

-The Wanderer-

Marion Island Newsletter, Issue 9, December 2001



SUMMER SURVEY 2001

2001 SUMMER SURVEY OF BIRDS AND SEALS AT THE PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDS

The Prince Edward Islands support 29 species of bird and three of seal. Of the birds, 15 species are listed as Threatened or Near-Threatened in the most recent (2000) edition of *Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*.



A transmitter is placed on a Macaroni penguin

For several species, it was thought that the Prince Edward Islands supported substantial proportions of the world's populations, e.g. Wandering Albatross about 33%, Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross and Eastern Rockhopper Penguin each about 20%. This led to international interest in establishing the sizes of populations at the Prince Edward Islands, especially Prince Edward Island (PEI), which has never been comprehensively surveyed in summer when most of the seabird breed. For example, the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) *Penguin Conservation and Assessment Plan* recommended that surveys of penguins be conducted at PEI.

The lack of a previous summer survey at PEI has resulted from RV *Agulhas* travelling to Antarctica in summer. However, the requirement for information on seabirds and marine mammals, particularly at PEI, led the Department of Environmental Affairs and

Tourism to allocate 20 days of RV *Africana's* time for the 2001 summer survey. As it is not possible for the limited number of field workers who spend the year at Marion Island (MI) to count all the seabirds there, it was decided simultaneously to conduct a survey of MI. Accordingly, *Africana* left Cape Town December 12 with a group of 26 expeditioners. Of these, 23 were drawn from Marine and Coastal Management, the universities of Cape Town, Pretoria and Witwatersrand, Robben Island Museum and Western Cape Nature Conservation Board. Also in the group were a medical doctor and two film personnel initiating a documentary on MI. *Africana* arrived off PEI on the early morning of 17 December and put a team of six persons ashore. The remainder of the party was landed the same day at MI, where it received substantial assistance from the MI 58 team. After surveying PEI, the team of six there transferred to MI. The summer party left MI on the morning of 26 December and was back in Cape Town on 31 December 2001.



Sam with a light mantled sooty albatross

The main objectives of the survey were achieved and a wealth of invaluable data gathered. These confirmed, for example, that the Prince Edward Islands support substantial proportions of the world's populations of Wandering Albatross and Indian

Yellow-nosed Albatross. It was also shown that there has been a massive decrease in the population of Eastern Rockhopper Penguin at MI, from an estimated 173000 pairs in 1994, 150000 pairs in 1997 to fewer than 60000 pairs in 2001. This accords with large decreases in most populations of rockhopper penguins worldwide. Gentoo Penguin and Crozet Shag (Imperial Cormorant) remain of conservation concern at the Prince Edward Islands; Sooty Albatross and Lightmantled Albatross may well also be decreasing. Conversely it was shown that the population of Sub Antarctic Fur Seals at PEI has increased about 10 fold.

It must have been disconcerting to the MI 58 team to anticipate a massive invasion in the midst of its schedule. In spite of this it gave us a terrific welcome, provided invaluable assistance and ensured a memorable Christmas. We are deeply indebted to it. Wilna Wilkinson led one of the bird counting teams on MI; Samantha Petersen used her veterinary skills to administer drugs to seals and co-ordinated much of the MI work. Our thanks too to Antarctica and Islands for invaluable support and advice, and to Captain Hall of *Africana* and his crew for welcoming us aboard and ensuring our safe return.

Prof. Rob Crawford

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!



Our imported Father Christmas with the special gift to MI-58.

Since the beginning of the expedition, everyone was looking forward to Christmas. Some had presents from home given nine months ago not to be opened until Christmas. We started our preparations two weeks beforehand, keeping in mind that the summer survey visit will leave little time for making presents. The Wet Lab was out of bounds for various secret reasons. With the *Africana* arrived more parcels and thus more supplies from home (some asked for and others surprises sent by families).

On Christmas Eve we had a touching church service led by Erika. We sang Christmas carols and entertained the *Africana's* officers and crew with a Christmas song to which they had a hearty reply.

This was the time we were waiting for: opening presents from home on the passage floor in Sea View, causing a few tears, but also much laughter.



On Christmas Day an important tradition was celebrated as first time Marionites were initiated with cold mire water. Actually, the initiators enjoyed it more than the victims.

In the late afternoon it was time for Christmas Dinner.

Tables were carried to the lounge and 38 people gathered for a delicious meal prepared by our summer survey cook, Dandy. Steph surprised us with an awards ceremony. Noteworthy awards were: Damduiker: André from 50/50 for falling into mires; Seal Bite: Beneke, and he has the scars to prove it; Lava Lips: Following Vincent's passionate embrace of grey lava on Karookop

Father Christmas arrived with a big 'Ho-Ho' and handed out gifts and in particular a special handmade gift for MI-58.

After dinner it was a mixed scene of red Christmas hats and white icebergs at the Crane Point. An adventurous team set off to Duikers to investigate one of many small icebergs.

On 26 December the summer survey team left and we were 12 again. Sarette's birthday was celebrated on the 28th of December and once again it was time for a hearty breakfast, tea in the lab and a lovely braai in the evening.

The early morning of the 31st was beautiful. A full moon shone brightly into my room and I couldn't sleep. I could have closed my blind, but who wants to sleep at such a beautiful sight. The dinner table was decorated with lanterns for an Oriental stir-fry. The trick of eating with chop-sticks was tested, but eventually most of us resorted to the common knife and fork.

After dinner all the stage personalities stepped to the forefront and we had many laughs as the karaoke progressed. At 12 o'clock a big bonfire was lit and champagne popped to celebrate New Year.

At the Crane Point, enjoying the heat of the bonfire, we admired the beautiful full moon reflected on the Southern Ocean. Some stood there, curious about 2002, remembering that none of us spared a thought for 2002 on New Year's Eve of 2001.

What more does Marion have in store for us? Did we make the most of this past year, and are there still things to experience, places to see with only four months left? Time is running out fast and soon the *Agulhas* will be here to take us back to life in South Africa.

How privileged I am to spend 2001/2002 with 11 friends on such a stunning island as Marion.

SQ2

Wandering around the Circle of Life

The wandering albatross, *Diomedea exulans*, was named after Diomedes, king of Argos, the bravest hero in the Greek army. When he died, his companions were inconsolable and were metamorphosed into birds, to wander over the vast ocean until eternity.



How can one ever forget your first sighting of a wandering albatross? On our second day on the *Agulhas*, sailing to the island, we saw him, graceful in flight, soaring on outstretched wings that can reach up to three meters. Whilst gliding with the grace of a king we ran around on the ship to keep him in view. We hung over the railing aiming to get perfect pictures, and in the end we stood there staring at this majestic bird that flies effortlessly.

We set foot on the island and even while greeting M57 members we were looking at the several wanderers dotting the island landscape. Each guarded its precious chick. Looking at this, Sam's eyes filled with tears "I can't believe that I am seeing them in real life".

A month after our arrival there is an obvious development at the wanderers' nests. With the never-ending task of feeding their fast growing offspring the parents can leave their 30 day old chick by itself.

Once I lay a couple of meters away from a nest, watching with interest how a chick played with vegetation surrounding its nest. He threw pieces of moss into the air and behaved like a typical youngster, inquisitive and restless. Its parent landed close to the nest approaching the chick with its neck bent forward. The hungry chick could not control his

excitement. He waited on his nest, begging for food. The parent obligingly regurgitated its food and fed its chick.



The island is covered in snow. It was time for us to ring the chicks in the study colonies. The Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology runs this study. When threatened chicks sometimes vomit oil and stomach contents as a defence mechanism. I held a chick for Sam to ring. I felt the soft warm down feathers, its rapid heartbeat against my own. This reminded me about the vulnerability of this endangered species, it's continued existence fully dependent on us as human beings.

It's August and the chicks are growing fast, its downy feathers making space for adult plumage. What a funny sight, even more restless now they wander off their nests with funky hairstyles, visiting each other, bored, not sitting still for a minute. They flap their wings, preparing for the day when they will take their first flight.

It is September. The chicks are almost fully covered in adult plumage now. They jump up and down, using the wind to lift them into the air.

October was the month where 1277 wanderer fledglings were counted on census.

"Been around the island to count you guys for it is almost fledging time.

You'll be leaving the island soon.

You make me think of the days when I was at your stage.

Could not yet fly although I kept on giving it a try.

Spreading your wings, facing the wind. Lifting your wanderer feet, your head lifted towards the sky.

Jumping up and down trying to take off.

Hold on little buddy, the day is not far when you'll be gone. I hope for you to come back one day, to build your nest and have your own chick, which in turn will fledge."

In December most fledglings left the island. Once again the field is scattered with white spots; adult birds have returned after more than a year at sea.



Wanderers mate approximately every second year, being monogamous they establish a pair-bond for life with no known divorces. With their majestic courtship dances, bill vibratings and whines, they mutually preen each other before and during copulation. Some birds are at this stage still calling for their mate to return. With the threat that longline fishing and the availability of food hold for this species, one can only hope that each bird's call will be answered.

Seeing the first wanderer incubating an egg gives me feeling of melancholy. We know that this egg will hatch soon, and not long after that the circle would be complete. The island will look the same than that very first day we arrived. Wanderers on nests with their necks stretched, each guarding its precious chick. A reminder of our own circle on the island, completed when it will be our time to leave a place, which we have to keep reminding ourselves, is not our home.

Wilna

Killer Creek

It started like any other day. A few of us were about, others sleeping in, one was on duty: killer duty.

At the sight of the first dorsal fin cutting the water beyond Paddy Rocks the alarm was sound and Marion Base put on Killer Alert: large male, swimming north in zone one*. The loud rattling of catwalks announced our arrival at the Crane Point where a brave few quickly slipped down the thick rope to the very tip of the last rock. The male came past, as did the rest of the pod, which then disappeared into the small gully next to the Crane Point. After a short while we got curious, as the killers never spend more than a few moments in the

gully before they move on. Scrambling over the rocks past the crane I saw them, one next to the other, with their heads very close to the rocks, moving up and down with the moderate swell.

Must be rubbing themselves against the rocks as they do in the many documentaries we've seen, I thought. Only after observing them for a while I saw the attraction: a small seal perched on a narrow ledge, barely beyond the reach of the killers. The seal was high enough for the killers not to be able to reach him, but low enough for the swell to wash him off the ledge a few times. Hurriedly he would then try to get back up, every time remarkably avoiding the killers with their open and ready jaws.

The killers tried all sorts of tricks to get to him. Once the male turned around and splashed with its huge tail, the smaller ones tried to move up with the swell, sticking their heads clean out of the water, but every time the seal managed to either stay up on the ledge or crawl back up.



By this time the whole team has gathered around the gully, staring down at this incredible scene unfolding before our eyes. We were feeling sorry for the seal; it looked so bewildered and scared, but we were also hoping the killers would get a meal. The ever-present giant petrels impatiently kept their distance out in the bay waiting for the seemingly inevitable. It must have been the seal's lucky day as the killers gave up after about twenty minutes of trying and slowly left.

We sat there, amazed at what we saw, incredibly thankful that we could be witness to such an event. We have seen killers hunting in zone three** with a large gathering of petrels many times, but never thought we would see it up close in our own backyard. Having sympathy for the scared hunted and the hungry hunter I was relieved that I had no part to play in this event. I was only to observe. Once again Marion changed the way I think about life.

Beneke

*Zone One: 0-5m offshore
Zone Two: 5-50m offshore

**Zone Three: 50-500m offshore

Zone Four: 500m offshore to the horizon



Orcas showing off their teeth

Liewe Ma

Dit gaan baie goed hier hoe gaan dit met Ma. Ma kersfeesvader kom nie meer met 'n slee nie hy kom sommir op 'n skip. En die posman ok. Selfs sonnir dat die robbe hille gebyt het. Ek dink hille het saam met die voelmense gekom met die Afriekaana. Ma hier is klynhsies vol robbe en dit ryk ok so. Die robbe het tog hille bytkans ingekry want hille het ons lyer gebyt Ma. Sommir so deer 'n syl en sy broek en sy ghamboot. Hy is darim nou weer oraait want Eskiew een is 'n goeie mediek ok.

Ma op ons round ailind het ons toe nie yliens gekry nie maar toe kom hier mos sommir 'n heele skip vol yliens aan. Dit is nou die voelmense en die posman en so aan. Hille is almal baie nice Ma maar hille is nie ylandirs nie. Party was darim ou ylanders. Dit was baie soos tyk ouvir maar hille het darem nie oorgevat nie ons is nog hier. Baie van hille het gesê die yland is nie soos wat hille gehoor het dit is nie. Hille sê dis meer troopies soos Moeriesjjs. Maar Ma ek weet van Moeriesjjs en die mense daar loop in swembroeke rond. So nou weet ek nie of hierdie mense maar yt bedagsaamhyt ghorteks en ghamboots en misse en hanskoene gedra het nie. En van hille het selfs die klippe gesoen as die wind waai net om te wys hille hou tog van die grond waarop hille loop.

Ma ons melk word nou biekie out hoor. Dit het sikke blops in ons noem dit kotsils want dit is nogal hoe dit is. Nou drink ons dieeet koffie. Dis nou nie dat dit ons maar maak nie maar mens kan nie anders as om dit te eet nie. Verder vang ek nou kelpvlee ook Ma. Dit is vlee al kan hille nie vlieg nie. Hille bly op silke snotterige geel gras wat in die see groei en dan ytspoel. Op die ou ynde gaan die mysie wat saam met my werk al die werk in 'n teesis sit. Dit is 'n ding wat doktirs skryf om hille graat te kry. Ma weet mos. Maar ek gaan nie ook 'n teesis skryf nie want ek skryf liewir vir Ma briewe en annir stories oor die yland.

Elkeen het maar sy ding wat hy moet doen. Die annir mysies wat in ons lab werk is baie kompleks maar hille is fênsie en skryf dit Biocomplexity. Die een dra 'n heele rigsak vol stikkies azzoerella plante van die een kant van die yland na die annir kant en die annir een tel blaarkies onnir die miekroeskoop. Dis nie dieselfde as om skape te tel nie Ma want dis nie gemaklik om op die miekroeskoop aan die slaap te raak nie. Yntlik werk ons alvier vir SAGA. Dit betekin subantartiese goggas en azzoerellas.

Nou wil Ma seekir weet wat is 'n ylandir. Dit is maar net as mens lief word vir hierdie plek dan word jy 'n ylandir en hyl as jy weg gaan maar die lyer het altyd meer te sê. Hy sê ons is almal dieselle as ons ylandirs is so ons mysies moet ok kan doen wat die mans kan doen. Dis seekir ok hoekom die mans in die span dan af en toe byerig raak want hille is dan mos ok soos ons mysies. Ma sê vir Ouma sy moenie worrie oor die kielir fever ding nie want dis 'n goeie siekte. Wat wel gevaarlik is is ekspidiesjin fever. Dit is 'n probleem met mens se oë want dan sien jy net die slegte dinge van mense raak en dis nie goed nie. So daarvoor is ons maar versigtig Ma.

Ons kietaar speeliry gaan goed aan ons kan al almal A majoor speel maar die mysie wat saam met my werk kan al baie liekies speel. Net party ken sy nie heeltetal nie en stop elke keer by Agge nee Fm. Ons is waarlik nou 'n span Ma want as iemand nie hier wou gewees het nie kon hille saam met die skip met die voelmense hystoe gegaan het en hille het nie. So Ma moet seblief vir die mense by die hys en ons borge Absa bank sê dat dit beetir met ons gaan as op daai proegram van biek brather want al kan ons nie 'n miljoen rand wen nie wen ons 'n plekkie in die son.

Groetnis Kleinsus Erika

Kleinsus tells Mom about the visitors they had. Although it was like take over the people were nice and did not take over. A Seal bit the leedir but his okay now cos Eskiew one is also a good mediek. She asks Mom to tell everyone that although the team cant win a million rand they win a place in the sun and that is mach better.

Weather statistics for the month:

Average Pressure	1004.4hPa
Highest Pressure	1021.0hPa
Lowest Pressure	977.4hPa
Average temperature	6.8C
Highest temperature	14.0°C
Lowest temperature	1.8°C
Sunshine hours for the month	122.8h
Total rainfall	191.8mm

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Thank you! Marion would not have been the same without your support!