently seen during Zodiac outings.
- **Fin Whale:** The second-largest animal on Earth; occasionally seen at a distance.
- **Orca (Killer Whale):** Several ecotypes exist in Antarctic waters, some of which specialize in hunting seals and penguins.
- **Blue Whale:** Rarely seen, but awe-inspiring in size if spotted.

Land Mammals

There are **no native land mammals** in Antarctica. The extreme environment prevents the establishment of terrestrial mammals, with the exception of introduced species (e.g., reindeer on South Georgia, now removed due to environmental concerns).

Fish & Marine Life

Antarctic fish have evolved special proteins to avoid freezing in icy waters. While not commonly seen from the surface, their adaptations are a marvel of evolutionary biology.

Krill – A keystone species, Antarctic krill support nearly all of the region's predators, including whales, seals, penguins, and seabirds. They gather in massive swarms and are vital to the Southern Ocean ecosystem.

Invertebrates

While invertebrates may not be the showstoppers of an Antarctic expedition, they are essential to the ecosystem:

- **Antarctic Springtails and Mites:** Among the few true land-dwelling organisms, found in moss beds and under rocks.
- **Jellyfish, Salps, and Plankton:** Often seen in the upper layers of the ocean, these drifting creatures form a critical part of the food chain.
- **Benthos:** Beneath the ice, the Antarctic seafloor is teeming with colorful starfish, brittle stars, and sea spiders—many of them large and slow-growing due to the cold.