

Ruth Musgrave

From: Bold in the Cold [boldinthecold@whaletimes.org]

Sent: Thursday, January 13, 2011 11:54 AM

To: boldinthecold@whaletimes.org

Subject: It's visitors day in Antarctica!

Dear *Virtual Team Members*,

Happy Thursday! Hope your week is as great as ours is here at Copacabana. The weather has been nice, the penguin chicks are growing fast, and everyone is in high spirits. Though we do most of our bird work alone, it is important for us to stay in touch for safety and to keep each other informed of interesting events. We use radios to keep in contact with each other and with other stations around the bay. It's fun to hear all the different languages of the ships and stations nearby— we hear Polish, Spanish, and even Portuguese spoken on the radio.

This morning, Penny hailed us on the radio with one of my favorite calls—"Whale in the bay!" Whenever I hear this, I stop whatever I'm doing and scan across the ocean with my binoculars. Whale sightings are great! It's easiest to see whales on calm days when the ocean is flat, but today was a windy and there were waves all around, so every splash looks like a whale. But, after a few minutes of searching, I saw the telltale column of water shoot up from the ocean. This waterspout is the whale exhaling air from its blowhole as it surfaces. This was a humpback whale— I could tell by its little dorsal fin (the fin on its back) and its big tail fluke with white markings.

[Humpbacks](#) are the most common whale visitor to the bay, but it is still exciting to see them. We've also seen a minke whale and a few killer whales this season. This whale was about 1,640 ft (500 m) from shore. (That's 5 football fields away.) It sounds far away, but the bay is about 4 miles (7 km) across and a humpback whale is gigantic -- about 50 ft (+/-15 m) long -- so it seems very close! (A humpback would be about the length of a school bus and a small car.)

When we see a whale, we record the time, the number of whales, the species, and their behavior. Though we don't do any in-depth whale studies here at Copacabana, it is very interesting to note when we see them. Humpbacks eat krill, and are usually in the Antarctic feeding. As you know, penguins also eat krill. So it's good to know that there is enough food nearby for both species. After all, krill is the basis of the Antarctic food web!

After watching the humpback for a few minutes, I went back to my work. But who did I stumble upon as I walked down the beach? Another common antarctic marine mammal—a [southern elephant seal](#)! It is always a surprise to see one of these giant animals when you're expecting to see a penguin. (A male southern elephant seal is a bit longer than a Jeep. It can be 16 ft (5 m) long. A female 9.8 ft (3 m).)

Earlier in the season, an elephant seal decided to nap in the middle of one of the penguin colonies! He was there for days, not at all concerned by the penguins milling around him. The penguins didn't seem to mind, either, except for the ones whose nests he was laying on. They were a little perturbed. Twice a week we count all the seals on the beaches near Copa. We're getting more and more seals recently because they're coming ashore to molt, so they have a fresh new coat for the coming winter.

Penny, Alexis, and I are all sitting around in the kitchen this evening. Penny is mending her gloves—we've all ripped holes in the fingers, Alexis is planning our work for this weekend, and I need to enter whale sighting data into the computer.

Cheers!

Kristen

(NOTE FROM JAKE: Kristen didn't have her camera, but our friends at NOAA sent a couple photos for you.)