

# Hello There, Mate

by Laura King

*On our cruise to Antarctica, Peter Harrison, our resident world-class ornithologist, offered frequent lectures and commentaries about Antarctic sea birds. I never missed any of these opportunities, and from what I could see, I was not alone, as tourists claimed every seat on the ship's floating theater when he talked. Peter is an old bloke, he'd been to Antarctica hundreds of times, and he was a natural and engaging storyteller. One thing that everyone wanted to know about was mating behavior.*

**So** many stories to tell. Each species is a little like others, yet all have peculiarities as well. Male king penguins strut around, stand up tall and straighten their spines when they are trying to capture the attention of a female. I observed this behavior firsthand, and have pictures which capture their hopeful charm.

How do we find mates? And what makes us so attracted? I remember seeing my husband, Ben, for the very first time on our blind date, when I was 23. The first thing I noticed? His height. Then his shoulders, wide and broad. Was he standing up straight to impress me? Perhaps. It caught my attention.

It seems so random, how members of a species pair up. So instinctual, it seems imbedded deeply within the animal. It drew me to think about our own rituals and practices as human beings, and they struck me as familiar.

Gray-headed albatrosses, that we saw on South Georgia Island, engage in an elaborate courtship dance. They bob up and down, often shaking their heads in-between movements, stretching toward the sky between others. They synchronize their moves so that they share the same rhythm. They even touch their beaks together, as if smelling one another



***Ben and me on our visit to Sacramento just after our 28th anniversary.***

through their very powerful olfactory sensors.

On one of our early dates, Ben and I danced with each other. Neither one of us is a very good or coordinated dancer. However, we developed our own way to move. Ben is physically strong, and he loved to twirl me around. He pulled me toward him, then pushed me away, in a synchronistic dance. At the end of every song, he dipped me low, bearing the weight of my arched back in his arm. When he held me close in a slow dance, I took in his scent, and I loved the way he smelled—it was masculine and clean, yet sweet like an orange. We still love to dance today, thirty years later, and I still love the way he smells.

A mating dance might also help the birds ascertain the physical coordination and vitality of a potential partner, something that might select for strength and fitness. On our second date, Ben and I went to the

park and threw a football back and forth. I knew how to throw perfect spirals because I had previously dated a football player. Later, Ben told me that when he saw me throw a football, he knew he had to marry me because he imagined that our children would be tall and athletic. Indeed, we had two tall sons, and though they are strong and fit, neither one of them showed any interest in sports.

Getting back to birds...the Adélie penguin, the ones we saw on the Antarctic continent, engage in what is known as a Loud Mutual Display when courting. They stretch their necks upward and make a song. It is akin to hearing the trumpet practice of a seventh grade band. Consequently, the beaches of their colonies are noisy and cacophonous.

Ben can't sing. I never thought I'd marry someone that was tone deaf because music had always been a huge part of my life. I was in musicals and choirs, and grew up singing in my family. I have to confess, I didn't like that about Ben, and found it unattractive. I committed myself to change it. I sang a lot around him, and still do. Though he still can't sing very well, he's a little better than he used to be, and I'm tickled when I hear him try. If we were Adélies, maybe we never would have hooked up. But we did, and maybe my genes were stronger: all three of our children love music.

On our first day in the Scotia Sea, we stopped on a little Antarctic island and observed rock hopper

penguins. They are small and curious, and they became my favorite penguin of all those we encountered on our trip. I stared at a pair through my camera lens and studied them while I took pictures. They rubbed their beaks down the lengths of their heads, and around their necks. It was intimate and delightful, and I can describe it as hugging and kissing.

Stephen King, in his book, *On Writing*, playfully discusses dialogue. It's sexy. If it weren't, he argues, why would so many people, after a night of conversation, end up in bed? I think that Ben and I knew we were attracted to each other immediately. Was it love at



## Rock Hopper Penguins

first sight? It may have been. So we didn't waste time. On our first date, we shared conversation that lasted well into the night. We shared our first kiss and more. It was intimate and delightful.

Considering the millions of people on earth, and the thousands of people that surround us, the pro-



## The Adélie Penguin

cess of finding a life partner seems so unlikely. Yet those spontaneous, and even haphazard twists of fate end up determining the future. Perhaps it is not as chaotic as it seems. There are calls, behaviors, dances, and physical traits that capture our awareness.

The king penguin, at sexual maturity, develops bright yellow ocular eye patches on each side of its head. The birds find it alluring.

"I like your blueberry eyes," I remember saying.

"And yours are green, like emeralds," he said to me. A few months later, he proposed to me with an emerald ring. I said yes, and kissed him. ♦



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Published by OLLIMemoirs, the publication of memoirists in writers' workshops given by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. All rights reserved by the author. Contact: info@ollimemoirs.org. May, 2019.