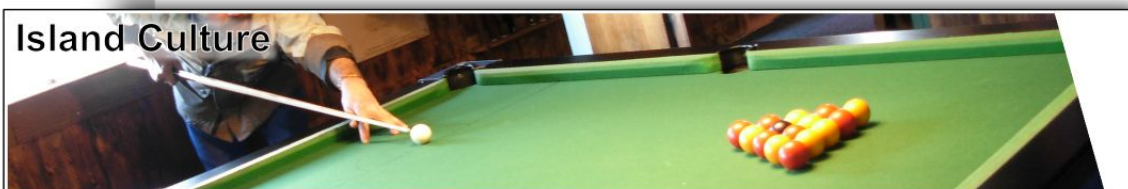




Thoughts from a
Marion sealer



Island Culture



All Grown up



The facts about Sheatbills



Majestic Kings and the appeal of Penguins



Thoughts from a Marion sealer

There are few places left on earth where you can experience a pristine wilderness a place still wild and beautiful, an ecosystem untouched or affected by man. The treacherous nature of the weather and isolation of this island has thankfully preserved its unspoilt beauty. Each day beholds a new adventure a chance to see a wilderness still in the same state it was hundreds of years ago. Before coming to Marion I thought I had an idea of what I was in for. Yet in my wildest dreams never did I expect it to be such an amazing opportunity. To be able to participate in the best and longest seal project in the world is not only a privilege but an honour at the same time.



Every morning after I wake up a sense of optimism begins to flow through my veins the thought of witnessing something new to science gives me the courage to brave freezing temperatures ghastly winds and weather so bad it chills your bones. We have already witnessed many great things and some of the highlights include watching Killer Whales effortlessly catching seal pups in the shallows, between the kelp beds. Every time we see these majestic giants your heart skips a beat and after eight hours of sitting and observing nothing but rain and a few noisy penguins the sound of a Killers blow hole makes you jump out of a warm sleeping bag, into the cold wet weather. Forgetting to put your boots on, you run over sharp black lava's in the hope of capturing a nice photo, or witnessing a predation.

Many times you come away empty handed, but everytime you get a nice photo or witness something special, a sense of satisfaction seeps through your body. Making sitting in the sleet and snow for 8 hours seem so worthwhile. Walking over the rough beaches clambering over razor sharp rocks, we census all the beaches around the island. The elephant seals with their sharp vision see us approaching from miles away making censusing difficult. We lift our binoculars on countless occasions, trying to make out a tag number, as well as watch the huge grumpy male behind you. A sense of adrenaline rushes through your body every time you hear the low deep croak of a big 3000kg adult male lying just a few feet away from you. These creatures are marvels of nature and it is difficult to comprehend the complex physiological adaptations these animals have to be able to dive of depth's of up to 2000m, or being able to hold their breath for hours. They are truly amazing animals.

Capturing an adult fur seal with a net is both exciting and scary at the same time. It involves hurtling over slippery rocks dodging aggressive bulls with fierce looking teeth and finally placing a net delicately over the chosen victim as not to hurt it. We then sit on them to prevent them from escaping or moving around.

The strength these 40kg females saps the energy out of you, while you struggle to epoxy a device on it and tag it, a process which lasts about half an hour. I remember in the beginning how even catching and weighing 100 pups was a daunting task! We have become adapt in the skill of leopard crawling using the element of surprise to our advantage subconsciously checking the wind direction. We are slowly becoming at one with nature, and with it our job becoming easier by the day.



Many people asked me why on earth I was going to an isolated island in the middle of the Southern Ocean to study marine mammals. To be honest I didn't know myself until I arrived here. Most of the mammals we are studying are at the top of the food chain. By understanding these creatures we begin to get a better understanding of the environment, for which we too depend on. Identifying changes in the populations allows a better insight into understanding other aspects such as global climate change, changes in prey abundance, and they all add up to give us an idea of the state of the environment. Every day, we go about our work weighing seal pups, censusing elephant seals, doing 10 hour Killer whale observations, all in the hope of getting a better idea of what's happening in this vast expanse called the Southern Ocean. For the Southern Ocean has a huge influence on environments all over the world. Whether it will give us a better insight into understanding this complex ecosystem we can only hope. But by participating in this programme we are experiencing wonderful rare events witnessed by so few people. As young scientists we are living our dream.

Everyday we experience these events, I have to keep reminding myself. I am at work, how fortunate I am to have such a job. Marion you have opened my eyes awakened my soul. I look forward with anticipation to what lies ahead.

By Derek van der Merwe



Island Culture

Where has anyone seen a place that is so much full of free time, fun and quietness; where you can do anything at your own time. Whether it is work, sleep, reading , watching movies or just chatting, it is up to you when you do it.

Anyway this is one of the Island secrets of just killing time when the weather conditions seem to be not friendly for us to work outdoors. It has just now become like a routine to make sure that I have to challenge the diesel mechanic for a pool game, although I challenge the other game players which they have their unique techniques. You get players that are manipulative, sophisticated, easy going and plain dizzy which changes your own style. I really enjoy beating him in this game(diesel mech), as he does not like losing. I never feel good either going to bed without bettering him at the game, so the game will continue till late without realising that it was time to go to bed.

That's the story.....!!!!.....hmmm.....!!!!coool.....!!!!!!!

Cheers!!!
Kholekile



Sponsor of the Month:



All Grown up

I woke up in the morning of 21 July and it was business as usual as I was doing day shift.

I went down to take sea water temperature and on my way back it struck me that it was actually my birthday.

I looked back at my life and realized that I was blessed with 34 years of healthy life and I felt so grateful to God.

Those who judge a book by its cover will still see a young man and of course there are those that can still call me young man, of which I can't run away from.

The team did a great job to make my birthday special, the cake, special presents made here on the island, the décor and the music and I'm so grateful. We sat and chatted a bit and later on the Metkassies took to the stage and of course we didn't disappoint. I would like to thank all those who wished me a happy birthday, Antarctica and Islands personnel and friends and family.

I suppose some would like to know whether the Metkassies are exploring the island or just simply enjoying the coziness of the Met office. Well, not yet, it is still too cold for me out there, it is still hibernation time. Come summer we will be out and about. We have however walked to the closest areas, checked out the seals, penguins and the birds.

We did some fur seal pup weighing and was a lot of fun, Mpho's story is even funnier.

The guys will say 'smile for the camera' and it's so difficult, the pups are so heavy and one also has to be cautious when handling them, it won't be nice to feel their sharp teeth. At some point I had to catch one using a rope attached to a plastic pipe and walked it to Martin and Kholekile for weighing. Martin said it was like I was walking a dog and for me with my rural background and thinking in pictures, what came into my mind was people in urban areas in the morning or evening walking their dogs and the people in the movies. I'm saying this because where I come from we whistle and the dogs come running, jumping at you with excitement while you are getting dirty all that time. What I was doing actually reminded me of my days of looking after cattle. I used a rope attached to a stick to catch a cow so I can milk it or clean and disinfect its wounds. I also accompanied Ben to ring Wandering Albatross chicks. He told me what they can do and offered me a jacket so mine doesn't get messed up. I reluctantly took the jacket and told him that I'll be fine, I was part of the team that ringed the Tristan Albatross chicks during Takeover last year at Gough and not even one of them puked. Once we got started I couldn't believe what was happening, wind direction was also a determining factor. It was cold so the oil was taking just seconds to turn into fat but it was a lot of action and fun. I was wearing two pairs of gloves and that was the end of them and as for my rain pants, I think they still smell something fishy.

That's it from me, so long and God bless!!!

Nkoane



The facts about Sheathbills

Sheathbills, or as the islanders say "Paddies", are the only terrestrial bird found on Marion Island. Their scientific name is *Chionis minor marionensis*. These small birds may appear to be cute and cuddly at first, but if one delves deeper, their secrets can be learnt! They are predominantly found living in biologically influenced areas near coastal vegetation and the shoreline. Their habitats are influenced by a number of animals, including: King, Gentoo and Macaroni penguins as well as Fur and Elephant seals. Paddies feed mainly on the waste products created by these animals. However they also forage in the coastal vegetation for small invertebrates.

Over 1000 paddies have been banded on Marion Island despite them being nearly impossible to catch. Bands are put out in three separate study sites around the island. Each study site has its own band colours. The Mixed Pickle study site has white bands, Repettos has yellow and orange bands and the Base site has yellow and green bands.



Sheathbills have a long breeding season, which stretches from early December to late March. In this time they rear between 1 and 3 chicks depending on the abundance of food.

Finally, the sheathbill that considers Base his territory is Yellow AAM. His mate is Yellow AAW. They nest under the old sheep pen on Boulders beach, where this year they reared one chick, which was given the band Green HS.

James Wilshire



Majestic Kings and the appeal of Penguins

Penguins are cool, well that's how we feel is the best way to describe them. It seems everyone loves penguins, since they are probably the most recognisable and enigmatic characters of the Sub Antarctic.

On Marion they are the Kings, Gentoos, Rockhoppers and Macaronis – who swim, breed, feed, dive and rockclimb their way through life on the island. At this cold time of the year there are Kings and Gentoos on Marion Island.

The King Penguins are the sleek and streamlined “executive” penguin model. We only get to see them on land where they seem slightly silly and awkward. They say that penguins are flightless, but you just have to look at them in the water and you can see they do fly, just not through the air. Kings are large penguins, around 95cm tall on average, and they have beautiful striking colours. King colonies are very noisy and smelly. Incredibly, the parent penguins find their way through the thousands of penguins in the colony to their own chick by call recognition. They form large breeding colonies of tens of thousands of Kings. Our closest large King colony from Marion Base is at Archway, which is an hour walk from base.

More fun is on the way with the arrival of the Rockhoppers and Macaroni penguins in the next few months!

Delia



Climate Stats: July 2009



Pressure

Maximum	1035.2 hPa
Average Maximum	1031.3 hPa
Average	1010.5 hPa
Average Minimum	992.4 hPa
Minimum	982.1 hPa



Temperature

Maximum	12.4 °C
Average Maximum	6.0 °C
Average	3.5 °C
Average Minimum	0.9 °C
Minimum	-2.9 °C



Humidity

Maximum	98 %
Average	80 %
Minimum	52 %



Wind

Maximum Gust	30.9 m/s (111.24 km/h)
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Rainfall

Total	144.2 mm
Highest in 24 hours	34.4 mm
Total days without rain	8 days
Total days >1mm	17 days



Sunshine

Total	82.6 hours
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Marion 66 team members:

Asanda Phiri – Field Assistant (Gogga)

Ben Dilley – Field Assistant (Birder)

Delia Davies – Field Assistant (Birder)

Derek van der Merwe – Field Assistant (Sealer)

Dianah Mabizela – Meteorologist (snr)

James Wilshire – Field Assistant (Gogga)

Johan Hoffman – Radio Tech (deputy leader)

Kholekile Cita – Medic (team leader)

Mark White – Diesel Mechanic

Marlene van Onselen – Field Assistant (Birder)

Martin Postma – Field Assistant (Sealer)

Mia Wege – Field Assistant (Sealer)

Mpho Koalepe – Meteorologist

Nangaadzhishumi Nefehere – Field Assistant (Sealer)

Nkoane Mathabatha – Meteorologist

Sponsors:

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WORLDSPACE

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RAATS



FAMILY WINES

Thank you guys for giving us a little bit of home to take along to the unknown.



This Month we had to send a colleague home. He was a valued team member & friend to us.

Wherever you are Doc, you are still part of our family.

We miss you.

-Marion Team 66