FOUNDATION TEAM ARE FIRST HUMANS TO VISIT EMPEROR PENGUIN COLONY

Three members of the International Polar Foundation's Princess Elisabeth Antarctica are the first humans to visit and photograph a newly-discovered 9,000-strong colony of emperor penguins.

Researchers from the British Antarctic Survey first discovered the colony, on on Antarctica's Princess Ragnhild Coast, of 1m-tall emperor penguins using satellite imagery. Their findings, and the locations of several populations was published in a 2009 paper by Peter T. Fretwell and Philip N. Trathan, "Penguins from space: faecal stains reveal the location of emperor penguin colonies". However, the colony's existence was unconfirmed until expedition leader Alain Hubert, station chief mechanic Kristof Soete and Swiss mountain guide Raphael Richard travelled to the colony in early December 2012, and took the honour of being the first humans ever to visit the colony.

> *"Since we started operating along Princess Ragnhild Coast we have encountered so many emperors penguins that I was convinced that a colony must be installed somewhere in the east", said Hubert.*

“I knew from last year’s satellite study that there could potentially be an emperor colony east of Derwael ice rise. Because we were operating not far from this the satellite location, I decided to force the way and try to access to this remote and unknown place. The surprise was even more than all I could have expected or dreamed about: I realised while counting the penguins that this was a very populated colony."

“It was almost midnight when we succeeded in finding a way down to the ice through crevasses and approached the first of five groups of more than a thousand individuals, three quarters of which were chicks. This was unforgettable moment!”

Hubert and Soete were part of an International Polar Foundation team supporting scientific research on the Derwael Ice Rise, some 50km from the colony, and 250km from Princess Elisabeth Antarctica. The projects carried out at the site included IceCon - which aims to gain a better understanding of the rate of the loss of ice – now and in the past - from the Antarctic ice sheet in the Dronning Maud Land area. The Be:Wise project aims to improve understanding of ice-shelf flow dynamics by focusing on the buttressing role of ice rises and pinning points – small offshore mountains which support Antarctic ice shelves from underneath.

Want to experience Antarctica for yourself? Visit the Inside the Station exhibition, in Tour & Taxis, Brussels.