

Rare Penguin visits Western Australia

On the 8th September last, Mrs. Winifred Caunce of Busselton was walking along the beach some 6 km west of Busselton when she came across a rather large, unusual looking penguin.

Mrs. Caunce said a few words of affection to the stranger and proceeded to return home. Without any further encouragement, the bird followed her 1.5 km along the beach and 300 m inland to her house.

Wildlife Officer Bernard Masters visited Mrs. Caunce and tried unsuccessfully to get the bird to follow him to the beach and back into the sea.

The penguin was eventually taken into custody by W.O. Masters and kept in his backyard for a few days. During this time details of the bird's physique and some behaviour traits were noted and a positive identification was made.

It was a large penguin, standing some 63 cm high and having an overall length of some 79 cm (from tip of tail to tip of beak). At times the bird extended its neck to such a degree that its length increased to more than 91 cm. Using a set of inaccurate bathroom scales, the bird weighed between 11 and 11.5 kg.

On consulting various reputable books on bird identification W.O. Masters determined that the bird was a King Penguin, a species usually found in the Antarctic. After consulting with Perth zoo director, Mr. Tom Spence, it was established that this was the first sighting of such an animal in Western Australia.

The colouring of the penguin which is not fully seen from any one angle and is not evident in the black and white photo, was as follows.

The upper portions of the back were slate grey, the lower portions being a darker but mottled charcoal/dark grey. The front (underside) was predominantly white but there was a pale-yellowish-cream coloured "bib" below the neck which had a diamond shape.

The ear patches were a bright orange-tinted yellow but they were not dark enough in colour to be described as being "Kodak" yellow. The yellow extended in a very narrow line around to the front of the bird where, immediately below the neck, there was another yellow patch. The posterior borders of the yellow colourations were all lined with a thin black border. Also, where the grey of the back met with the white of the front, there was a similar black border.

The head was very dark slate grey to black in colour. The bill was black except for the posterior half of the lower mandible which was a pale pink colour, streaked with black.

The eyes were brown; feet were black, both upper and lower surfaces; the tail was mottled black and slate grey.

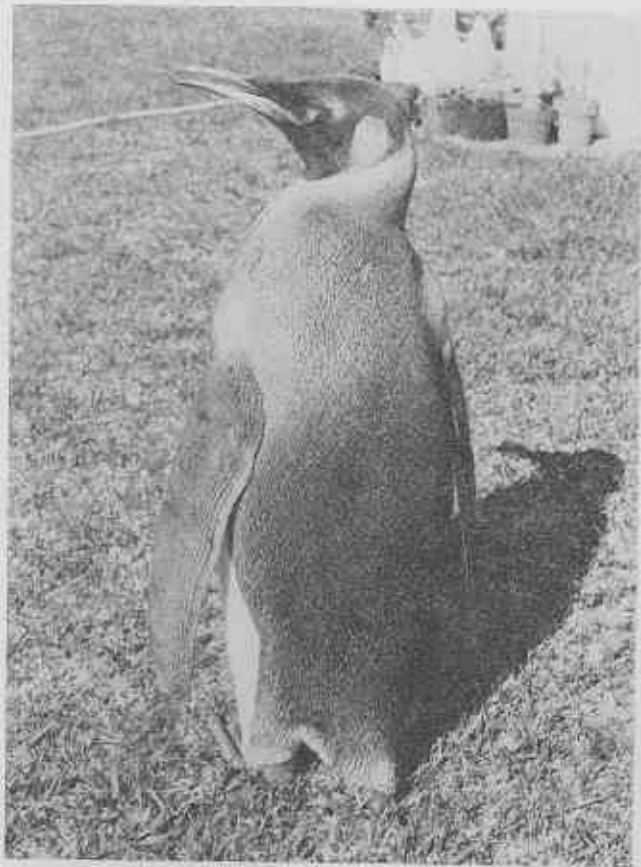
The flippers were white underneath; dark slate grey on the upper wing; the tip of each flipper was black underneath.

Behaviour

At no time did the bird show any fear of humans. With small children approximately the same height as itself, the bird sometimes showed some aggression if they ventured closer than about 60 cm.

Sudden movements by persons, vehicles, animals, etc. caused the bird to become alert but, otherwise it was very placid and readily accepted whole, dead fish as food from the hand. On only one occasion did it pick up food from the ground and that was when it had been hand fed a fish which it then dropped.

The penguin adapted quickly to confinement within an average backyard but did not enjoy being placed in a box during transportation. After one night in W.O. Masters' possession, it began calling at dawn, presumably for more food.



Because of its obvious attachment to humans and being over 2 000 nautical miles from its habitat, the bird was considered in danger of being deliberately or accidentally harmed by human actions. After further talks with Mr. Spence it was decided to send the penguin to the care of the Perth zoo.