

# THE TATTOO

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## Miss Yellow-Yellow: love at first flap

By MIKE NGUYEN  
The Tattoo

Where do Africa's cutest birds go for gourmet fish, perfect breeding grounds and a colony of their peers?

To Connecticut's own Mystic Aquarium, of course.

Sure, one can go to Mystic and gawk at sea lions, oodles of fish and world-famous beluga whales, but don't miss the exhibit tucked away in the corner of the aquarium's outdoor area where about 20 African black-footed penguins bask in the sun, swim in the tanks and waddle with their mates all day long.

Pressing their noses to the grease-smudged glass, outsiders get only a glimpse of the penguins whizzing by in their watery tank. But for a select few, willing to dish out a paltry fee for the joys of penguin-petting, Mystic Aquarium offers visitors a chance to get to know its feathery friends a whole lot more intimately, through its Penguin Contact Program.

### To touch a penguin

The name speaks for itself. You actually get to touch penguins, among other things, while learning more about the species and how they're cared for at Mystic.

Since its beginning last summer, the Penguin Contact Program has become a popular alternative attraction for aquarium-goers and bird lovers alike. The program is a tour of the penguin exhibit and other parts of the aquarium, ending with final "contact."

To start off with, you meet in the gift shop with a small group of no more than a dozen attendees. From there, it's out into the newly-built pavilion and a tour of the animals outdoors on the way to the penguin area.

On the way, you'll get acquainted with the beluga whales and their new one-acre outdoor area, and all those pinnacled: seals, sea lions, and the like. Not long ago, some huge walruses were on loan to the aquarium.

They're all good, and fun, but you're here for the pen-



guins. So it's up to the penguin exhibit, where you'll sneak past the gawking crowds, to the hidden precinct behind the public area called, cleverly enough, the back-up area. You're going to have to wash your shoes in anti-bacterial detergent by stepping on a soaked sponge.

See? You get a free shoe cleaning, too.

### Gourmet fish

This happens throughout the tour, as the animals are sensitive to foreign germs, so make sure you don't wear any flip-flops. Bring your nose plugs, too, because the back-up area reeks of fish.

"It smells like Cape Cod," a young observer said as she entered the room. You can't blame anyone since it's where the caretakers cut up and prepare the fishy meals for the birds.

And Mystic spares no expense for its only bird species. Its penguins are treated to top-notch fish straight from gourmet restaurants.

After a brief talk on husbandry and penguin care, you're able to enter two small narrow rooms, where one or two special-care penguins are held. In one is a proud dad and his well-fed chick, while in the other is a resting mother (pregnancies aren't easy, even for penguins).

"They're so cute," exclaimed Kaylie Wynn of Connecticut, who was there with some friends and her family. Wynn's mom brought them down to Mystic to partake in the contact program.

### Off-balance, but adorable and sweet

If you keep a keen eye, you'll see that your "contact penguin" is right under your nose in a transport box. Ours was Miss Yellow-Yellow, a single female, identified by four yellow beads to distinguish the two colors in her names and a pink bead for gender on the penguin's wing.

Miss Yellow-Yellow was born in the aquarium but rejected by her parents, most likely because of a slight neurological disorder that prevents her from keeping her balance well. Now 14 years old, she's one of two penguins in the aquarium's African penguin colony without a mate.

Shelly Rinaldi, the guide for our tour and part-time assistant aquarist at the aquarium, describes her as "very, very sweet." Rinaldi regularly feeds and cares for all the penguins in the Mystic colony.

### Waddling among us

Finally, it's off to the exam room in another quarantine area of the aquarium to give the penguin and your group

some quality time together.

On the way, regular aquarium visitors stare in awe, as curious kids and adults peek in and say, "Look, there's a penguin in there."

You would think there was a parade down the paths of Mystic Aquarium.

As you walk towards the exam room, take a peek through the viewing windows of the very large tanks for stranded animals if you can, and you might be able to see a harbor porpoise swimming around, among other animals being cared for after being found stuck or injured along the East Coast.

For the last 15 minutes to half hour, we sat cross-legged in a circle, and the penguin was set loose.

Anxious attendees snapped pictures and beckoned the penguin their way while Miss Yellow-Yellow waddled around the circle for all to pet her smooth back and feel her leathery wings. Nicole Baittista described Miss Yellow-Yellow as "soft, like a pillow." She said she likes penguins because "they're really cute and interesting."

Being in the exam room and all, you get to do a small exam on the penguin too, checking out its heart and lungs with a stethoscope. Someone really should've checked her sinuses, as poor Miss Yellow-Yellow kept sneezing up a storm.

### Touching is good

Rinaldi said physical interaction with the penguins is beneficial to both man and birds.

"It helps train the birds to be handled," she said, so they're more comfortable when they're given check-ups, while

giving "guests a closer look at the species."

"You learn so much more through contact," Rinaldi added, saying that program participants are thoroughly educated on the species and its history.

"I love working with the penguins," Rinaldi said, "they're very well-trained birds."

She said the penguins at Mystic are easy to work with because they've been trained to get out of the pool and stay in the beach to be fed, rather than being chased around at feeding time.

### A fond farewell

After final good-byes to Miss Yellow-Yellow, the group is escorted back out to the regular public area, and left to explore the rest of the aquarium and its lively inhabitants for the remainder of the day.

It's the penguins, though, that will stay on their minds and in their hearts for a long time afterwards.

Want to be a part of this contact program? Anyone is able to participate, but you better hurry, the program is catching on with overwhelming popularity. Advance reservations can be made by calling Mystic Aquarium at 860-572-5955 ext. 520.

Rinaldi says the \$45 price for the penguin program is

an advantage. She said participants realize it's a "product they're consuming," and take it more seriously.

"I find the people that are here to take part are thoroughly interested in penguins," she said.

All the money goes directly into the aquarium, its research center, and its various rescue efforts, according to Jacinta Simoncini, marketing coordinator at Mystic Aquarium.

Admission to the contact program can also make a nice gift for penguin lovers of all ages. Wynn, an avid penguin fan, participated in the program with her friends because it was her 14th birthday present from her mother. One man brought his wife, a member of the Audubon Society, to participate in the program as a Valentine's Day present.

### Kids listen best

Rinaldi said youngsters make the best audience for the penguin contact program.

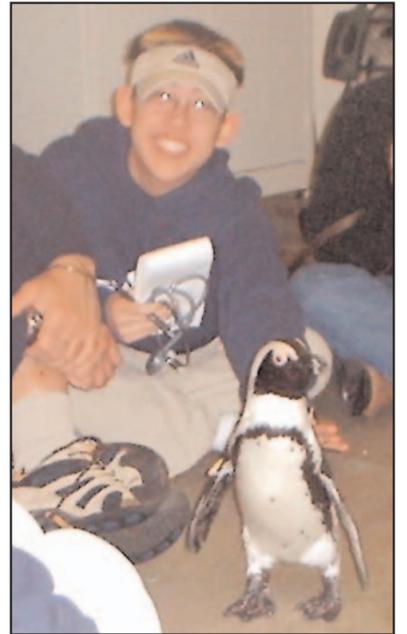
"Kids are more attentive. They listen and follow the rules," she said. "Adults tend to 'veg' out," and become a bigger problem than their younger counterparts.

As for the future of the young, yet wildly popular contact programs at Mystic, "The possibilities are endless," said Rinaldi. "We continue to learn and develop every day."

To find more information on Mystic Aquarium and the contact programs, log on to the aquarium's website at [www.mysticaquarium.org](http://www.mysticaquarium.org).

### Photos by Jen Plonski of The Tattoo

Top: Penguin group; left: Miss Yellow-Yellow; below: Mike Nguyen and Miss Yellow-Yellow; below, from left: shark, frog and walrus. All photos taken at Mystic Marinelife Aquarium.



## Mystic Aquarium is more than cute penguins

By JEN PLONSKI  
The Tattoo

Mystic Aquarium is a great place to do all sorts of things.

But what?

Well, I'm glad you asked.

To start with, be sure to go to the sea lion and seal show.

There were three seals performing in the show, the biggest named Coco, who got the most attention and even got to come close to the front row of the audience.

There, he let out a loud, ear-popping wail.

When any of the seals did what he was supposed to do, trainers fed him a couple of fish, so the seals all did a lot of things correctly.

One of the creatures was a former navy seal that dove under water and got things that were



too deep down for people to reach.

There were two anchors at the bottom of the pool and he swam down and got both of them without breaking a sweat.

A sea lion jumped so high out of the water that his nose bopped a bright orange ball hanging from the ceiling (always a big crowd-pleaser).

When I visited there was a special exhibit on walruses that was especially cool. These big babies lay around all day except for their daily exercises and check-ups. The walrus caretakers keep them in tip-top shape. Their flippers, tails, and the rest of their bodies are checked out every day.

The walruses raise and wave their flippers, spin around in the water, salute and even fetch a little pink toy.

For their reward, they get some fish or get squirted in the nose with a hose. Trainers said

the walruses enjoy the feel of the water on their whiskers.

Also at Mystic is an exhibit featuring the findings of explorer Robert Ballard, who discovered the wreck of The Titanic. There, you can climb down into a miniature submarine and imagine deep sea exploration for yourself.

Ballard's exhibit begins with a multimedia, big screen presentation about the really deep parts of the ocean.

You can then walk around the submarine display and look at all the different stuff that's included in real subs.

There's even a large pottery jar - the type of item that might be found in an old shipwreck. When you look inside it, you'll be surprised to see a tiny video screen showing, well, you'll see.

Mystic always has some special exhibits going on. Right now, it's featuring swamp things and frogs, which seem to go together.

But it's the stuff it always has - the beluga whales, the Stellar sea lions, the sharks and starfish - that bring people



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