Chinstraps rule the roost in these loud, crowded colonies. 

A sprawling city bustles with the loud racket of morning rush hour. Crowds of commuters hurry past each other, skirting by construction sites. Suddenly one traveler bumps into another and sets off a shouting match. Others in the vicinity join in. Adding to the loud squabble are honking and screeching noises from down the road, where there’s yet another traffic jam. Eventually the gridlock eases and the commuters continue, ready to get on with their day.

This may seem like a typical morning in a big metropolis like New York City. But the scene is set in Antarctica, and these commuters are really chinstrap penguins on their way to their foraging grounds. Chinstraps are flightless, two-foot-tall birds that live in and around Antarctica and nest in crowded communities called colonies. Many chinstrap colonies are home to hundreds of thousands of individuals and have a lot in common with man-made urban centers. The seabirds that inhabit them are the ultimate city slickers.

BIRD BUILDERS

Like human cities, chinstrap colonies are extremely noisy. Every November, near the start of summer in Antarctica, members of different colonies arrive at their breeding grounds on Antarctica’s shores. Here the chinstrap penguins squawk practically nonstop.

Chinstrap penguins are named for facial markings that resemble helmet chinstraps.

To attract a mate, male chinstraps stretch out their wings, throw back their heads, and bray.

These penguins eat snow to cool down when they feel too warm.

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Where chinstrap penguins live
They create enough noise to rival the shouts, blaring horns, and other hubbub of a real metropolis. "They're incredibly loud," biologist Ron Naveen says. "In fact I use earplugs when I observe them."

Once the animals in a colony settle on the breeding grounds, they begin an activity you see in a lot of urban areas: construction work. Mated pairs use pebbles to build nests that are up to 20 inches wide. Similar to houses in many human neighborhoods, the nests are arranged side by side. The animals live in close quarters for safety. An isolated nest would be a prime target for a skua, a predatory bird that swoops from the sky to snatch chinstrap eggs and chicks. "But together the animals can team up and ward off enemies," pengiun researcher Heather Lynch says.

Chinstraps don't need to only look out for predators though. They must also be alert for burglars within the colony. That's because the penguins regularly try to steal stones from one another's nests. The animals fend off would-be robbers by swatting them with their wings. Why do the chinstraps do this? It's a real metropolis. "They're incredibly loud," Naveen says. "It's like community day-care centers." The groups—which are sort of like community day-care centers—huddle together for warmth and protection. Eventually the chicks begin to roam the colony together. After they've shed their gray, downy coats and grown black-and-white feathers at about eight weeks of age, the young chinstraps strike out on their own. They head to the sea where they must learn how to catch food to survive.

Chinstraps are excellent swimmers. "The birds are torpedo-shaped," Naveen says. "Their sleek form allows them to zip through the water at 20 miles an hour!"

The speedy chinstraps catch enough krill to fill their bellies. Then they emerge from the water and get back on the penguin expressway toward home. Back at their nests, the returning parent is greeted by hungry offspring. With regular meals, the youngest members of the penguin city begin to grow.

When a parent isn't babysitting, it heads off to work. The parent's job? Catching fish for the family. To commute from their homes to the ocean, the chinstraps in a community always waddle along the same routes. These "roads" have been used by colony members for so long that they've become well-worn footpaths. Like city streets, the paths bustle with individuals. Sometimes the flow of commuters comes to a halt, resulting in a chorus of screeches. Nobody enjoys traffic! After traveling a mile or more from their nesting site, the penguins finally reach the colony's "food district" at the edge of the sea. From here they get to work, diving into the water in search of shrimp-like krill.

With regular meals, the youngest members of the penguin city begin to grow.

In late January, about a month after chinstrap penguin chicks hatch, offspring are left in groups so both moms and dads can search for food. The groups—which are sort of like community day-care centers—huddle together for warmth and protection. Eventually the chicks begin to roam the colony together. After they've shed their gray, downy coats and grown black-and-white feathers at about eight weeks of age, the young chinstraps strike out on their own. They head to the sea where they must learn how to catch food to survive.

In late March (the start of fall) penguin cities enter their off-season. During this time, colonies disperse. Members spend the next several months at sea. Next November the birds will return to re-create their metropolis. New residents will hatch, and parents will once again prepare their chicks for life in the big city.