

LIFE IN A FROZEN WORLD

Wildlife of Antarctica

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Ice.

As far as the eye can see, blanketing
the continent on the bottom of the world.

Antarctica.


The coldest, windiest, driest place on Earth.





Yet in this extreme environment, life thrives.

Over millions of years, many living things—from microscopic bacteria to the blue whale, the largest animal that has ever lived—have evolved to survive on the ice, in the ice, and under the ice. Shaped by layers of snow and ice older than the human species, this frozen world is their home.



Green plants are the base of the food chains in most ecosystems, even in the communities that flourish in this extreme environment.

No trees grow on Antarctica, but a forest of giant algae thrives under the sea. These seaweeds have adapted to grow in extremely cold water and to photosynthesize, or use sunlight to make food. They do this even in the low light of Antarctica's dark winter (June through August) when the sun is not visible.

Growing on the underside of the ice is an upside-down pasture of tiny green plants, another type of algae called phytoplankton. Sea ice algae living underneath thick ice have adapted to the extremely low light conditions. They are very efficient in their use of available light to photosynthesize and reproduce rapidly.

During Antarctica's winter, when the ocean around the continent freezes, these algae are the main food of krill, shrimplike creatures about the size of an adult person's thumb.