



ANTARCTICA

Terrestrial life on the desert continent

by Paul Broady

For most people, the mention of Antarctica conjures up images of huge expanses of ice and of penguins, seals and other life which abounds in the Southern Ocean. However, there is another quite different side to the region, that of the ice-free land and the animal and plant life that exists there.

During the summer, penguins and seals leave the sea for the rocky ice-free areas around the coast in order to breed and moult. Flying birds can travel a considerable distance inland to mountain ranges to rear their young on windblown rock ledges. However, all these animals depend on the oceans for their food and spend most of their lives at sea. They are all part of what is termed the "marine ecosystem".

In contrast, the "terrestrial ecosystem" contains those plants and animals which never leave the land. This life is much less abundant than that found in the oceans because it is existing in a desert. The largest animal is only a few millimetres long and the largest plant is a grass which grows as a

few scattered clumps covering areas of only a few square metres in some of the most hospitable regions of an inhospitable continent. What a difference from the teeming life in the Southern Ocean!

The "terrestrial life" exists on a mere 2.4 percent of the continent. This is the area which is free from a permanent cover of ice and snow. The total area is slightly greater than that of New Zealand. Most of this ice-free land is found around the coast, the vast majority of the centre of the continent being covered by a massive ice-cap up to four kms thick.

Despite its stark, desert-like nature the landscape in these ice-free areas is often magnificent. There are high rugged mountains and wide sweeping valleys. In some regions the valleys contain sparkling, sapphire-blue lakes or the lake waters might be hidden below a permanent cover of floating ice. Glaciers tumble down from the mountains and terminate abruptly with high, vertical ice-cliffs which are sculptured by wind, sun and meltwater.

