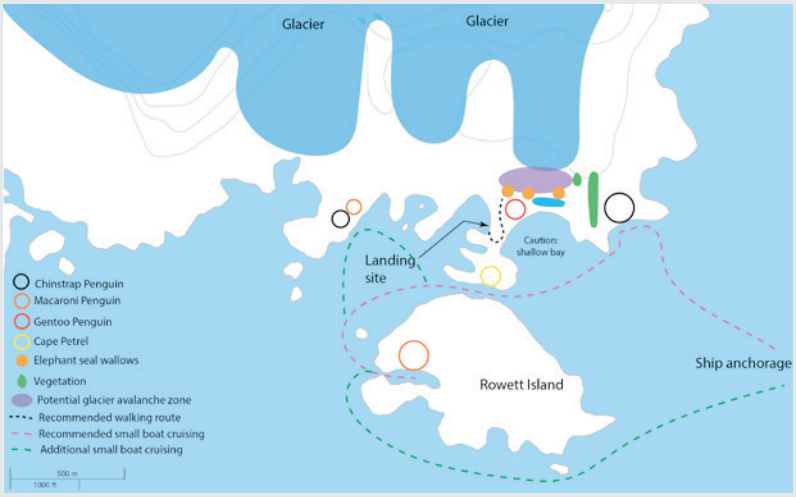
Cape Lookout, Elephant Island (Draft)

Primary landing area:
61°16'45.90"S 55°12'53.70"W

IAATO visitor site guide

Key Features

- Rugged mountain and glacial scenery.
- Chinstrap, Macaroni and Gentoo Penguins.
- Moulting elephant seals (in season).
- Small boat cruising.
- The name Cape Lookout was used by early sealers, appearing on British Captain George Powell's map in 1822.
- In March 1922 the Shackleton-Rowett Expedition landed here to secure elephant seal blubber to help offset the cost of the expedition. Rowett Island was named by the expedition for John Q. Rowett, the principal patron.



- Scientific counts of Chinstrap Penguin (Pycocelis antarctica) have taken place 2 km to the west, at IBA ANT032 and 6 km to the northeast at IBA ANT031. It is likely that prior to glacial retreat, the lack of land precluded activity.

Description

TOPOGRAPHY

Retreating glaciers and knife-like mountain ridges offer a dramatic backdrop to a small and shallow rocky bay. At the head of the bay lies a meltwater lagoon, which may be flooded on high tides. Scree slopes tumble down from nearby pinnacles. A channel is created by the equally dramatic and swell washed Rowett Island, a short distance offshore.

On the western side of the western headland of the bay, a small rocky beach protected by protruding rock fingers offers the best landing site. On low tide, slippery rocks may be exposed. Landing sites inside the bay are likely to be too shallow to be feasible.

Plate tectonics buried and metamorphosed the original series of sedimentary rocks that included sandstones, mudstones, and limestones - all laid down approximately 100 million years ago - leaving a schistose fabric. This structure allows much freeze-thaw weathering giving rise to the sharp peaks and ridges, as well as scree slopes.

FAUNA

Confirmed breeders: Chinstrap penguin, Macaroni penguin, Gentoo penguin, Cape petrel.

Suspected breeders: Wilson's Storm-petrel, Black-bellied Storm-petrel, Snowy sheathbill, Brown skua, Kelp gull, Snow Petrel, Antarctic shag, Antarctic Tern.

Occasional visitors: Southern elephant seal, Antarctic fur seal, Leopard seal.

Present offshore: Antarctic petrel, Kerguelen petrel, Blue petrel, Southern fulmar, Antarctic prion, Black-browed albatross, Grey-headed albatross, Light-mantled albatross, Southern giant petrel, Fin whales, Blue whales, Humpback whales.

FLORA

Mosses including Sanionia uncinate and Ceratodon purpureus

Lichens including the crustose Xanthoria spp., and Caloplaca spp., and the bearded Usnea antarctica.

Growth is most dense on ridgelines and slopes away from the shifting scree slopes.

Patches of the algae Prasiola crispa can be seen in the nutrient-rich ground around penguin colonies.

More diversity exists on Elephant Island as a whole e.g., 25 species of moss, 7 species of liverwort, 48 forms of lichen, and both species of vascular plant.

Visitor Impact

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Disturbance to wildlife.

Destruction of nest sites in scree slopes.

Erosion of moraine and scree slopes.

Destruction of vegetated areas.

Landing Requirements

SHIPS*

Ships per day: Maximum 2 Category 1 ships per day.
Category 2 ships may not land but could do small boat cruising.

*A ship is defined as a vessel which carries more than 12 passengers.

VISITOR NUMBERS

Maximum 200 passengers for landing (Cat 1) with a maximum of 30 persons ashore excluding guides.

Similar to Point Wild on the northern coast, the site is better suited to small boat cruising, with limited landing potential based on local wildlife concentrations and weather conditions.

If the concentration of wildlife allows passage from the moraine/landing headland further out onto the primary visitor area, then walks can take place closer to the lagoon; however, there is a risk that the glacier snout could collapse and avalanche so caution is advised.

LANDING AREA

Swell/surge may affect landing beach – exposure to west and southwest directions.

Protruding fingers of rock may offer some protection from swell.

Potential for high swell as waves get squeezed through the channel between the mainland and Rowett Island where incoming eastern swell is not visible when leaving landing site

Partly submerged and/or shoal rocks lining channel when approaching landing site from the east.

Landing beach approach shallow with rocks.

The landing beach is typically only used in a transitory nature by wildlife; however, its limited size means that access is often prevented.

Heavy concentration of penguins, with the addition of fur seals and elephant seals on the primary visitor area.

A rough, uneven path traverses the moraine from the landing beach to the primary visitor area. It requires good balance and footwork, and occasional steps up and down rocks.

Evaluate wildlife distribution and density on landing beach, as this may prevent shore and landing operations

CLOSED AREA

Cliffs with skua and wilson's storm petrel nesting sites above the landing and adelie colonies – ensure all persons ashore are maintaining adequate distance.

VISITOR SAFETY

Slippery rocks along tide line.

Loose rocks, moraine material and scree slopes.

Falling rocks (near steep slopes, ridges and peaks).

Icefall/avalanche from the retreating glacier.

Close encounters with Antarctic Fur Seals.

GUIDED WALKING AREA

Guided walking route only, no free roaming.

Only one route identified from the landing site to the primary visitor area, by traversing around the moraine.

Visitors should be always guided or under direct supervision, given the concentration of wildlife, the restricted area and the hazardous terrain.

RESTRICTED ZONES

In general, the beach/waterline, wildlife-occupied areas, vegetated areas, unstable/steep slopes, directly below the glacier snout and on the glacier itself (unless travelling with the appropriate equipment and experienced glacier guides).

Avoid the waterline of the bay so as not to block access for wildlife.

Maintain distance to all wildlife e.g., penguin colonies, potentially breeding fur seals, and moulting elephant seals.

Avoid vegetated areas.

Avoid scree slopes that may hold breeding burrowing petrels etc – if proceeding to high points, use bedrock routes.

Avoid vegetated areas.

Avoid area directly below the glacier snout in case of icefall/avalanche.

Potential disturbance to wildlife and damage to nesting sites e.g., scree crevices.

Trampling of fragile vegetation.

Potential risk to visitors from rock or icefall/avalanche.

Areas to be avoided are best judged by guides and based on terrain and wildlife knowledge, experience, and observation.

Visitor code of conduct

BEHAVIOUR ASHORE

Visitors should maintain precautionary distances from fur and elephant seals to avoid aggressive encounters.

Visitors should take care moving over rocky, loose and slippery terrain.

Visitors should avoid the area directly below the glacier snout in case of icefall/avalanche.

Small boat drivers should take precautions to avoid submerged rocks and foul waters in the channel between Cape Lookout and Rowett Island, as well as when approaching the coastline and landing site. Swell and surge onto the rocky coastline can be hazardous, particularly around the more exposed Rowett Island.