

People at MetService: John Law – Broadcast Meteorologist

Isolation, sub-zero temperatures and a night that lasts for months. It's no surprise if these don't sound like your idea of a dream lifestyle. But if the thought of travelling thousands of miles out of 3G range and spending half a year on an ice shelf with a handful of people is what floats your boat, then Antarctica is the place for you.

And that's exactly where John Law is heading. John has been a familiar face for New Zealand over the past few years as presenter of our MetService TV weather videos. But all good things must come to an end and John has left MetService for the chilly shores of Antarctica to spend 18 months working at Rothera base.

This isn't your run-of-the-mill career change and so we couldn't miss the chance to catch-up with John before he left to talk about his time at MetService. He gave us the perfect snapshot of what it can be like to work here...



MetService: John, we have to ask. Why Antarctica?

John: *This isn't even my first time heading down there! I did a stint at Rothera Base a few years ago and spent all of 2016 in Antarctica. From then on I was totally hooked.*

It's hard to explain why I love Antarctica so much. First of all it's a place of complete extremes, it's the windiest spot, the coldest spot and almost entirely untouched. There are glaciers, sea ice, penguins, seals, in fact every day when you go out there's always something new to discover.

Antarctica is an entire continent set aside for peaceful activities and for science. When I go down there I'm doing pretty standard weather observations, making sure supply planes can fly in and the equipment doesn't stop working. But there are scientists there that are making ground-breaking discoveries.

As you might imagine, it's also all about the people you're with because you're so isolated. During the winter there's just 21 of you at Rothera, which is actually quite a crowd in Antarctic terms. I once spent a month living in a tent on a frozen runway with just a handful of others. I have a friend who spent an entire winter in a base with just four people.

Speaking of jobs what brought you to meteorology?

I've always liked the weather. I grew up on the South Coast of England and one of my earliest memories was the great storm of 1987, I was five at the time and I remember there were fallen trees and damage everywhere.

Since then the weather's always been a big deal for me, so I went to university in Norwich to study Meteorology and Oceanography.

Norwich is a long way from Wellington, what brought you to MetService?

At first, after graduating, I didn't even leave the building I studied in. I worked at a private forecasting company called WeatherQuest that was based on the top floor of the environmental sciences building at the university.

But then I came to New Zealand for a tramping trip and during that holiday I stumbled across the advert for a general meteorologist at MetService, I applied for the job and before I knew it I was uprooting my life in the UK and moving to Wellington!

So how did you end up presenting the weather on video?

I started at MetService working on general forecasting. I'd never done any kind of TV broadcasting before but had worked on the radio and briefed the TV presenters in the UK. What mattered was that I just really like talking about the weather!

My first time in front of the camera for MetService was in 2012, I was filling in at short notice for Dan Corbett while he was away and there was no time to be nervous.

When Dan left in 2013 to present the weather at TVNZ I took over full time, so after being at MetService for less than two years I found myself as the Communications Meteorologist. As well as working on the weather shows I would also talk to journalists about the weather and other public-facing stuff. It was a busy few years and an amazing learning curve for me.



Can you describe what it's like to be in your shoes at MetService?

I love my job. The busiest time is in the morning; I arrive at work and immediately brief myself on the weather story for the day. I talk to other forecasters and colleagues in different teams and work as a conduit to get all that info into a series of short videos. No two days are the same. There are days with a big area of low pressure and severe weather warnings then there are whole months of dry weather. There's always something new to talk about.

Once I've got the message for the day pinned down I work on the script and the graphics, then it's up to the studio to record. On an average day we produce around 13 different shows, which we record as if they were live. I've got it down to a fine art and I usually get each one right on the first take but occasionally we need to re-record a forecast. Filming is normally finished after an hour or so.

Balancing my routine with variety is important and I always have some time to work on other projects. Recently I've been really excited to develop what we can do with the weather shows and build connections with other talented people at MetService.

What have you learned in your time in front of camera?

I'm very lucky, feedback has been really positive and generally very nice. I know that I speak very fast sometimes and this gets mentioned. I've had to try and slow my speech down and my Maori pronunciation has definitely improved!

In terms of communicating the weather to the public, there's no better way to learn. It's all about including the information people need without complicating things. What do people really need to know? Do they need to know loads of specific measurements, or do they need to know there will be heavy rain and the areas it will affect. Don't bombard people with information, just provide what's necessary to keep them safe.

What legacy are you leaving behind?

First of all, everything is a team effort and I can't take full credit for any one thing. But my time at MetService has been amazing. We've come so far in how we get our message out into the media. Our videos are now on stuff.com and the Herald, they perform really well on social media and it's a fantastic way of communicating weather. If we can carry on that story and build on the success we've already had then there's a bright future ahead. MetService is really powerful because it's great to be able to provide weather direct from the forecast room and have meteorologists presenting on camera.

My legacy as broadcast meteorologist is to hopefully leave behind an amazing role in which a person can tie together information from so many people and sources. Every video the public sees is a result of not just forecasters, but the design team, the data teams, the weatherscape team and more. It's powerful collaboration.

I'm going to miss the sense of team and comraderie. Being in the forecast room means you're working shifts, and sometimes on shift work you will find yourself working nights. When you spend that kind of time with colleagues you get to know people really well. You build a work family. I'm sad to be leaving that.