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Antarctic animals

The weather conditions in the Antarctic are very inhospitable, as it is the coldest place on Earth! For this reason, very few terrestrial (land) animals are able to survive in the Antarctic. However, many marine (sea) animals and bird species thrive here.

Marine animals

A huge variety of marine animals can be found in the Antarctic. Several different species of whale including humpback, blue and sperm whales all live here, along with orca (killer whales). Various species of seal also live here including Weddell, crabeater and leopard seals.

The penguin is a marine bird that is completely unique to the Southern Hemisphere. Many species of penguin have adapted to survive in the Antarctic. Adélie, emperor, chinstrap and gentoo penguins all breed here.





Terrestrial animals

Believe it or not, the only terrestrial animals that live in the Antarctic are invertebrates (animals without backbones). The largest is the wingless midge, which can grow to a maximum of 13 mm in length. Most of the other invertebrate animals that live here are so small that they can only be seen under a microscope!





Did you know?

Penguins can live in the sea for several months at a time. Their bodies and wings have adapted to make them excellent divers and swimmers.

Birds

Some birds, such as snow petrels, are able to withstand the Antarctic weather throughout the year. Snow petrels breed in the Antarctic and have been seen as far south as the South Pole. Other birds, such as the Arctic skuas and Arctic tern, migrate to the Antarctic from the Arctic. They do this to avoid the Arctic winter and in effect have two summers – one in the Arctic and one in the Antarctic.

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Antarctic weather

Many people know that the Antarctic is the coldest place on Earth. But it may come as a surprise that it is also the windiest, and that the world's largest desert can be found here! Both the weather and climate are incredibly harsh, but just how cold is the Antarctic and why is it classed as a desert?

Can plants survive the weather conditions?

Very few plant species can survive the inhospitable conditions of the Antarctic. Antarctic hair grass and Antarctic pearlwort are the only two species of flowering plants that are hardy enough to withstand the brutal climate. Mosses have also adapted to survive here.









Temperature and precipitation

Antarctica is actually a continent, larger in size than the whole of Europe. The weather can vary significantly across different areas. The table below shows the average daily temperature and monthly precipitation for the Vostok Station, based in the Antarctic.

The lowest temperature ever recorded in Antarctica is -89.2°C but temperatures are often warmer near the coast. It sometimes rains in these warmer areas but most precipitation in the Antarctic falls as snow. The continent is the driest on Earth and is classed as a desert because there is so little precipitation here.

Did you know?

Millions of years ago, the climate in the Antarctic was a lot warmer than it is today. In fact, conifer trees once grew there.



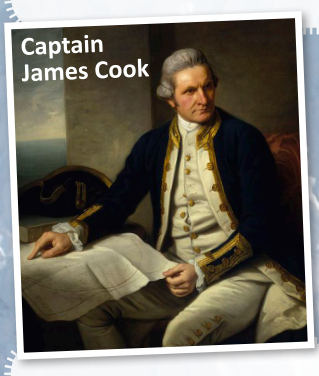
Vostok Station	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Average temperature (°C)	-32.1	-44.3	-57.9	-64.7	-65.6	-65.2	-66.9	-67.6	-66	-57.1	-43.3	-32.1
Average precipitation (mm)	0.1	0	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.1	0

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Antarctic people

No human has ever lived in the Antarctic permanently. In fact, it wasn't until the late 1700s that humans began to discover this hostile and mysterious region. Despite having no permanent residents, the Antarctic has fascinated humans since it was first discovered and continues to intrigue people today.





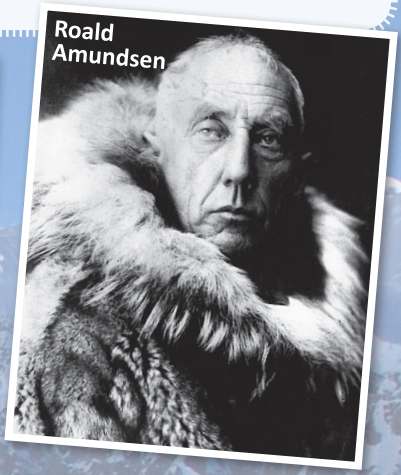
Today's population

Today, approximately 4,000 scientists and researchers reside in the Antarctic over the course of a year. They analyse and monitor the unique conditions here. There are over 60 research bases for the scientists to stay in, with most staying during the summer months (November to April). Scientists can 'live' here for a couple of months or up to a couple of years.

The Antarctic has also become a popular tourist destination, but tourism is very carefully managed in this area to help protect the local environment and wildlife.







Discovery and exploration of the Antarctic

A British explorer, Captain James Cook, was one of the first explorers to visit the Antarctic region. In 1772, his voyage took him to the Antarctic Circle but he and his crew were forced to turn back because of the severe weather. Later, in 1819, the British explorer, William Smith, discovered some Antarctic islands. Explorers continued to visit the area and a race to reach the South Pole (the most southerly point on Earth) followed in 1911. The race was won by a Norwegian explorer called Roald Amundsen.

Did you know?

Argentina sent a pregnant woman to the Antarctic in 1978. She gave birth to a baby boy, who became the first ever person to be born on the continent!



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