

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CONTROVERSY OF "STRAY-PENGUINS" IN SCHIRMACHER RANGE AREA

Arun Chaturvedi<sup>1</sup> and Dr A.C.P. Tripathi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Geological Survey of India, <sup>2</sup>Indo-Tibetan Border Police

### Background

Starting from October every year, and especially in November- December, many Adelie penguins are seen in Schirmacher range. Most of the expedition members consider them as "stray penguins", who have lost their bearings and are doomed to starve in the barren range. Well-intentioned attempts have been reported in some of the previous teams, to "rescue" these stray birds and send them back to their natural environment, i.e. near the coastal areas, by helicopters. Though some experts from Wildlife Institute of India did express the opinion that these birds may not be the lost ones, but could be seeking breeding grounds in Schirmacher range; yet in the absence of any physical evidence, even they had doubts if these penguins could actually nest about 80 km away from the coast or not. Thus, the controversy remained and most of the expedition members tried their best to "help" these poor birds.

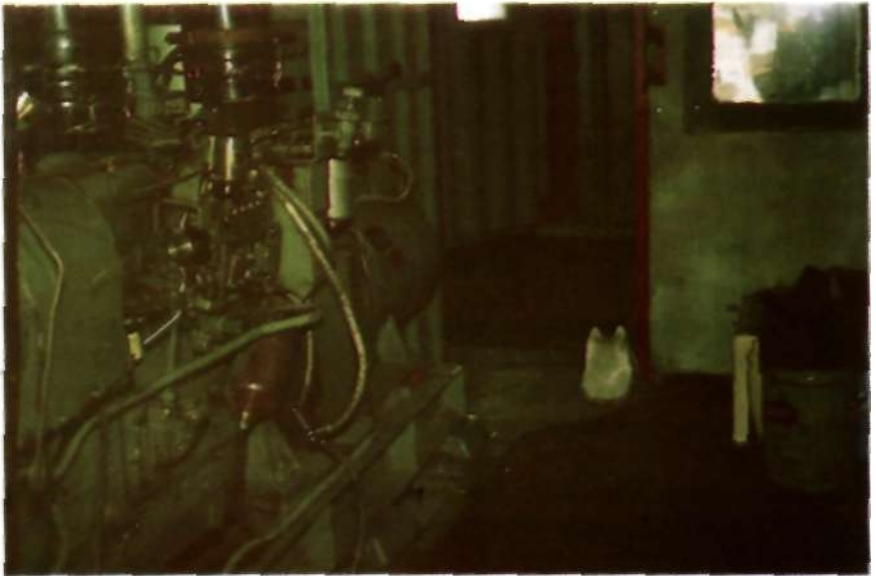
### Observations

With these controversial questions in mind, a watch was kept for penguins during the course of glaciological traverses. Since the end of the polar winter, the authors were alert to record some concrete evidence. In the last week of October 1996, the first Adelie penguin was sighted near Maitri. After that, in the first week of November 96, groups of 6 to 9 penguins were also observed. These birds were quite fearless and roamed at will around Maitri station (Fig.1). At the time of strong winds, some even took the liberty to enter the generator block, not being bothered about the loud humming of running generators (Fig.2).

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 96, two nesting sights of Adelie penguins were observed, just about 150 metres west of the station (Fig.3). Within a couple of



*Fig. 1; Adelie penguin in front of the main entrance to Maitri station, seems to be enjoying the "red carpet welcome"*



*Fig. 2: Adelie penguin resting inside the generator block, sheltered from strong winds*



*Fig. 3: Nesting site very close to Maitri station*



*Fig. 4: A large group of Adelie penguins nesting on Nunatak Veteheia*



*Fig.5. By the second week of December, most of the eggs are abandoned*



*Fig. 6: An Adelie that persisted too long, provided food for the skuas*

days, five more nests were discovered on Nunatak Veteheia (**Fig.4**); which is about 90 km away from the coastal zone (latitude 70°47' 06" S and longitude 11°38' 57" E). In some of the nests, there were two eggs. A regular watch was kept on these nesting activities. By 12 December 96, most of these nests were abandoned (Fig.5), with none of the nesting partners seen around. Most of the penguins were seen to have gone towards the shelf, not to come back again. However, a couple of Adelies persisted in Schirmacher, vainly diving for food in the lakes of the Oasis. These ultimately became too weak and were devoured by the skuas (**Fig.6**).

### **Conclusions**

The above observations have firmly established that these Adelie penguins are neither stray nor lost. These are healthy pairs, who are attracted to the pebbly grounds of Schirmacher range and surrounding Nunataks, seeking the nesting sites. However, due to the enormous distance (80 to 90 km) between their nesting grounds and feeding sites, none of these attempts are successful. Ultimately, most of the birds abandon their eggs and some who persist, become food for the skuas. Thus, it is a natural cycle of inter-dependent breeding and feeding of birds, that is going on in Schirmacher range, and humans would be well advised not to interfere in it.