

The Big Picture

series by Chris Linder



Rock Stars

What's black, white and adorable all over? Rockhopper penguins – the brave little guys battling Antarctic elements, celebrated here in [Chris Linder's](#) photographs.

by **Scarlet Lili Thomas**

 luminosaartscene.com

Scarlet Lili Thomas is a Naarm-based early-career writer, curator and artist. She publishes art and culture writing through LUMINOSA Arts Scene on Instagram and her website.

For Chris Linder, going to Antarctica “was like going to the moon”. When he first visited in 2007 to photograph Adélie penguins on Ross Island, he was struck by the landscape’s scale and the opportunity to witness an entire ecosystem unfolding before his lens. Unlike many other bird species, penguins make their lives visible. They build nests on the ground, raise their chicks in colonies and interact constantly in ways that are easier to observe. “When you’re in their colonies,” Linder says, “you can see their whole life story happening in front of you.”

Since then, penguins have remained a recurring subject in the American photographer’s work, eventually leading him to the remote Falkland Islands, in the South Atlantic Ocean. A location scouting expedition turned into an encounter with southern rockhopper penguins – one of the smallest penguin species and, before too long, Linder’s favourite. “They’re very fearless birds,” he says. “They choose the most inaccessible and difficult nest sites I’ve ever seen.”

Distinct from other penguins that can simply walk from the beach to their nests, rockhoppers face a far more dramatic journey. Linder has watched them battle waves and scale cliffs up to 40 metres high, all to return to their chicks. “These animals live on the edge of what’s possible in the ecosystem,” he says. “They only make this perilous journey for the sake of their babies.”

Capturing that resilience became central to Linder’s photographs. Many of the images show penguins emerging from the sea – moments that happen in a fraction of a second. “I wanted to show them in their athletic majesty,” he says. “The moment they come out of the water is the most difficult part of their transition from a sea animal to a land animal.”

To capture these moments, Linder spent hours perched on rocks in harsh conditions, waiting for the right combination of weather, light and movement. Over two weeks of photographing, he returned with around 60,000 images. “It’s a really chaotic environment,” he says. “You’ve got spray everywhere, birds coming through, and you’re trying to make sure you’re not swept off the rock.”

Part of what makes Linder’s photographs so captivating is the personality these penguins reveal. Their upright posture and curious movements can make them appear almost human, but Linder believes that comes from careful observation rather than projection. “The more you watch any kind of wildlife, the more you can observe their individual behaviours,” he says. Rockhoppers, for example, are particularly curious. He recalls moments where they would walk between his legs or even peck at his camera tripod while he was working.

As a conservation photographer, Linder uses images as a way to make science accessible – to encourage the public to engage with research and the challenges facing species as rare as the rockhopper penguins. “Photographs are a gateway to learning about things,” he says. “They make people want to ask questions and learn more about what’s happening in that picture.”

Sun's out, tums out: a pair of rockhopper penguins catching some twilight rays, New Island, Falkland Islands

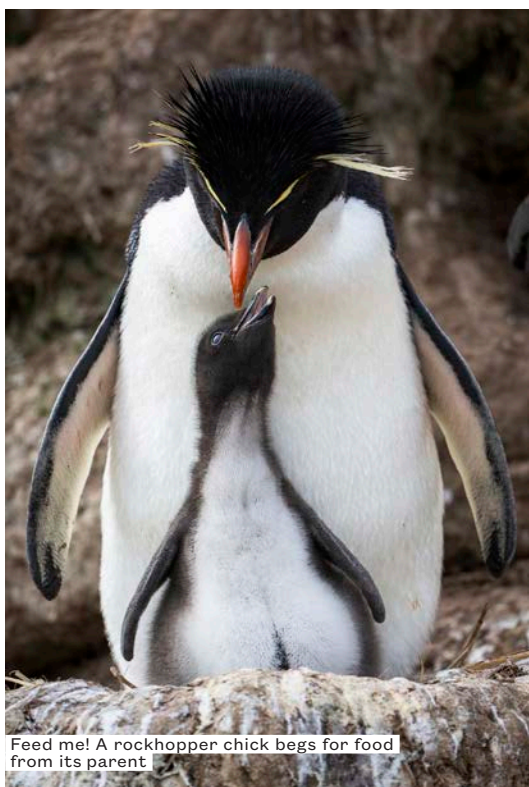
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Dr Petra Quillfeldt and Dr Juan Masello check a rockhopper penguin's weight on New Island



Open wide: a rockhopper displays its spiny papillae, which help it to swallow slippery prey



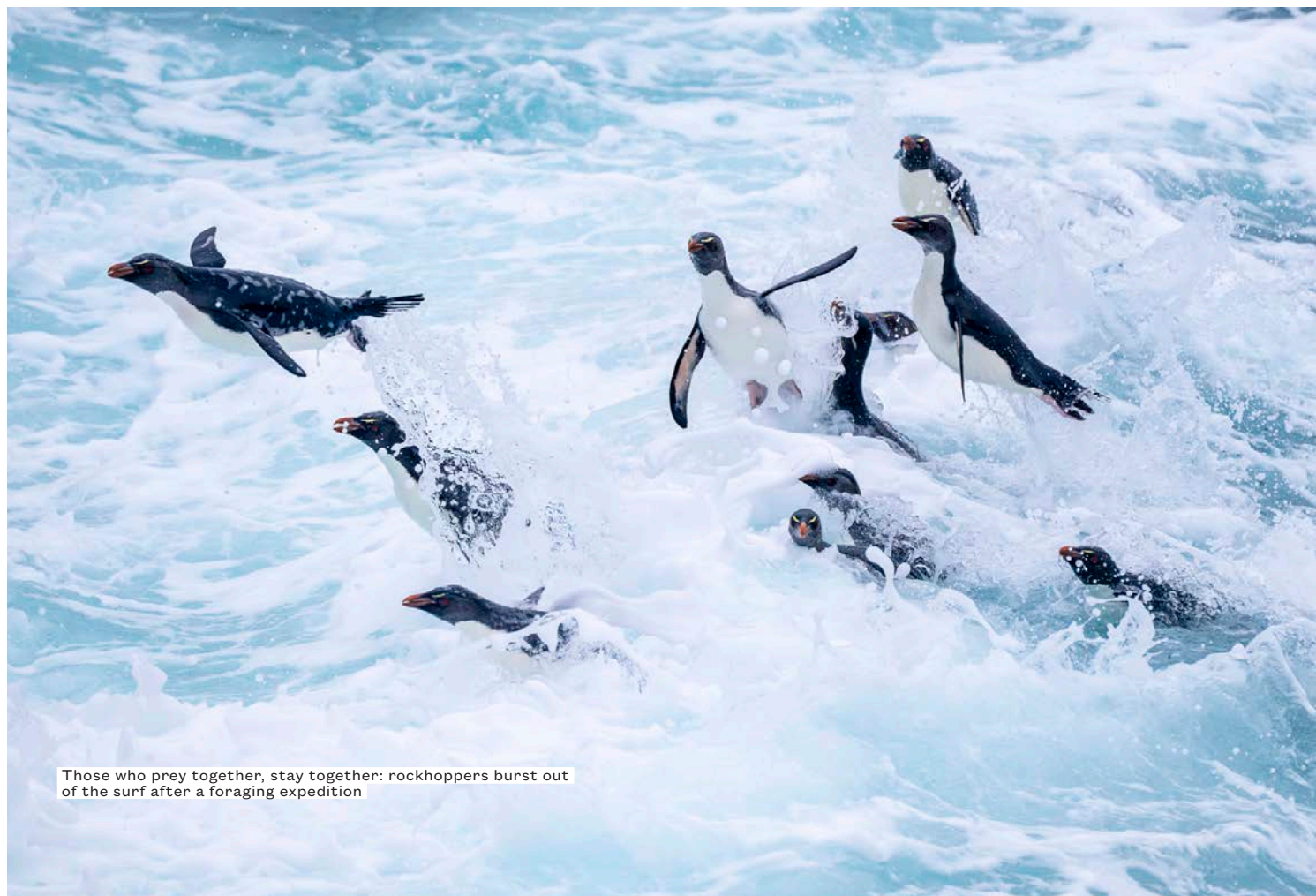
Feed me! A rockhopper chick begs for food from its parent



As groups of penguins return from foraging as Dr Quillfeldt and Dr Masello collect faecal samples



Happy feet: penguins socialise near their colony at Murrell Farm, Falkland Islands



Those who prey together, stay together: rockhoppers burst out of the surf after a foraging expedition