

SNOW

A short history of felines in Antarctica.

Words by Jonathan Feakins.

In October 1945, the short-lived Antarctic publication known as the *Hope Bay Howler* ran an impassioned broadside:



In the unlikely event of our advice being sought by those proposing to settle in the Antarctic, we can only say, 'Do not keep a cat.'

Not only does this totally useless animal fall under suspicion of fouling our drinking water, playing havoc with stores, specimens and anything else handy, but it will also divide your household into pro- and anti-cat factions.

Months beforehand—in the midst of a secret British operation to establish Antarctic bases during World War II—a young kitten found himself deposited on the Palmer Archipelago. Records for Tubby remain scarce, but he apparently once ruined an interbase radio chess contest by knocking over the board. This incident, perhaps, helped inspire the *Howler's* fierce editorial.



After the war, the same base, Port Lockroy, received their latest furry explorer: Tiddles, fresh from the relatively accessible Falkland Islands. He soon made a home for himself atop the (perpetually warm) radio transmitter—and, in good weather, ventured outside to stalk birds.

Four thousand kilometers to the east, another arrival soon settled into Syowa Station. Just before departing from Japan in 1956, the Japanese Antarctic Research Expedition received a newborn male calico, which they brought on board as a symbol of good luck. By majority vote, they named him Takeshi, after their captain: “The kitten’s name is decided,” reads a handwritten document preserved at the National Institute of Polar Research (just

above a serviceably doodled profile of a tiny, whiskered face). Takeshi would spend the next year waiting patiently for tempura, playing with sled dog puppies, celebrating the New Year, listening to the accordion, and surviving one unpleasant bout of electrocution. For his return voyage in 1958, Takeshi donned a tiny homemade lifejacket.

That same year, another kitten arrived tucked gently inside the jacket of a pilot landing at McMurdo Station. Upon discovery, she immediately faced deportation until a batch of company-hungry New Zealanders at the nearby Scott Base offered up their quarters. Igy (so named after the “International Geophysical Year,” which had brought so many countries to the continent) spent the next year atop a piano amidst her collection of twine and matchboxes. After returning to New Zealand with the base’s radio operator, however, Igy—perhaps enticed by the sudden abundance of mice and flightless birds—quickly went rogue (“Igy At Large In Christchurch,” the local paper announced).

By the time a meteorological assistant landed at a Brit-

Snow leopards keep warm in the high mountains of Central and South Asia by wrapping their fat, three-foot-long tails around their bodies.

Members of the Antarctic Cat Club share photos of the cats they left at home and wear cat shirts on Saturdays.

ish Antarctic Survey base in 1963, the aptly named Ginge had already become “part of the furniture.” Unfortunately, the cat’s tropical coloring made for questionable camouflage while hunting local sheathbills (quite unsuccessfully—many of the shorebirds would circle around him, pecking at his tail). He had much better luck with petrels, to the point that the senior biologist began to question the wisdom of retaining a staff member who insisted on actively murdering their research subjects. When the meteorological assistant developed a severe toothache that required treatment, however, Ginge managed to hitch along on the four-day journey back to the Falklands.

The Antarctic Treaty now bans non-native animals from the ice sheet to preserve the local environment (and occasional chess tournament). Opinions remain split, however, as to whether the cat-less continent is an improvement. 🐱

CATS

Left: Joachim Krack/
Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy.
Above: M-Verlag Berlin/
Karl Heinrich Lämmel/Alamy.