

Ruth Musgrave

From: Bold in the Cold [boldinthecold@whaletimes.org]
Sent: Friday, January 14, 2011 11:13 AM
To: boldinthecold@whaletimes.org
Subject: Last day at Penguin Camp



Courtesy Courtesy
Skua flying a Skua corp264

Dear Bold in the Cold Explorers,

We just got back from one of our big skua days. Once a week, we hike about 8 miles, covering the coast and about a mile inland to the south as far as four miles from our station. The hike is lovely. (Photos of skuas attached.)

In our study area we follow 162 skua territories. The hills and coast around us are divided into a quilt-work of territories with boundaries just like on a map of the US. Unlike the U.S., however, the borders of these territories change from year to year. Some territories are very stable. They've had the same pair of skuas, male and female, holding the area for years. Sometimes two skuas will hold the same territory with each other for nearly 10 years!

Other territories are much less stable. One of the territories I check daily at Copa currently has two pairs of skuas hanging out on it. Others have a different bird on it every time we visit.

All skua territories are not created equally. Some skuas control penguin colonies. They specialize at stealing eggs and chicks from the penguins. These skuas pass on their hunting techniques to their chicks. Any skua holding a territory with penguins on it was raised on a territory where its parents controlled penguins as well.

Other skua territories have nothing on them but a pleasant view of the ocean and a protected place to nest. These birds are fishers. They don't have any resource on their territory except for space to raise their chicks.

And finally, there is a third type of territory that sometimes takes a little detective work to figure out. Some skuas have 'bird resources' (as in birds to eat) on their territory. The birds aren't penguins, they are storm petrels that nest underground or cape petrels that nest on cliffs. Skuas with this kind of territory eat fish, too. In their territory, we look for bones, carcasses and feathers in boluses (*the indigestible bits that birds throw up). This helps us determine whether a skua pair has access to other resources besides just fish. (*Maybe you've investigated owl pellets in class before?)

Skuas have a bad reputation because they prey on penguins. But don't let that fool you. Penguins do a good job of standing up for themselves. Whenever we have a spare moment one of our favorite activities is watching Gentoo TV. That's when we're in our main room watching the penguins march by on the way to the colonies. Last night I watched a gentoo go out of its way to chase off the Hut Skua that was sitting on the grass. The Hut Skua was nowhere near a penguin colony!

Okay, I need to go get ready for tomorrow (Saturday). We have more skua territories to check near

the Polish station. We canoe in front of a glacier to get there, which is always fun. On Saturdays, we spend the night so we can do laundry and take showers. I'm off to gather my laundry and make sure I have my gear for checking skua nests. I better not forget my nail polish! (We mark skua chicks with it).

We are all so glad you could join us at Penguin Camp this week. We loved sharing our research with you. Next week, you (and your signatures) will join the crew at Krill Camp - aboard the Moana Wave. But if you have any questions or thoughts, please send them to Jake and he'll get them to us. We'd love to hear from you, too.

Have a great weekend and enjoy the rest of your time in Antarctica!

-Alexis

(and the Science Team at Penguin Camp: Penny and Kristen)