

# Penguin sex? It's rather chilly

Biologists dash that familial love-story aura of the "March" movie. They're birds, after all.

**T**he stars of *March of the Penguins* seem to endure the worst of all worlds: almost nonexistent sex lives that nonetheless lead them to parenthood, total self-sacrifice, and endless suffering.

Conservatives are loving it.

"It demonstrated qualities of sacrifice and devotion and the importance of child rearing and bringing the next generation into the world," says Michael Medved, who hosts a conservative radio talk show in Seattle. He said this was

the first movie many of his listeners had seen since *The Passion of the Christ*.

Other conservatives such as National Review editor Rich Lowry have publicly extolled the film and set up the penguins as paragons of family values.

Yet several biologists confirmed what I suspected 15 minutes into it. *March of the Penguins* is a fairy tale.

In case you haven't seen this second-highest-grossing documentary of all time — a French-made National Geographic production, narrated in its American version by Morgan Freeman — I'll summarize. Scores of emperor penguins leap from the sea and march for miles to some frigid inland wasteland

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JERÔME MAISON

"**March of the Penguins**" goes very light on the science.

# Penguins do it — but not all that romantically

## PENGUINS from C1

where the temperature drops to 80 below zero. They pick mates, nuzzle, and lay eggs. The dads dutifully incubate the eggs for weeks, fasting and suffering through blizzards, the moms suffer as they search for food, the parents both suffer and sacrifice as they feed their hatchlings, and some mother penguins lose their young and wail and cry. They live for nothing but their children. It's called a love story.

But it's not minus 80 out there. It's minus 40 at the worst, says Gerald Kooyman, a penguin expert from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, Calif. "Why would they exaggerate that?" asks Kooyman, who has made more than a dozen trips to Antarctica.

Kooyman said these cold-adapted penguins probably aren't suffering, despite what viewers are told. From beginning to end the scriptwriters project human feelings onto the penguins. It's not exactly scientific, but then the film probably couldn't have achieved its blockbuster status without going light on the science and heavy on the melodrama.

Viewers are told a pair of young penguins who fumble and lose their egg have suffered an intolerable loss. But how do we know their squeaks aren't just penguin for something like "Oops. Oh well. Hey, let's get something to eat."

And that tearful scene when a "mother" is shown wailing over her frozen chick? Kooyman suspects it was staged.

While some conservative commentators praised the penguins for being monogamous, it turns out emperor penguins probably pick a new mate every year. Not that there was much actual mating in the film; mostly the penguins nuzzled. If you watched carefully, though, you could see one lying on its tummy while another stood behind it — that was penguin sex.

It would be jumping to conclusions to assume the female was the prone one.

In fact, scientists are mystified as to how the penguins themselves figure out which sex they are, says John Rowden, a curator at the Central Park Zoo.

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To humans they're identical, even if you look between their penguin legs, where they all sport an opening called a cloaca. When opposite-sex penguins rub their nether regions together, the male squirts semen from his cloaca into hers.

In zoos, genetic tests can distinguish the sexes. That's how curators at Central Park discovered that some of their penguins are gay — or at least having gay sex. "We currently have a number of same-sex pairs," Rowden says. Other birds in the wild sometimes form same-sex pairs. Given the situation with penguins it's impossible to tell whether any of the birds in the film were boy-boy or girl-girl couples that stole or adopted eggs.

Not that conservatives are the only ones reading things into penguin sexuality. Many New Yorkers latched onto one particularly devoted gay penguin couple, Roy and Silo, who live at Central Park Zoo.

But they were not as gay or as devoted as they appeared. After a six-year relationship they went their separate ways, and Silo now has a girlfriend.

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