

The

WANDERER

Marion Island Newsletter



ANTARCTIC
LEGACY
OF
SOUTH AFRICA

December 2020



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Hi! My name is Winnie “WINZA” Moodaley. This is my story of the journey to what would become my home away from home for the best part of two years.

Letter from Team Leader

From March 2019 until April 2020, I was Expedition Medic for M76.

M76 came together to this amazing place, forging some amazing memories and friendships that will last well beyond the expedition. There were ups and downs but, as my husband likes to remind me(!), what doesn't break you, only makes you stronger. It was truly sad to see them leave, when the time came, but those of us who remained understood the call of duty. I was asked to stay on and serve with the incoming M77 team, who had been reduced drastically in numbers due to... yep you guessed it... covid-19. In May 2020, I was officially appointed by DEFF as the Team Leader of the M77 Expedition. It was with a great sense of pride and humility that I accepted the role. Together with the amazing people, the current inhabitants of Marion island, we have forged a certain camaraderie that only comes from a place like this.

Transitioning from one expedition to another is not without its challenges. We came from a big group and had to adjust to an extremely small group of eight people. Shared tasks and duties had to be readjusted to fit a small group. The exuberance that was present with the bigger group was missed when the numbers dwindled down. But there is one thing the people of M77 displayed at the face of it all: resilience. We made the place feel like home, and did our best to keep the gusto alive. For me, the adjustment was made easy with the support of my family back home. Let me tell you something, if you don't have the support of family and loved ones, places like this can become tedious.

When we heard there was a group of new people arriving, our excitement grew. When we heard that it was a film crew, with some of our remaining team members, there was an air of euphoria. The day we first saw the yacht, renewed energy poured into people and increased the overall morale, which is one of the key factors in sustainment on missions of this nature. It was sad in November when Joe and Johnny from the film crew had to return home. Thankfully, they left behind some amazing members of the film crew.

Now we come to that time of the year... Christmas is never easy when away from loved ones, but it's made bearable when surrounded by good, kind people. Christmas 2019 was amazing, with good company, good food and the fun of Secret Santa. It was jolly festive and made the longing for home a bit more bearable. We now have reached that festive period once again, and the vibe is growing daily as we approach it.

I do believe this will be another memorable one, as we all spend Christmas away from our loved ones and homes. I am of the view and feeling that M77 (including the film crew, as we are one) will make a wonderful time of our festive season. It would be nice if our loved ones could visit just for the day, at least, but I'm well aware that in that instance I would be going home with them!

In conclusion, this has been a truly amazing and life changing experience for me. I have done several missions within the SANDF, such as peace keeping missions in Africa and anti piracy operations with our navy. Each of these missions instilled a sense of self discipline and resilience in me to continue on even when the going gets tough. I am, as always, grateful for the opportunities afforded to me, and the trust placed in me by those who believe in me.



Alain Jacobs is better known as **AJ**, the diesel mechanic who carries out base maintenance and upkeep on top of looking after the all-important generators. Working as a diesel mechanic before coming here set him up perfectly for this role with DEFF. He believes coming to Marion was destiny and decided to come for the “experience of a



How I keep busy

- Work!
- Music-making app “fruit loops”
- virtual DJ
- watching movies

lifetime”. The experience has been quite varied as AJ was part of the M76 team that stayed on, so he has seen the team drop from 24 to 8 and then back up to 17 now. Other than the reduction in team numbers, and the fact that he remained on the island (something he brushes off as his duty), covid-19 hasn’t had a huge impact but he says “what’s happening at home, now that scares me.”

WISH
I'D BROUGHT
 Programmable
 Keyboard
 DJ Controller

Meet the Team

Here since April (earlier in some cases!)



Aphiwe Dyum is responsible for communications on Marion. His job with DEFF mainly involves servicing and maintaining all the coms systems on the island... and there are a lot! Satellite, radios, computer network and telephone system are all things everyone on base uses for work and safety, and Aphiwe is often pulled in many directions to help everyone! Prior to this, he was an intern at SABC & a VTS technician at MDSOL. He has come here to gain more experience in coms while gaining the opportunity to work outside of the country for the first time. He was part of the M76 team that

How I keep busy
 - Working on radios & computers in Electronic Workshop & Radio Room
 - Playing games

stayed on as a reduced team due to covid-19 and has gained more than just additional work skills during this time, learning a lot about himself too. “One thing I realised whilst being on the island is the inter-personal skill that is necessary when working in remote areas like Marion Island.”

WISH I'D
BROUGHT
 PC card reader
 Portable CD/ DVD ROM
 PS4 console



Khuliso Collen Maphaha, from Nzhelele, Limpopo, is a graduate from the University of Venda under the department of Hydrology and Water Resources and currently a masters candidate in the same department. Here on Marion, he is an Assistant Meteorological Technician (Metkassie) under the South African Weather Services (SAWS). His duties are making weather observations and maintaining of weather instruments. He came here for personal development, in terms of career, and to develop skills in different atmospheric environments. “I expected that I would not easily adjust to the environment as this would be out of my comfort zone. However, the ability to set my priorities, and my understanding of various cultures helped me not only understand my fellow team members but helped me to adjust in a short period of time.” The absence of the complete M77 due to covid-19 was “deeply felt as we spent a lot time together in Cape Town” and there was no opportunity to explore the other side of the island due to absence of field assistants. Luckily 6 months after his arrival on the island, the department sent field assistants, “it was a great feeling going out for the first time in 6 months to help sealers monitor seals and birders monitoring penguins and other birds during breeding time.” Khuliso’s experience on Marion has been “greater than expected and I look forward to greater moments to come.”

How I keep busy

- Work!
- Helping field assistants with bird & seal monitoring

WISH I'D BROUGHT: all of M77 from the start

Nkoane Jack Mathabatha has been involved with SANAP since 2007, visiting Gough, Anatarctica and Marion several times. Marion Island is the one that first captured his interest: “I was fascinated by the environment, having no trees and the snow.” His role as a Meteorological Technician entails weather observations, visual observations of cloud types and heights, occurring precipitation and intensity, visibility, sea surface observations (waves and taking sea water temperature by lowering a thermometer into the ocean). This information is combined with information recorded by external sensors which monitor temperature, humidity, wind direction / speed and atmospheric pressure. Data collected here is used for forecasting and climate research. Weather observation has been part of the expeditions since South Africa started sending teams to Marion Island. “It is an honour and a privilege to be part of this important research.” This year is totally different from his previous expeditions to Marion Island, mostly due to covid-19. As well as reduced team numbers, they couldn’t explore or venture out into the field as field work was suspended. Being unable to enjoy the beauty of the whole island was “a weird and difficult situation”. However, he was given an opportunity to ring wandering albatross chicks in September, which was exciting! Usually, he would also perform upper air ascents with a hydrogen balloon to record atmospheric pressure, temperature, humidity, wind direction and speed as part of his meteorological work, but has been unable to do this since beginning of May, due to lack of kit through covid-19. Things changed for the better when six field workers and a film crew of five arrived towards the end of September. This is his second time to be part of a team with a film crew (first was 2009). This change brought excitement and more activities to Marion. “I also couldn’t bring some of the things that would make the expedition more enjoyable due to the lockdown prior to departure to the island. But we are not the only people affected, the entire world is affected by the pandemic. The earth isn’t going to stop revolving and if we stop moving we might fall off and be left behind lingering in the past. We just have to adapt and do our best under the circumstances.”



How I keep busy

- Work!
- Listen to music
- Watch series
- Games nights
- Karaoke

WISH I'D BROUGHT
A camera

Patrick Hlongwane, or **Pat** as he likes to be known, is the base engineer employed by Department of Environmental Affairs. If something needs fixing (and it regularly does) then Pat is your man. Prior to coming here, he enjoyed some time at home after a year on Gough Island. He has wanted to come to Marion Island to explore and work ever since he found out about it and is thoroughly enjoying the experience. The expedition is similar to that of Gough but the base is, of course, much bigger here. Like everyone else, the biggest impact from covid-19 that Pat has felt has been through a reduced team, although his wonderful singing voice and superb dance moves have brightened up life for those who are here.



How I keep busy outside of work
watching movies & playing games

WISH
I'D BROUGHT
My girlfriend



Philani Siya Ngcobo, or **Siya** as we call him on base, is an Assistant Met-Technician and carries out weather observations, reporting on the cloud formations hourly and maintaining data integrity (quality control) from the base weather station. He also carries out a monthly calibration of all the sensors and instruments used. Before he came here, he was a data scientist intern and previously worked as a data technician in a role that was essentially the same as the one he carries out here. Although Siya came to Marion for work, he wanted to spend a year with albatross and snow. He expected total isolation here on this remote island, with maybe one call a week, but has been pleasantly surprised at the access to the internet and the ability to keep up with sport and news. In terms of covid-19, he mostly worries about family but says "I'm fortunate to be here and away from everything."

How I keep busy
- Work!
- Listen to music
- Watch series
- Games nights
- Karaoke

WISH I'D
BROUGHT
More beer
Trackpants



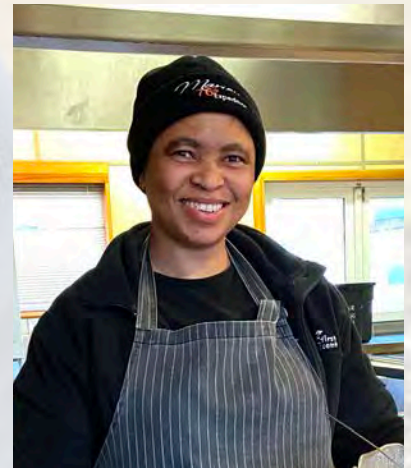
Stephanus Schoeman is an Electronic Engineer working for the South Africa National Space Agency (SANSO) in the Space Science Division. Here on Marion, he is responsible for data collection,, management and monitoring, as well as the maintenance and upgrades of space weather observation instruments. He’s been working for SANSO since 2017. Before coming to Marion, he completed a takeover at SANAE IV and, prior to that, a full year there. His enjoyment of his job was a driving factor that brought him to Marion, along with the “opportunity to see such a beautiful place.” He says it’s pretty close to what he expected... “except for the initial small team and covid difficulties, of course. There are many similarities to my time at SANAE, but differences as well. Most notably, the vibrant life all around, being so close to the

WISH I'D BROUGHT
More coffee

ocean and being able to go outside and explore with (a bit) more freedom. ” Covid-19 has not affected things here for Stephanus in the most part. “Aside from worrying a little about the folks back home, we have it easy this side I think.”

How I keep busy
- Lots of work!
- Reading
- Practising piano

Winnie M. Moodaley, aka Winza, works for the Department of Environmental, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) and is our base leader, as well as the Medical Orderly, attending to medical emergencies and health problems that arise. Before this exciting opportunity, she worked in the SANDF, South African Military Health Service and was deployed on various peace keeping missions on the continent, as well as a number of Marine Operations alongside the S.A Navy. She says this deployment is “pretty similar to those done in my previous setup. Only difference being the size of the group and, where the military operations involved civilian population, this one involves our lovely Marine life such as the penguins, killer whales etc.” Winnie came to Marion Island to pursue new opportunities and challenges. “It was also a way to find out what I am capable of in such a remote setting; if I could rise to such a challenge.” (editor’s note - yes she can!) Winnie stayed on from M76, due to covid-19 restrictions, and says the reduced team made “quite a difference in terms of social interaction, so in its own unique way, it’s like a remote setting within a remote environment, if that makes any sense lol.” The effects of covid-19 haven’t really impacted Winnie, except during the take over, where the team had



WISH I'D BROUGHT
My family

to get used to things like face masks and social distancing in the first few days. “But I do think it’s an interesting scenario that when I left R.S.A there wasn’t any covid-19 anywhere in the world, now it has becoming a global pandemic that has affected everyone everywhere in one way or another.”

How I keep busy
- Play pool
- Read (lots!)
- Playstation games

Find out all about the team members who arrived in September on page 9

SURVIVING May-September

8 people, one base, no fieldwork



Left to right: Stephanus, Khuliso, Apihwe, Siya, Pat, Winnie, Nkoane, AJ

When they signed up to an expedition on Marion Island, no one could have predicted the events that would unfold around the world. Disappointed to be a smaller team than expected and stuck largely indoors was tough on them all, but, in a bubble away from the global pandemic, this unit remained united and strong. They worked hard to ensure the base was looked after and their work carried on, despite limited resources. Surrounded uniquely by albatross, penguins and seals and in a home away from home, they made the best of what they had. All grateful to be safe, karaoke and games nights continued.

WEATHER

According to the METKASSIES

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| MAX WIND GUSTS | 139.32 (June) |
| TOTAL RAINFALL | 843mm (May-Sept) |
| HIGHEST IN 24 HOURS | 35.5mm (May) |
| TOTAL DAYS WITH RAIN | 134 (May-Sept) |
| TOTAL DAYS > 1mm | 98 (May-Sept) |
| TOTAL SUNSHINE | 304.9 hours (May-Sept) |

| | MAXIMUM | MINIMUM |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| TEMPERATURE | 16.2°C (May) | -3.1°C (August) |
| PRESSURE | 1029.6 (Sept) | 960.7 (June) |
| HUMIDITY | 100 (May-Sept!) | 43 (July) |



Danielle Z. Keys, or **Dani** as she likes to be known, works with Nelson Mandela University in the Marine Apex Predator Unit (MAPRU) here on Marion. She describes her job as “a little bit of everything.” For MAPRU, she deploys all sorts of telemetry devices, including: GPS, accelerometers, hydrophones and cameras. This year, she is focusing on white chinned petrels, king penguins and wandering albatross. In addition, she is continuing the Fitz long-term monitoring projects of the birds on the island and helping the O&C Birder (Thando) where she can. Dani spends the majority of her time in the field and is truly passionate about the birds she works with. This is her second expedition to Marion. “Marion stole my heart in 2018 and I never wanted to leave in the first place! I love the freedom and the wildlife here - there is nothing else like it.” Prior to coming here, Dani had started her PhD, having just got used to the real world after her M75 expedition to Marion. When covid-19 meant that a group of field scientists would be sent out halfway through the year, Dani was asked to return. “Despite all the terrible effects of the pandemic, if it wasn’t for covid-19, I wouldn’t be here” she says. “I am braver this time round. The island is a lot smaller and I’m more eager than ever to explore every inch of it.”

WISH
I'D BROUGHT
My husband
Wine
My teddy bear

How I keep busy: Work takes up all my time!

Introducing M77

(The late arrivals)

Frikkie van der Vyver is a field biologist, here through the Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme (MIMMP) and University of Pretoria to collect data and samples from Marion’s pinniped and orca populations. Formally trained in conservation, ichthyology and fisheries science, Frikkie has previously been involved in various research and monitoring programmes, including fishery development and impact assessment projects. In 2013 he joined the 70th Marion Island expedition, where he spent 13 unforgettable months working for the MIMMP. Back in South Africa, this remarkable experience led to his appointment as an agent of the Port Elizabeth Museum Marine Mammal Stranding Network, to attend to sick, injured and vagrant animals ashore along the Garden Route coast, including the collection of scientific data and leading of necropsies. Extremely happy to continue working hands-on with marine mammals, he also had the freedom to pursue his interest in seal-fisheries interaction research, and spent many months at sea developing pilot studies on board commercial fishing vessels. Unfortunately funding for a PhD bursary was not forthcoming, so he ended up co-founding a field research programme in collaboration with the marine tourism industry in Plettenberg Bay (visit www.wildocean.org.za for more info). Covid-19 hugely effected Frikkie’s original plan to share the experience with his girlfriend. Unfortunately she had to sit out the trip due to space limitation on the yacht that brought him here. “It’s been a stressful time waiting to hear about plans to get her here. Fortunately the long wait is over as the MIMMP was recently granted funding for another 3-year cycle. This means that she will be joining us in April for the M78 expedition! With covid-19 raising havoc in most parts of the world, an opportunity to return to Marion couldn’t have come at a more appropriate time.”



“Sealers don’t get much time off, especially this year given our reduced 2-man team. Besides joining in on Christmas and new year’s celebrations, I’ve been working non-stop since we got here.”

WISH I'D
BROUGHT
Beer

Leandri de Kock from University of Pretoria, Department of Plant and Soil Science, first heard about Marion Island four years ago and was won over by a presentation that included pictures of loos with the most fantastic views and snow. “Then and there I decided that I will be coming to Marion in the future.” Prior to coming here, Leandri completed an honours degree in zoology - her thesis studied the moult phenology of Southern elephant seal females at Marion Island. Her role here is focused on plants, not seals, however. Her job takes her all over Marion Island and involves a lot of time in the field - she has to maintain and download data from windstations located around the island, collect data from natural windbreaks around the island, collect data from grey-headed albatrosses in Santa Rosa Valley, collect genetic samples from plants and sample high altitude plant species. Leandri’s overwintering experience here on Marion was cut short by 5 months because of covid. “It was difficult to leave family behind, knowing that they will have to deal with covid.” Despite the shorter season, she says “The experience is really a dream come true. I have learned so much and seen so much of the island. So far, not one day has been the same. Truly an adventure of a lifetime.”



WISH
I'D BROUGHT
A dress
Wine & gin

How I keep busy: I'm trying to spend as much time in the field as possible. So, when I'm not doing my own work, I enjoy helping the other field assistants and learning from them. I don't spend much time at base but spend time sorting photos then!



Audrey Mpho Mashau, or **Mpho** as she is better known, is an Environmental Control Officer (ECO) with the Department of Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF). Her role is to monitor compliance of all projects that were granted environmental permits for their activities this season. This includes auditing the implementation of the management plan (PEIMP) and making recommendations where applicable. Whilst she normally works as an Environmental Officer in the Compliance Section of DEFF in Pretoria, Mpho has overwintered on an expedition like this before and knows Marion - something she says “came in handy as I knew the kind of mental and physical commitment I was putting myself into.” This is just as well as covid-19 meant she is here on Marion for longer than normal. She would normally have just come for the relief period; instead, her arrival in September (on a yacht which she has mixed feelings about) means she is here until pick up!

WISH I'D
BROUGHT
Real coffee
The internet
LOL!

How I keep busy
Cooking & Baking
Reading fiction novels to relax my mind



Thando Cebekhulu, calls himself the troublemaker and he certainly adds life to base with his stories of penguin research and round island mayhem! He works for DEFF in the Oceans and Coasts section and is a Seabird Field Assistant, collecting data and managing the databases. Thando originally came to Marion Island as part of M74 and says “it actually feels like I never left this place.” Prior to his M74 expedition, Thando worked for the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) as a zoo-systematic intern. Since then, he has fallen for penguins and that’s what he expected when he returned for this season... “penguins for days”... he’s certainly had that. He’s found covid-19 stressful back home, although remains unaffected here, “just hoping everyone is following covid-19 protocols to minimise infections.”

WISH
I'D BROUGHT
Earphones

How I keep busy: Hanging out in the movie lounge, listening to music or watching movies, series or documentaries.

Yinhla Shihlomule is an MIMMP Sealer, working for University of Pretoria. Having studied Marion Island fur seals (both Antarctic and SubAntarctic species) as a student, Yinhla was well-placed to apply for a post he saw to work with marine mammals on Marion. He was selected successfully in 2014 and says “Since then, this has been home for me. It is the most peaceful place on earth - never mind the roaring winds and tumbling waves.” This year, however, things have been a little different... the sealers arrived on the island in summer during breeding season. “It was a bit tough at first. Had to be Marion fit and there wasn’t enough time for that. But, for me, I will say covid-19 was a blessing in disguise. I sailed to Marion Island. That’s a lifetime experience. I hope soon the virus will be thing of the past.”



WISH I'D
BROUGHT
Speakers
MP3 Player

How I keep busy

There is plenty to do when you are a sealer. Office work, Lab work washing and sorting poop, elephant seal census and killer whale observation. Apart from work related stuff, I listen to music and read books.

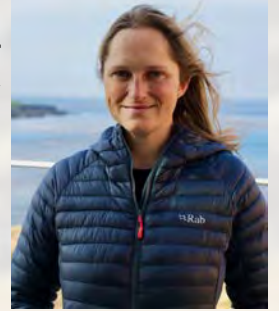
LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION...

The Film Crew

Director **Ruth Peacey**, Cameraman **Tom Hartwell** and Camera Assistant **Katie Wardle**, all from the UK, joined M77 in September to film the wildlife of Marion Island for a big international television series that will hit screens in 2023.



With a background in zoology, a fair amount of experience working with penguins and also as a polar guide, Marion was the perfect destination for Ruth to spend 7 months. She started working for the BBC Natural History Unit fifteen years ago and is now a freelance producer director, having worked across various productions including Planet Earth Two and Penguin Post Office - a film that saw her spend 6 months living at an old British Base in Antarctica. "Antarctica cast a spell on me and Marion has evoked that same magic. I feel so lucky to be able to share this special experience with such an ace team."



WISH I'D BROUGHT:

Yoga mat; Nice clothes & shoes

Tom has been filming wildlife for television for seven years.



His wildlife films are regularly shown on a popular BBC show called The One Show and, prior to COVID-19, he spent 8 weeks filming various animals in Kenya for an international wildlife series. Tom has an ability to capture the beauty of nature perfectly on camera and his shots of Marion are bringing a new perspective to even the very experienced field workers here. He describes Marion as a "cameraman's dream... I couldn't resist the opportunity to film on an island with such incredible natural spectacles, not to mention so many charismatic and loveable species!"

WISH I'D BROUGHT:
My daughter

Katie completed a degree in Digital Film Production in 2018 and has since been working with camera kit in a hire facility whilst making her own natural history films in her spare time, including one

on fur seals in New Zealand. No one knows kit as well as Katie, something which has been an absolute life saver for the team on this trip. Her camera skills are excellent too and she has been filming alongside Tom, getting a second perspective on many of the behaviours and animals being filmed. "I feel so lucky to be able to experience this crazy island and at the start of my career this is a gold dust opportunity to learn and hopefully propel me into other work on my return home."



WISH I'D BROUGHT:

Small gifts & British sauce packets to make dinner for everyone

Here on the island, the film crew have

immersed themselves into the team of M77 and been busy filming right from day one! Like the field assistants, they split their time between hut and base, filming at sunrise and throughout the day when the weather is right. Being from England in the U.K., it's been wonderful to be immersed into South African / Marion culture and share experiences of and with the wildlife here in this special place.

Team gather in Cape Town on deck of Pelagic Australis, a 72' sailing vessel, before departure to Marion Island on September 18th 2020

L-R (back row): Johnny, Dani, Chris, Tom, Mpho, Leandri, Juliette, Thando

L-R (front row): Katie, Joe, Frikkie, Yinhla, Ruth, Dion



All the film kit, field gear (including masses of gum boots) and 14 people onboard made the boat crowded - everyone hot bunked, taking it in turns to sleep! No room for luxuries either...



JOURNEY TO MARION



Night and day, whatever the weather (including 60 knot winds), everyone took turns to help sail.



There was much relief arriving at Marion Island safely on 25th September

Back in the Nick-of-Time for Breeding Season!



Northern Giant Petrel Family at Archways

Danielle Z. Keys - (M75/7 MAPRU Birder)

After finally getting my head wrapped around my PhD back in the mainland, I was then asked if I would want to go back to Marion Island on an 'emergency voyage' to pick-up the vitally important seabird long-term monitoring programs. Of course, I dropped everything (including my partner in crime – sorry Stephan Keys, M75 Birder), bought a years' worth of supplies and bam. I'm back. However, only after several brain-scratching covid tests and a million hour long (slight exaggeration), gruelling yacht ride to Marion.



Start of the game 'Rock or Bird' searching for albatross

Within the first few days of arrival, Thando and myself (the downscaled Birder duo) went to the field and started counting, ringing, monitoring and catching, what feels like, everything that moves. We were fortunate enough to have some rather eager base personnel to assist us and of course, M77's weaner – Leandri, who is basically a birder now.

Within a few weeks, all the Wandering Albatross chicks in the three colonies were rung, we set up the Northern giant

petrel monitoring colonies (which hatched shortly after they received their markers), and then we were just in time to record the peak breeding dates for the Grey-headed albatross.

However, time waits for no one, and apparently neither do breeding birds who are just popping eggs out like there is no tomorrow. And, before we knew it, two months had passed. Leandri and I travelled the inland paths in search of the illusive Light-mantled Sooties that love nesting in the oddest locations. This makes the game of "rock-or-bird" very intense. And when we looked again, the coasts were alive and filled with penguins and seals, the pains dotted with adult Wandering Albatross, and burrows filled with incubating White-chinned Petrels (of which 20 have been deployed on already).



Dani ringing Wandering Albatross



Thando measuring Macaroni Penguin

Far left: Gentoo Penguin chicks creche; Left: Grey-headed Albatross hatchling before Christmas



THE M77 WEANER

*Leandri de Kock (M77 Winder/
Plant Ecologist/Weaner)*



*Leandri helps monitor wandering albatross.
Here she meets a chick prior to fledging.*

I got the news late in August that I would be part of the special voyage to Marion with a film and ship crew and a handful of field assistants. And might I add that the group of field assistants are highly experienced with all having completed at least one full overwintering expedition beforehand. And then there is me, the youngest team member, with no Marion experience. I totally felt out of place when I heard where all the expeditioners have been and what they had achieved. I felt very intimidated, to say the least. But I also felt extremely lucky to be part of such a historic, once-in-a-lifetime expedition. And that to the place I have been dreaming of since sitting in my undergraduate zoology and botany lectures! I remember telling my friends in the lecture that I WILL be going to that place somewhere in my life... and they just laughed! Well, here I was extremely excited, nervous, scared, happy, overwhelmed and all the emotions in-between the night before we left Cape Town.



*First glimpse of the base on
Marion Island*

By no experience, I mean that I have not even seen most seabirds (e.g. gannets or penguins) in my life yet and here I was embarking on a sailing expedition to the Southern Ocean. Even being on a vessel in the middle of the ocean was a new experience for me. But I must have some 'seafarer blood' in me because I was one of few who enjoyed the 8-day sailing trip on the *Pelagic Australis*. And yes, I started ticking off seabirds on my life list! Finally, at 5 am on the 25th of September, we saw Marion Island for the first time. She greeted us with a perfect wind-still, sunshine day and an inviting interior coated with snow. Apparently, it was one of the first good days in a while! The island looks a lot bigger than I imagined it would be. Rookie-imagination, I guess? The M77 'base' team were so welcoming, but also afraid to hug us. And not because of Covid, but because we stunk so much after 8 days of sharing bunk beds and a small bathroom and other smells I will not even mention.

And then it felt like MADNESS from the start. We arrived just in time for the breeding season of the elephant seals and many of the birds. Usually, the 'newbies' get trained during takeover and then you are fit by the time the fieldwork season is at its peak. And by then you also know the island much better and know which paths to take and where to avoid the mires. Well, I got thrown into the deep-end and was learning 'on-the-job'. The M77 team have a lot of patience because they had to teach me everything about island life. I had to learn where and how everything works at base, had to adapt my cooking skills for a big group of people and get used to a base that always feels as if it is shaking. And then I had to learn how to survive in the field. The field assistants literally took me under their wings, and I am so fortunate to learn from the best-of-the-best! They have taught me so much in so little time. From the animals and their behaviours, which paths to take, how to read the weather and hut life. You have to basically learn how to walk on this island so that you do not fall whenever someone waits for you. Believe me, I provide daily entertainment to the other field assistants!

I have acquired so many skills already, and I cannot wait to spend the rest of my months working with these guys. I am enjoying every minute of my time in the field on this spectacular island. I saw this quote in a hut-book entry: "Get out of your comfort zone- you will be surprised what you find. Use all the opportunities to explore and be brave!". And that is exactly what I am doing. I am excited to see what adventures Marion will offer me in the summer months! I will be sharing some more first-hand experiences in the next edition. Until next time... I am off to go wander!



Marion happiness!

To the End of Our Limits, For Seals

Frikkie van der Vyver



Unlike previous expeditions, we only arrived at Marion Island in late September last year, right at the start of the southern elephant seal breeding season. This meant Yinhla and I had no time to recover from the gruelling voyage aboard the *Pelagic Australis*.

We literally hit the ground running to restart routine tag-resight census rounds. With harems already growing at a startling rate we soon found ourselves immersed in organised chaos. Having been back in South Africa for a number of years since our previous stints on the island, we'd almost forgotten the thrill of being chased by massive territorial beach masters and angry cows while trying to record their flipper tag numbers. A couple of adrenaline-fuelled weeks later and we'd already survived a few hair-raising close encounters, including the temporary marking of newborn pups during risky attempts to link mother-pup-pairs. Of course the extreme weather conditions notoriously common in the roaring forties didn't make our efforts easy, but this is just one of many challenges facing us seal biologists (aka "Sealers") during the Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme's (MIMMP) intense breeding season work schedule.

On 15 October, the designated birthday for ellies, we set out to conduct the peak breeding season total island count, which has been performed by Sealers on this date for decades. True to form Marion threw everything at us in our attempt. By mid-morning a violent southerly storm saw wind speeds gusting at 50 knots, sending temperatures plummeting down to freezing point which turned horizontal rain into stinging ice pellets. Racing between beaches to keep warm, we may have contemplated our decision to return to this unforgiving island for yet another stint of demanding fieldwork in difficult conditions.

A week later saw the first few pups being weaned. Running around from dawn to dusk for the next month or so we managed to tag 740 of them with Red-Red flipper tags - this year's cohort colour combination. Of these we physically lifted a hundred or so to record weaning mass and collect biological samples. Given that ellie weaners can weigh anything between 80–200kg, this activity is no small feat and considered a serious challenge for any Sealer, especially this year given the reduced 2-man team. Luckily we got help from Thando (Birder), AJ (Diesel Mech), Sciya (Metkassie), Dani (Birder) and Liandri (Winder) on a few occasions, which made the work a little easier and way more fun! We can't express our gratitude enough.

With ellie harems disappearing overnight another challenge soon arrived – The Antarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*) pup weigh. Breeding season chaos in this species typically lags two months behind that of elephant seals, and thank goodness. Gazella bulls become extremely territorial during the beginning of December, when females arrive to pup, and so we had our hands full trying to catch and weigh 100 newborns at two selected monitoring sites. Again, we had fantastic help from Dani and Leandri, both keen to assist with weighing, but more so to get a chance to handle the super cute fur balls! It's hard to believe that in the past three months Yinhla and I have walked over a thousand kilometres in steel-tipped gumboots, over rough terrain, to continue the MIMMP's 39-year uninterrupted research programme (visit www.marionseals.com for more info). Somehow, during all the chaos, we've also performed frequent dedicated killer whale photo-ID observations, two elephant seal necropsies and many hours of mind-numbing data entry sessions. Apart from ongoing fur seal pup weighs, scat collections and fieldwork for other monitoring projects, we continue with the routine elephant seal tag-resight census rounds. These become notoriously difficult from December to January, when large numbers of ellies venture far inland to shed their skin during the peak moult haulout phase. The additional tasks of performing photogrammetry projects and moult sample collections have us reaching field huts well after 9pm. Fortunately moult season slows down in February, which will give us some time to catch up with outstanding data entry and the long overdue breeding season summary report.

Though the work is tough and the days are long, we often remind ourselves how much we missed the island when we were back home. Past Sealers will agree, spending a year working with marine mammals in this remote sub-Antarctic wilderness is a truly profound experience. We remain grateful for the opportunity to re-live it, especially during this difficult time when others back home are faced living with the pandemic.



Teamwork - weighing an elephant seal weaner



Joe Hope and Johnny Rogers came on Pelagic Australis with boat crew, Chris, Dion and Juliette. Director, Joe, and cameraman, Johnny, were here to film with the rest of the film crew for what was looking to be the busiest time for capturing wildlife behaviour on camera, leaving in early November. Joe spent most of his time on the beach filming penguins with Tom, while Johnny was with Ruth and Katie aboard the yacht, filming underwater.

*Above left: Johnny prepares lamb; Above right Ruth, Tom, Joe & Johnny;
Below: M77 say goodbye*



VAGRANTS



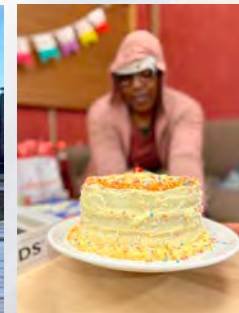
*Above left: Joe makes brownies; Above: Pelagic Australis
Right: Captain Chris gets off the boat o take some pictures;
Below right: Juliette & Dion help the sealers*



WILDLIFE: Dani and Leandri spotted a ruddy turnstone in breeding plumage in October here on Marion Island - seen from Goney Plains!

OCTOBER-DECEMBER

As well as a huge amount of tough work and field days, we've all managed to fit in a bit of fun together. It's these moments that bond us as a team and help us all to overcome the challenge of being away from home in such a challenging environment. We've danced, thrown boots, watched whales and birds through the windows and shared countless meals and games.



Above top: Yinhla throws a boot; **Above:** Frikkie & AJ brai; **Top right:** Jerusalem dance challenge; **Mid right:** Joe is the boot throwing champion; Leandri looks at her boot throw; **Bottom right:** Pat shows how to throw a boot; Mpho celebrates her birthday; Nkoane throws a boot

WEATHER

According to the METKASSIES

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| MAX WIND GUSTS | 162 (Dec) |
| TOTAL RAINFALL | 476.6 (Oct-Dec) |
| HIGHEST IN 24 HOURS | 71.6mm (Dec) |
| TOTAL DAYS WITH RAIN | 69 (Oct-Dec) |
| TOTAL DAYS > 1mm | 47 (Oct-Dec) |
| TOTAL SUNSHINE | 458.6 hours (Oct-Dec) |

| | MAXIMUM | MINIMUM |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| TEMPERATURE | 17.3°C (Dec) | -1.5°C (Oct) |
| PRESSURE | 1030.3 (Oct) | 956.0 (Dec) |
| HUMIDITY | 100 (Oct-Dec) | 17 (Dec) |

OTHER NEWS

Mice still plaguing Marion

We were all ecstatic to hear that the mouse eradication project will commence on Gough Island in 2021. Yet, the reality is they are still here on Marion, plaguing our seabirds. Many of the Wandering Albatrosses' nests had mouse holes in them and birds were failing after the fledging Round Island (which is very late in the season). Mice were also seen running around the Grey-headed Albatross colonies just weeks after they had laid their eggs.

Danielle Z. Keys (M75/7 MAPRU Birder)



Top right: AJ checks out an elephant seal near base

Right: The rockhoppers are back! Below: Below: Poem sent to the marine mammal researchers by Alana, Age 7, from Kenya



Thank you!

After some crazy admin, from the guys that know how, permits were issued to allow Base Personnel to ring the Wandering Albatross chicks. How-to-videos are been made in advance by the M76 team (just in case). At the time we had no idea a field team would be sent to the island. However, Nkoane, who had previously assisted Birders in the past, and Stephanus, a perfectionist by nature, came to the rescue and managed to ring some of the chicks before they started wandering off their nests. They did an excellent job, and this made ringing the remaining Walbie chicks a whole lot easier when we finally arrived. You guys are champions and your little Wanderers are now gliding over the oceans.

Danielle Z. Keys (M75/7 the super grateful MAPRU Birder)



MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY NEW YEAR!



Left: New Years Eve
Above clockwise from top:
Pat fixes Christmas lights
Dani & Siya decorate
Nkoane & Ruth decorate
Snowman cake by Katie
Winnie & Khuliso on
Christmas Day
Beautiful table thanks to
Winnie & Katie
Thando & Yinhla peek out
behind the tree
Mince pies by Dani, Leandri
& Tom (tasted authentic!)

DIY Marion-Style



Making the perfect gift

Hi Everyone, I am AJ and I am the diesel mechanic for M77. This is my first article for the Wanderer even though I've been here since 2019 (yoh what a disgrace) LOL =) Today I will be covering some tips and ideas as to helping you out when you are left in a pickle.

Making gifts for Christmas can be somewhat tricky as you're on an island with very limited resources. So if you are a "BOB THE BUILDER or HANDY ANDY" type of guy you will get along just fine. If you are good with your hands then you're good to go!

Here are my tips:

1. Take inventory of your resources. Examples can be wood, string, varnish & spray paint.
2. Tools check. Examples are jigsaw, drill, scissors, paint brush, soldering iron & a handsaw.
3. Internet check. Google is your friend! =) this is where you can generate your ideas from such as key chains, photo albums, island memoirs, wine stands/racks and the list goes on...

BELATED MERRY CHRISTMAS & A PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR TO YOU ALL!!

This is it for me AJ over & out, Awe my bru!!!

Recipe from the Hut: Tom's Tuna Pasta



Ingredients:

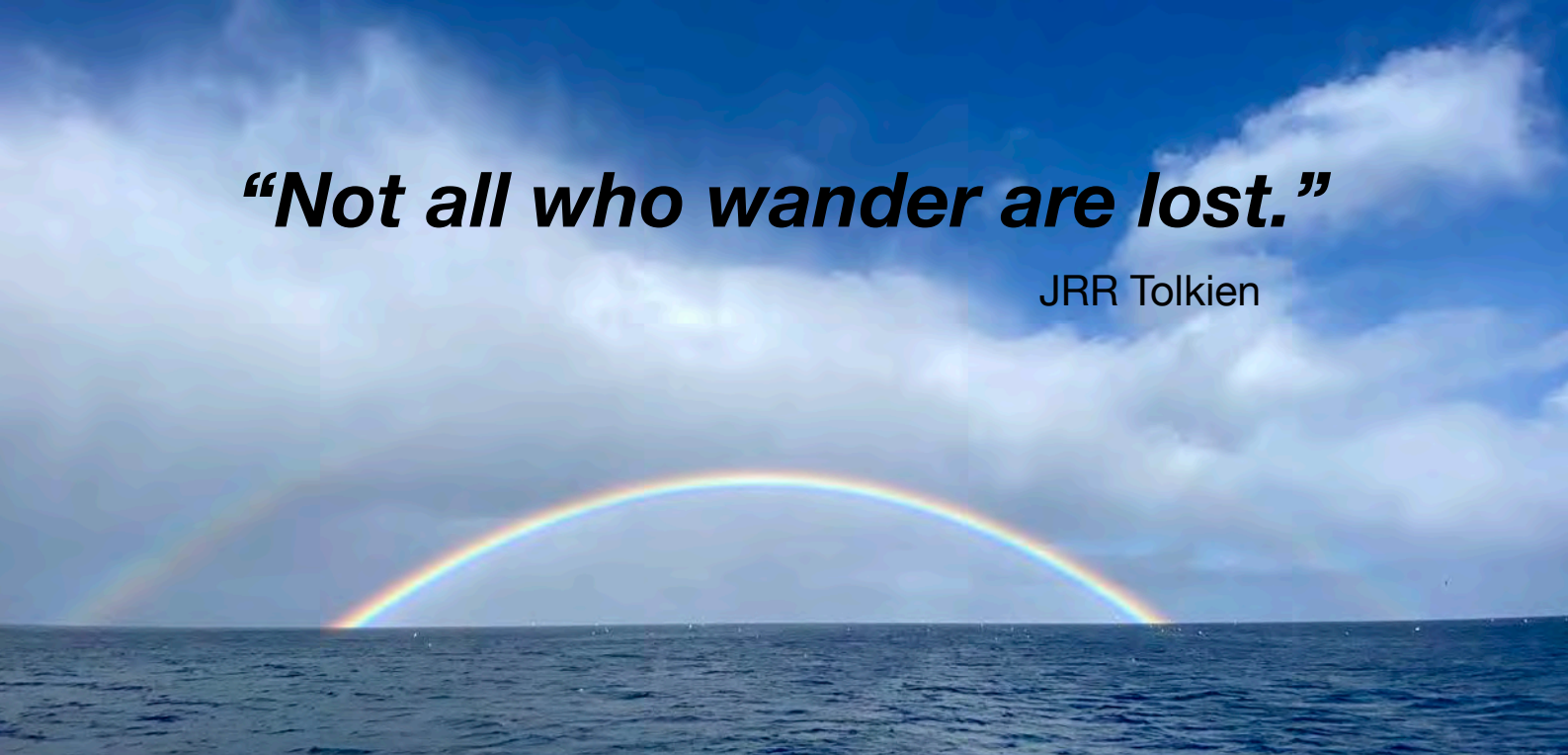
Tinned Tuna
Tin of Peas
Tinned Tomato
& Onion Mix
Mixed Herbs
Dried Onions
Garlic Flakes
Pasta

Method:

Hydrate the onions first (use freshly boiled water from a stream), then heat some oil in a pan and add the onions. Once soft, sprinkle with garlic flakes and fry for 2 minutes. Next, add tuna and peas. Cook for 5 minutes, then combine with tomato & onion mix and sprinkle with mixed herbs and pepper. Add a touch of Tabasco sauce for a little zing (or a lot of some zing zing!)! Cook for a further 5-10 minutes until bubbling. Mix with pasta (cooked as per instructions on packet). Finally, lovingly serve up to your very hungry hut companions and enjoy over a conversation about your epic Marion day!

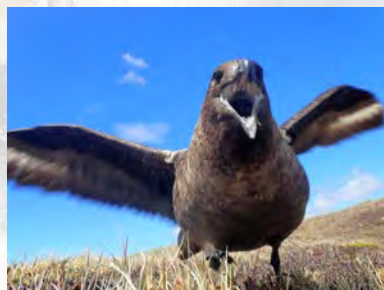
“Not all who wander are lost.”

JRR Tolkien



Coming next issue:

- Katie shares a precious wildlife moment
- Find out what's happening on the other side of the island as more people embark on Round Island Adventures
- Another fresh look from weaner, Leandri
- Weather update for January
- News from the field as birders and sealers continue their gruelling schedule
- And, of course, more recipes, photos, stories and fun!



HUTBOOK HIGHLIGHT:

“Katie & I went to see sooty chicks to film. WOW. I can honestly say being on that clifftop, looking into the eye of a parent whilst it preens a chirping fluffy chick metres from me was one of the greatest moments of my life. These birds are so special, so striking, so humbling and evocative, from their calls to their tenderness with each other and their offspring. It broke and completed my heart all at once.”

Ruth, Director Film Crew M77

