

### Short Sleepers

By Rachel Feltman

- 1 Sleep is both very mysterious and very important. All animals do it – even ones without brains or central nervous systems (I'm looking at you, jellyfish). And many single-celled organisms have biological functions that follow roughly 24-hour cycles. We know sleep is essential, but we don't know exactly what it does or how it evolved. One way we can start to learn more about snoozing is to look at how other animals do it, since most of the really robust research we have is on primates and rodents. That's where a recent study on chinstrap penguins comes in. Researchers found that these flightless birds in Antarctica get about 11 hours of sleep a day, 33. The real kicker, however, is how they get it: in stints of roughly four seconds.
- 2 Scientists hung out with a colony of thousands of breeding chinstrap penguins, keeping close tabs on 14 of them in particular. From the outside, it seemed like the penguins were doing the sort of slow blinking and head jerking you'd expect from sleep-deprived new parents. We already know that these animals spend weeks hardly sleeping to protect their nests from predators and other penguins looking to steal pebbles or eggs, with parents trading off time spent either hunting or guarding. The researchers had to attach electrodes to the birds to even tell they were sleeping at all. But they were: all those little blinks and head nods were brief periods of sleep. They did this about 10,000 times a day, adding up to an apparently sufficient 11 hours.



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