

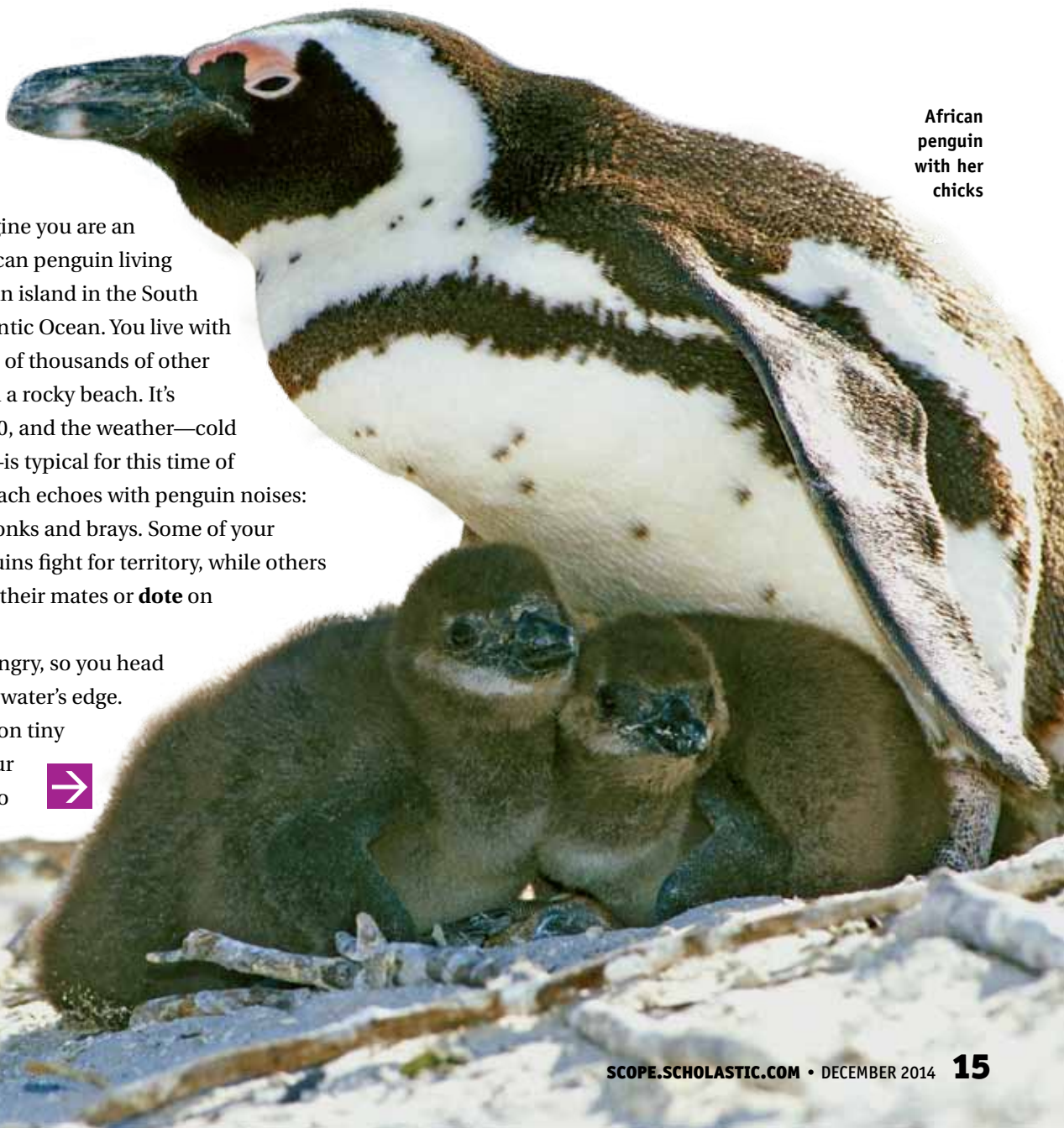
# The Amazing Penguin Rescue

A devastating oil spill, 40,000 penguins, and the humans who saved their lives **BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

African  
penguin  
with her  
chicks

**I**magine you are an African penguin living on an island in the South Atlantic Ocean. You live with tens of thousands of other penguins on a rocky beach. It's June 23, 2000, and the weather—cold and windy—is typical for this time of year. The beach echoes with penguin noises: barks and honks and brays. Some of your fellow penguins fight for territory, while others cuddle with their mates or **dote** on their chicks.

You're hungry, so you head down to the water's edge. You waddle on tiny feet, and your wings are too



stubby for flying—but in the water, you can swim faster and dive deeper than any bird on Earth. As you plunge into the sea, your wings become powerful propellers. You shoot through the water at 12 miles an hour, a black-and-white blur, snatching sardines from the surface, swallowing them whole, catching more. Your tightly packed feathers protect you from the freezing water. You remain in the sea for hours, until your belly is full, before heading back to shore.

That's when something goes wrong.

As you come to the surface for air, the water feels unfamiliar. It is too thick; it burns your eyes. You try to swim away, but suddenly your wings have become too heavy to lift. Your body wobbles and rolls. You feel bitterly cold.

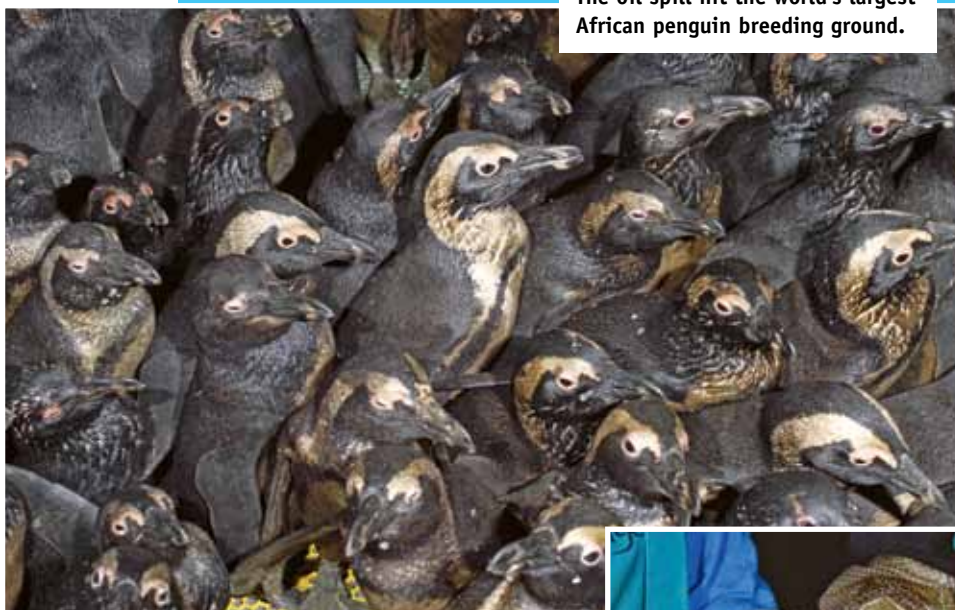
You shiver and gasp for breath.

What you do not know is that a few hours ago, a cargo ship called the *Treasure* suffered serious damage to its hull in the rough winter seas. It split apart, and as it sank, about 1,300 tons of toxic oil gushed into the ocean. Now that oil surrounds your breeding ground—the largest African penguin breeding ground in the world. You and thousands of other penguins have been trapped in the massive oil slick and are soaked with poisonous oil.

The impact of oil on a penguin (or any bird) is immediate and devastating. You are shivering because the oil has caused your feathers to clump and separate, allowing the freezing water to **lash** at your sensitive skin. Your eyes hurt because the oil has burned them.



The oil spill hit the world's largest African penguin breeding ground.



**ABOVE:** Oil-covered penguins **BELOW:** A penguin is cleaned.



Your wings are heavy because they are coated with oil and waterlogged.

But your instinct for survival is strong, and somehow you struggle back to shore, fighting against the current. The journey, usually effortless, is an agonizing ordeal. You manage to stagger onto the beach and back to your nest, where you lick and peck at your feathers,



desperate to clean them. Finally, you give up. There is nothing to do but stand there, terrified, dazed, silent.

## Strange Creatures

Then the beach is invaded by enormous creatures.

They are humans, but you don't know that. You have never seen a human before. These men and women understand what you don't: that this oil spill is a catastrophe for you and your species. Some of these people have dedicated their lives to helping birds like you, birds imperiled by oil spills and other human-made disasters. They have participated in bird rescues around the world. All they care about is saving your life.

But how could you know this?

As these humans swarm the beach, you are overcome with panic. When a man catches you, you viciously fight him off with your powerful jaws and razor-sharp beak. You bite his arm, ripping his skin through the fabric of his thick coat. He doesn't let go, so you strike again, biting his leg and inflicting a wound that will leave a scar for the rest of his life. But he cares more about you than himself.

All across the beach, dozens of people are capturing penguins, **enduring** excruciating bites and wing slaps as they load terrified birds into crates. It is painful, exhausting work, and the sight of all of these scared and injured penguins is heartbreaking to the humans. Some—grown men and women—fight back tears.

But they don't give up. Tens of thousands of penguins are in danger. And these people intend to save every single one.

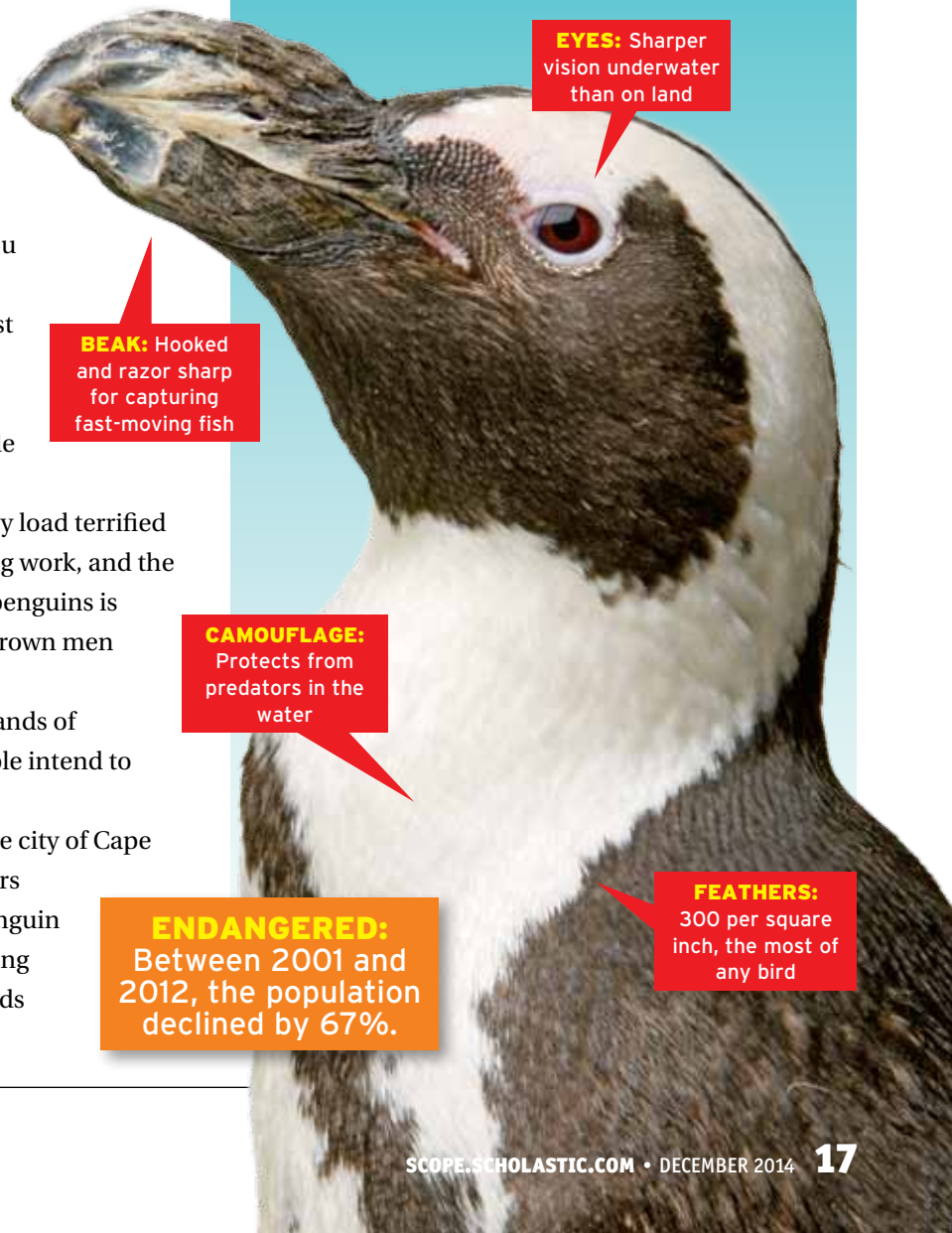
Ten miles from the island, outside the city of Cape Town, a team of scientists and volunteers has transformed a warehouse into a penguin rescue center. They work with astonishing speed. The warehouse contains hundreds of round enclosures, each large enough

to accommodate 100 penguins. Other areas of the warehouse have been designated for washing penguins. One room is filled with 10 tons of frozen fish, the amount needed daily to feed the penguins. Acquiring this enormous quantity of fish every day will be among the workers' great challenges.

Actually, everything is a challenge. Simply getting one penguin to eat is a **monumental** task. In the wild, penguins hunt for sardines, gobbling them up while the fish are still alive and wriggling. These penguins won't accept dead fish from human



## AFRICAN PENGUIN FACTS



**EYES:** Sharper vision underwater than on land

**BEAK:** Hooked and razor sharp for capturing fast-moving fish

**CAMOUFLAGE:** Protects from predators in the water

**ENDANGERED:** Between 2001 and 2012, the population declined by 67%.

**FEATHERS:** 300 per square inch, the most of any bird

hands, so they must be force-fed. To force-feed a penguin, a worker must restrain it, pry its beak open, and shove fish down its throat. Feeding one penguin can take an hour. Feeding all the penguins takes an army of workers 15 hours.

And then there is the smell. The combined scent of penguin droppings, dead sardines, and human sweat **permeates** the facility—a stench so revolting that many people vomit when they first arrive.

As news of the rescue effort spreads, thousands of volunteers flock to the warehouse, eager to help. They are a diverse group, including wealthy women from fancy neighborhoods and poor teenagers from the streets of Cape Town. Some volunteers have experience rescuing wildlife; others have never owned a pet. All have one thing in common: a mission to save as many penguins as possible.

## Terror and Healing

For you, one of thousands of oil-soaked penguins, every hour brings new terrors—the force feedings, the ointment applied to your eyes, the tube stuck down your throat to pump liquid charcoal into your stomach.

But as time passes, you begin to feel better. The ointment heals your eyes, and the liquid charcoal helps your body rid itself of the oil you swallowed. You feel stronger. The humans win your trust and you accept fish from their hands. There is one woman who comes every day. You recognize her voice and greet her with a bark.

After many weeks, it is, at last, your turn to be cleaned. You are taken to a room and placed into a plastic tub. A woman pours vegetable oil over you to loosen the caked-on oil. She washes you with mild soap and warm water, her gentle hands scrubbing your body

Penguins in their holding pool, about to be fed



inch by inch. She carefully cleans your eyes and ears with a toothbrush. You do not bite her. The next day, after your feathers are clean and dry, this woman picks you up and holds you close to her chest. You do not try to get away.

## Heading for Home

One day, after several weeks have gone by, you are put into a box. You feel yourself being moved. When the box is opened, you are on an unfamiliar beach. You stand there until your instinct takes over; then you run to the water and plunge in. Soon you are on the shores of a rocky island.

Your island.

While you were gone, humans cleaned up the oil that had covered the beach. The ocean carried the rest away.

Before long, thousands of other penguins arrive on the island. The air is filled once again with honks and barks. You have no idea that you have been part of the greatest animal rescue in history. Nearly 40,000 penguins were saved. In the coming weeks, researchers will be **elated** to observe that many of the rescued birds are paired up with mates and sitting on eggs.

You don't think about any of this because you are a penguin. All you know is that your world is finally as it should be. ●

# The Seabird Chronicle

## SAVING PENGUINS, ONE SWEATER AT A TIME

October 1, 2014

It was September 1998, and the rescue workers at Phillip Island Nature Park in Australia had a big problem: An oil spill near the island was threatening the little penguins that lived there. (Little penguins are a species of penguin, so named because they are only 10 to 12 inches tall.) The workers were scrambling to save the oil-slicked birds, but the penguins were in bad shape. They couldn't keep warm. To make matters worse, they were trying to **preen** their feathers to get rid of the oil. In the process, they were swallowing the toxic oil, which would slowly kill them. If the workers didn't act quickly, the little penguins were not going to survive.

Then the workers had an unusual idea: sweaters.

Teeny-tiny penguin sweaters. But would this crazy idea work?

### Especially Vulnerable

Oil spills in the ocean are among the most devastating of environmental disasters. When a large quantity of oil leaks into the sea, it can **decimate** fragile ecosystems and injure or kill marine life. Oil clogs the blowholes of dolphins

and whales, interfering with their ability to breathe. It coats the fur of otters and seals, making it impossible for them to warm up or cool off. Oil can also **contaminate** the food supply. Sea mammals, for example, become gravely ill after eating an oil-coated fish or plant.

Of all the creatures that make their home in the ocean, seabirds like penguins are especially **vulnerable** in an oil spill. Oil strips feathers of the natural oils that keep birds warm. This leads to hypothermia, a fatal condition. Plus, ingesting even a small amount of oil can be deadly to seabirds.

### Sweater Success

Volunteers got busy with their knitting needles, and within days the first penguins at Phillip Island were outfitted in their new wool

sweaters. Putting the sweaters on the penguins was tricky; at first the birds were determined to tear them off with their beaks. But amazingly, the sweaters did the trick, warming the penguins and keeping them from preening. This bought workers time to carefully clean the oil from each bird. Over time, the birds grew strong and healthy. Eventually, the penguins were well enough to return to the wild.

News of the sweaters' success spread. Tiny sweater patterns were posted online so that penguin-loving knitters all over the world could help with rescue efforts. Soon, sweater donations were pouring in.

### Enough Sweaters for Now

Over the past 15 years, workers on Phillip Island have put the sweater donations to good use, helping save more than 1,000 little penguins. (Sadly, oil spills are not uncommon near the island; the area is crowded with tankers transporting oil.)

Today, the nature park has more sweaters than it needs. In fact, a message on its website kindly asks volunteers to refrain from sending sweaters for now. **Surplus** sweaters have been donated to other wildlife conservation groups, or sold in the gift shop, which raises money for the park.

—Kristin Lewis



### WRITING CONTEST

Sometimes the problems of the world can seem hopeless and overwhelming. How did the people in the two articles you just read solve seemingly overwhelming problems? How do these stories bring hope to readers? Answer both questions in a well-supported essay. Send it to **PENGUIN CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* by Phillip Hoose.

GET THIS  
ACTIVITY  
ONLINE

