



The leopard seal made repeated approaches

The perfect predator?



Tony Baskeyfield had a thrilling encounter with a three-metre-plus leopard seal on his last visit to Antarctica - and it was his special privilege to witness a penguin kill

Photographs by **TONY BASKEYFIELD**

Leopard seals rank alongside killer whales as Antarctica's top predator. Named after their spotted coats and fearsome jaws, leopard seals have large, reptilian heads and streamlined bodies. They propel themselves using powerful fore-flippers, reaching speeds of 25mph. Females grow larger than males, weighing up to 450kg and measuring over four metres long. They have large canines for bigger prey and their cheek teeth are serrated, which enables them to strain krill from the water. They also eat fish, penguins and other seals. They have punctured inflatable boats and even followed people onto the ice. But like all predators, they are

usually judged by the worst stories. Leopard seals are inquisitive and solitary.

We had just completed an exciting iceberg dive and were comparing notes on the very large leopard seal that we had all just encountered. She had swam up to each of us and established her dominance in the water with a display of swimming agility followed by gaping a very impressive set of teeth right in our faces.

No one is really sure what to expect in a leopard

seal encounter, and the sad story of the death of a British marine biologist in Antarctica (thought to be the first human fatality caused by a leopard seal) was in the back of our minds. It was said this was a completely unprecedented event and no one knows why she was attacked.

We all agreed that this was a very large three-metre-plus female that had put each of us in our place on the dive. We have video footage that showed her circling around me. With my fins

“ She'd take the penguin in her mouth, raise it out of the water and swing it once or twice ”



extended I'm over two-metres long and she was easily half as big as me again. The first I saw of her was when she appeared upside down, curved around me backwards, with mouth wide open and teeth bared. It could have been almost comical, but with a head the size of a lion, I just kept on looking at all those teeth! I was at first unsure what she was going to do next. So, I gently swam backward and away from her gape, but with my finger on the motordrive button of my camera. She then swam round me once again and disappeared into the greeny blue icy water of Antarctica. She reappeared twice more during the dive.

On the boat we all concurred, although she gaped at all of us there was no other threatening behaviour. She had swum up to each of the divers and put us in our place, which was at the bottom of the pecking order in the water around the iceberg. While we were excitedly comparing our experiences in the inflatable after the dive, we saw a penguin porpoising for its life towards us at high speed. Kelvin Murray, our chief diver (professional diver, naturalist, polar explorer and BAS diver - www.silvertipworld.com) said he thought it was being chased. The penguin passed us so closely it nearly jumped right into the boat, then dived underwater closely followed by the leopard seal we'd seen earlier. A moment later the chase was still on, with the penguin going back in the opposite direction and the shadow in the water getting closer. For the third time the chase continued round and past our boat, this time on the port side with the silhouette of the enormous leopard seal right on its tail. The penguin jumped desperately and then dived and Kelvin said: "She's caught it, and she'll drown it now". A minute later, the leopard seal appeared on the surface with the penguin in her mouth.

"You can go in if you like," Kelvin suggested. We all looked at each other, eyes wide open in the



The leopard seal shredded the penguin



The seal ignored the divers as it fed



The divers head off on another chilly adventure

'okay, you go first' look to see who'd go first. Then, there was a frenzy of activity with masks, snorkels and cameras as we unanimously readied ourselves while the boat was repositioned on the other side of the iceberg closer to the seal.

One by one we slipped into the water and gently paddled up to the seal and penguin. I could not believe what was happening. First of all it was unlikely she would catch the super-agile penguin in the first place; then, when she'd caught it, I never dreamt we would be getting in the water to watch her eat it! Then I thought she would just swim away or be aggressive towards us. But no, she completely ignored us and concentrated on feeding. I was able to get inches from her to take sequence after sequence of over 700 motordrive images. At one point she had let go of the now-dead penguin and I was almost





The Antarctic scenery is truly stunning



Self-portrait of Tony in the water

“ We all looked at each other, eyes wide open in the ‘okay, you go first’ look to see who’d go first ”

between her and her catch. She could have chosen the penguin or me to bite into. Then, one of the other divers bumped and shoved me right into her. ‘This is it’, I thought, but she was only interested in the penguin and started to thrash it around to skin it. It took several attempts to remove the skin and feathers. She’d take the penguin in her mouth, raise it out of the water and swing it once or twice. Once the bare flesh was exposed she’d bite off chunks of meat. After the longest ten minutes in my life, a voice came from the boat: “Probably time to get out now!” We reluctantly agreed and left her to finish off her kill uninterrupted.

The following day we were treated to another display by a not-so-big playful female leopard seal of around two metres. She was just showing off, swimming upside down, doing loop-the-loop and getting really close for the complete 30-minute dive. We knelt on the seabed at 10m and watched the acrobatic display. Finally there was a large dollop that she deposited in the water above us

that opened up and was full of penguin feathers. Yes, you guessed it... Leopard seal poo on my head! At first I couldn’t work out what the stuff was falling all around us until I noticed bits of undigested feathers separating out of the big bits. From my experiences, leopard seals don’t seem to be the aggressive, wild, savage killers they have been made out to be, but curious and maybe a little misunderstood. ■

Tour operators

- Antarctica Bound www.antarcticabound.com
- Aqua-Firma www.aqua-firma.co.uk
- Waterproof Expeditions www.waterproof-expeditions.com

Fact file

- Location:** Jougla Point, Antarctica
- Depth:** 18m
- Time:** 40 minutes
- Water temperature:** Plus 1 to minus 1 degrees C
- Distance:** 8,500 miles from England