

March of the Penguins

Learning South of the Equator



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When wandering the Lower School halls towards the end of winter, you may see life-size penguins decorating the walls and hear the refrain “there are no penguins north of the equator” drifting out from a classroom.

Each year the first grade students spend several months learning about penguins. The unit begins with Black-and-White Day, where the students are invited to dress up in black and white to celebrate the beginning of this classroom unit. This first grade tradition has become something that kindergartners look forward to and second graders reminisce about.

Although dress up days are fun and memorable, there is also a lot of learning that takes place. Each student is assigned a species of penguin, and the whole unit is spent studying their species. Their main projects include writing a research report on their penguin, writing and illustrating a fictional story about the birds, and—the most anticipated project of the unit—creating their life-size penguin pillow.

While the curriculum is focused on learning about flightless birds and their habitats, it covers more than just science. First grade teacher Julianne Clark integrates other subjects into the student’s exploration of penguins. “They’re getting to apply skills that they are learning or have learned,” Clark explains. “They need to be able to read, they need to be able to write comfortably, and we go over a lot of math concepts like adding and learning units of measurement. Here they actually get to apply it, and application is a higher order thinking skill.”

The unit culminates with a “March of the

Penguins,” in which the first graders march onto the stage at a Lower School assembly with their bird-shaped pillows and perform the original song, “There Are No Penguins North of the Equator.” Kathy Johnson, Head of the Lower School, says, “Past students remember their chosen penguin well and immediately bond to the group of students that stand up during Friday Assembly when their penguin name is called and join in singing the Penguin Song.”

After their lively performance, the first graders head back to their classroom for a Penguin Party with family and friends. At this anticipated event, the students get to share all their hard work by showing off their penguins and reading their stories, reports, and poems to their families. There are also penguin-themed snacks like black-and-white Oreo cookies and Goldfish crackers to set the tone.

Once the festivities have died down, the penguin pillows are hung up around the Lower School for students and staff to admire. Later, the first graders take them home as a memento of all they learned about their favorite flightless fowls.

— Paige Carlson, Whitworth '15,
SGS Communications Intern

First grade focuses on favorite flightless fowls



Above: First graders show off their penguin pillows. Opposite page: Bright yellow feathers on a Rock Hopper penguin.