

The Wanderer

June 2022

Diary of an M79er - 'Marion first timer'

- The Magical Island -

Tour of the Base

The Butternut Hotel

Meet...

the M79 Team



Circle of Life

Part 1: Island splendour

The Little Chomper

CONTENTS



3 LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

4 MEET THE TEAM

8 TOUR OF THE BASE
- The Butternut Hotel

12 TAKE-OVER MEMORIES

13 THE LITTLE CHOMPER

15 MEMORABLE SHOTS

18 THE MAGICAL ISLAND

19 M79

- Team memories

20 CIRCLE OF LIFE

- Part 1: Island Splendour

23 ISLAND LIFE

24 WEATHER

- for the brave

25 THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

COVER IMAGE:
Wandering Albatross
chick
(*Diomedea exulans*)
Michael Ross





letter from the *editors*

Sub-Antarctic Marion Island. What a breathtaking place. Every time I set foot on a *Blechnum* slope (dominant fern species on the island) or cautiously walk upon the mirey marshlands (as these can be quite a hazard if they catch you off guard), I feel both privileged and humbled all at once. At the moment, the valleys and coastal flats are dotted with white fluffy albatross chicks, while northern giant petrels are soaring the skies. It is my second overwintering period, and I'm still amazed at the pristine island environment.

Marion has been treating us well these past few months, the team is slowly becoming a family and we are truly looking forward to the rest of our overwintering period. I hope that this first edition of *The Wanderer* will keep you entertained! Enjoy.

Elsa van Ginkel
Editor

Co-editor



I fell in love with Marion Island the first time I came here in 2019 for the takeover voyage. Its impeccable features are beyond what words can describe. I knew there and then that I wanted to come to spend a year as an over-winterer. It took time for my family to accept that I would be gone for a year when I first introduced them to the idea until they better understood the passion I had for the work I do and for the island itself.

It is indeed a blessing and an achievement to be here.

It has also been a great time so far: learning the work, getting to know each other as a team and getting used to the *M79ers* family. It's going to be a good year!

Tankiso H. Moso
Co-Editor

Meet...

the M79 Team

Diesel Mechanic



Sanele Action Mkhize

31 years
Kwesikabhanana isigodi
isiZulu

Communications Engineer



Gladys Chelimo Kemei

29 years
Kericho, Kenya
Swahili

Base Engineer



Tshimangadzo Jufter Munyai

35 years
Tshivhulani
Tshivenda

SANSA Electronics Engineer



Tankiso H. Moso (TK)

29 years
Mthwalume, Portshepstone
isiZulu

Chef



**Ntlangemhlophe Sanele
Sukude Nombekela (Sanza)**

31 years
Mthatha
IsiXhosa

Medical Orderly



Mndeni Aaron Hlatshwayo

35 years
Umkhondo/Piet Retief
IsiZulu

The Wanderer - Meet the Team

Environmental Control Officer



Masithembi Mishumo
(Mish)

26 years
Thohoyandou
Tshivenda

**Assistant
Environmental Control Officer**



Gcobani Tshangana

32 years
Cape Town
Xhosa

Astrophysicist (UKZN)



Austine Acro Gumba
(Austin)

31 years
Rusinga Island, Kenya
Swahili, English and Luo

O & C Birder



Samuel Tebogo Posie Peta
(Sam)

27 years
Tzaneen
Sepedi

NMU Birder



Lucy Smyth

27 years
Cape Town
English

O & C Birder



Andile Ace Mdluli

30 years
Richard's Bay
isiZulu

O & C Birder - Oceans and Coasts Seabird Field Assistant

UKZN - University of KwaZulu-Natal

NMU Birder – Nelson Mandela University

The Wanderer - Meet the Team

**Senior
Meteorological Technician**



Thendo Sikhwari

**30 years
Vuwani, Limpopo
Tshivenda**

Meteorological Technician



Tanganedzani Tshitavhe

**27 years
Thohoyandou Block-G
Tshivenda**

Meteorological Technician



Siphesihle Faltein (Sihle)

**28 years
Mthatha
IsiXhosa**

MIMMP Sealer



Banele Dosi

**31 years
East London
IsiXhosa**

MIMMP Killer whaler



Monica Leitner

**31 years
Pretoria
English**

MIMMP Sealer



Michael Ross (Mike)

**25 years
Westville, Durban
English**

***MIMMP - Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme**

The Wanderer - Meet the Team

MFM Ecologist



Elsa van Ginkel

26 years
Pretoria
Afrikaans

MFM Ecologist



Vhuawelo Simba

28 years
Tshaula Masiwane
Tshivenda

Geomorphologist



Abuyiselwe Nguna (Abu)

31 years
Queenstown
IsiXhosa

***MFM** - Mouse-Free-Marion

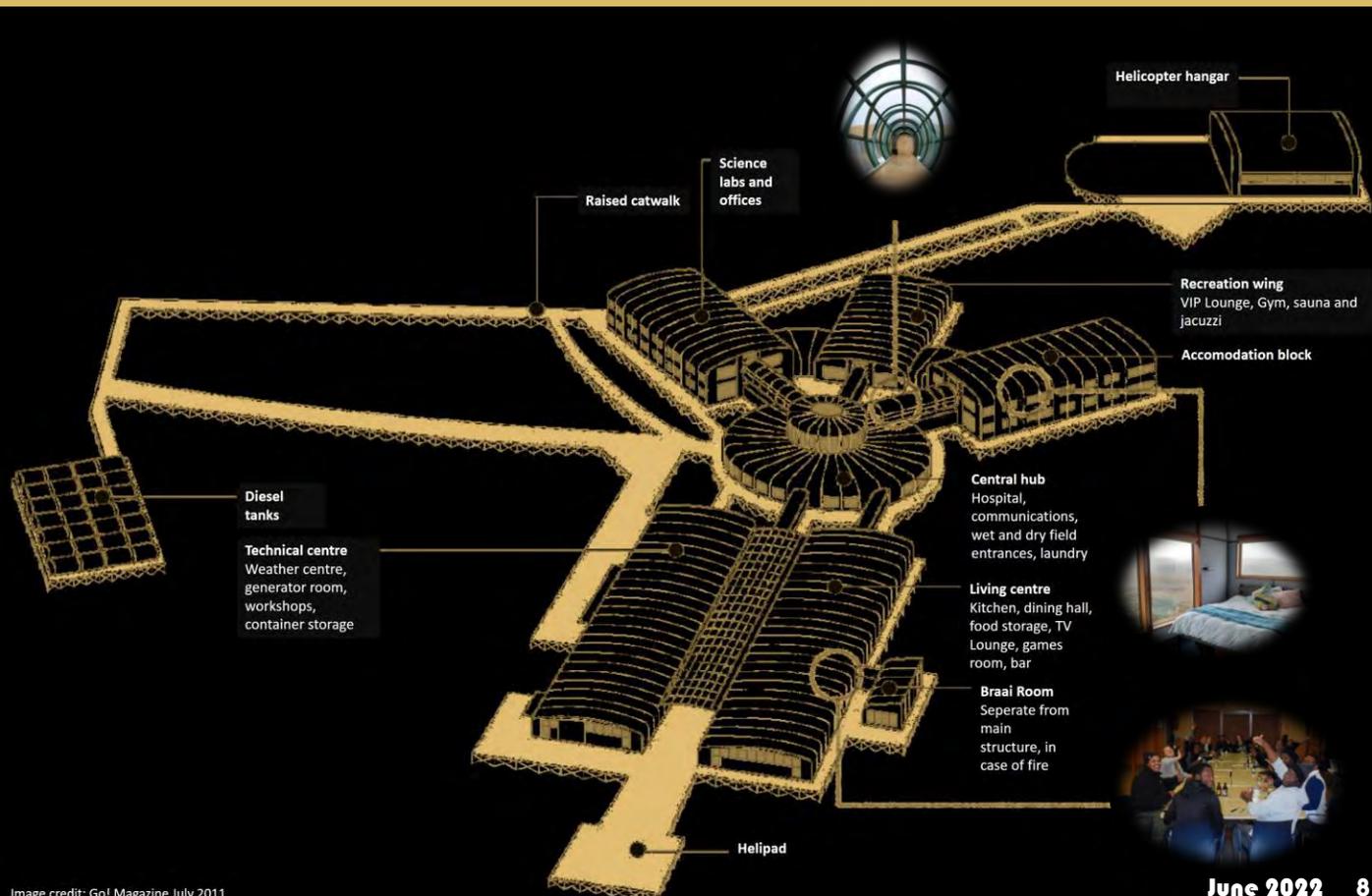
What a privilege to share this truly amazing island with such a special group of people. We all have our different backgrounds and expertise; and together, we will make this year a memorable one!



Tour of Base

- The Butternut Hotel

This modern research base was specifically designed to house approximately 80 people during the takeover period. It was constructed over 8 years and has been in use since 2011. It covers an area of 6000 m^2 and stands 28 m above sea level. Marion Island Research Base will be our home for at least the next 11 months, where the base personnel will be maintaining the base, while the field personnel will be conducting research on a variety of topics, including weather conditions, seals, birds, mice, invertebrates and geomorphology.





The Butternut Hotel as seen from the Agulhas II.

We arrived on the island via helicopter and were met by a few of the M78 overwintering team, welcoming us to this pristine island.

The base is a bright yellow amongst the pale grey-green colours of the island, with some of the most prominent scoria hills towering in the background.

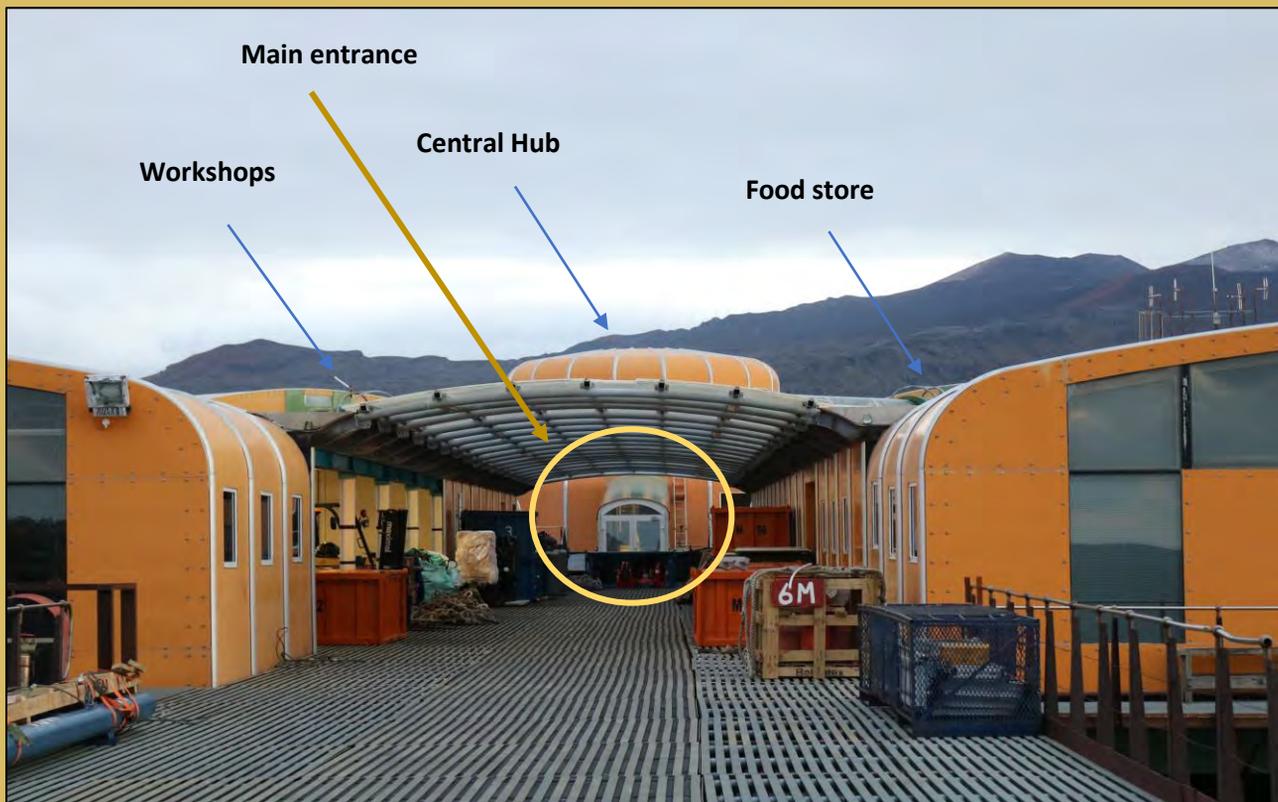


The view from the Research base: Helicopter called 'The Squirrel' from *Ultimate Heli*.



S.A. Agulhas II on sub-Antarctic waters during the annual relief voyage to Marion Island.

The Wanderer – Tour of Base



View upon arrival: Marion Research Base.

If you walk towards the main entrance, you have the workshops and waste room on your left, with the entrances to the food store and the kitchen area on your right. As you proceed through the main entrance, you stumble upon the boot room (as no boots are allowed within base) and the dry rooms (to dry all of your wet field gear when you get back from the extreme weather of the sub-Antarctic); which then leads to the central hub. The central hub itself consists of the clinic, movie house and laundry room.



The boot room



Gym

The central hub has three wings on the bottom floor: the science laboratories, the yellow block accommodation (with gym, sauna and jacuzzi) and the green block accommodation. The top floor of the central hub consists of the radio room and phone booth, with two hamster tunnels leading to either the science offices (with library and conference room) or the blue accommodation block. The dining area, as well as the TV lounge, games room, bar and braai room, are all housed next to the food store and kitchen.



The view from the Braai room



The bar and games area in full swing

Take-over Memories

SANSA Engineers



Sealers and Killer whalers



O & C Birders



NMU Birders



Medics



Mouse-free Marion



SAWS



Geomorphologists



M79 Chef



Astrophysicists



Environmental Control Officers



The Little Chomper

- by Michael Ross

Sub-Antarctic fur seal pups (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*, for those interested) are just about the sweetest things you can imagine. As I write this, the pups are around 180 days old and extremely plump. They weigh around 18 kg, though we have encountered a couple of whoppers weighing over 30 kg! The pups are essentially little balls of cuteness, finding their feet, or more correctly their flippers, in the wonderful paradise that is Marion Island.

The beaches are packed with furry, rotund balls, which haven't a care in the world. They spend all day playing in the rivers, jumping out of the water as if performing in a circus, or napping peacefully tucked away from the wind.

Walking near a squad of pups, one is occasionally startled by distinctly human-sounding scream emanating from one of the pups, or by an adorable growl which gently rumbles at you from underneath a pile of rocks.

I am determined to make friends with fur seal pups, and while so far, I have received mainly growls and the pup turning tail and bounding away, I have had a couple of instances of a curious pup approaching and sniffing my outstretched hand. These little moments of magic spur me on.



A fur seal pup having a nap

Elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*) are distinctly less sweet. This may be in part a product of their size – young elephant seals weigh around 120 kg, while full-grown females approach 800 kg, and an adult male can reach a massive 4000 kg. Cuteness somewhat inversely scales with size, so I can't necessarily blame the elephant seals. I also must confess that my views of elephant seals are perhaps a touch unfair, given I must approach them while they're hauled out on land, completely out of their element and potentially scared of humans.

In general, when approaching an elephant seal, it has this look of wanting to give you a nasty bite should you get too near, which doesn't seem a good footing on which to start a friendship. However, I have seen some slightly more relaxed ones, and I did see a baby elephant seal trying to make friends with one of the resident bird species known as a Paddy (Lesser Sheathbill, *Chionis minor*) so maybe there is hope for me.

Fur seals and elephant seals cohabit many of the same beaches on Marion. While they're in close proximity to one another, they generally seem to mind their own business, and so I haven't seen many interactions between the two species. However, if I had to hazard a guess of the outcome between a fur seal pup and a medium-sized elephant seal, it wouldn't take a genius to bet on the elephant seal.

Once upon a time, on an island far, far away (as a side note, I find it exceptionally cool that I can write what appears to be the start of a fairy tale, but it is my lived reality! Marion is 2000 km south of South Africa and pretty much in the middle of nowhere.)

The Wanderer – The Little Chomper

After finishing up with the other elephant seals, I was pleasantly surprised to notice that the runner (the elephant seal whose tag I was initially trying to read) had changed course and had missed the pup. For some reason, the elephant seal had been halted in his tracks and hadn't ploughed over the little pup. The pup, having been spared a squashing, was now eager to return to his mother, perhaps to relay details of his traumatic experience.

However, both the elephant seal and the pup were in a cave, and in order to get to the rest of his friends, the little fur seal would

have to get past the elephant seal. He confidently approached the elephant seal and stopped right next to the elephant seal's flipper. At this point, I mentally shouted at the pup – do not walk over the elephant seal's flipper! He'll lift his flipper, and you'll be squashed against the rocks! Despite all my mental reasoning with the pup, it was fruitless, and there was nothing I could do to help. Fortunately, the little pup didn't need my help at all. After inspecting the obstacle in the way (i.e., the elephant seal flipper), the little pup improvised.



Trying to make friends with the elephant seals

Completely unexpectedly, he bit down sharply on the elephant seal flipper! The elephant seal, who was clearly also surprised by the turn of events, lifted up his flipper, and the little *chomper* trotted underneath, very pleased with himself and happy to join the other fur seals.

Monica and I were floored. We burst out laughing and then turned to each other to confirm we had both seen what we thought we saw - 18 kg fur seal: 1, versus 1000 kg elephant seal: 0.

As a final confirmation that this had actually happened, we spotted a neat bite mark and some droplets of blood on the elephant seal's tail. Who would have thought...? Marion Island is an incredibly special place, and I feel so lucky to have the privilege of being here for a year to experience it all. There will undoubtedly be many stories of the trials and tribulations and also the highs and lows of life on the island. We hope you can live vicariously through us and experience some of her magic for yourself.

Memorable shots!





Michael Ross



Michael Ross



Diary of an M79er - 'Marion first timer'

- the Magical Island -

- by Vhuawelo Simba

Working on Marion Island has been a dream since my undergraduate years. I felt my knees weaken upon arrival, though it could have been my body reacting to the motion of the ocean still. I had an inner storm brewing inside of me, an entanglement of excitement, curiosity, anxiety and confusion - for the view I had been anticipating was out of sight - hidden in the mist accompanying the bad weather that greeted us. Then, like magic, it appeared right in front of us, and it was breath-taking, exactly how I imagined it would be and more; however, only lasting for a few minutes before disappearing behind a curtain of mist again. The weather was so bad that we had to wait a whole day before flying to the island.

I finally got to this *magical island*, and it was one of the most amazing moments of my life; everything was different from what I knew and what I had seen before. The first noticeable thing was the amazing vegetation and a complete absence of trees, and the beautiful terrain no matter which direction I was facing. However, don't be fooled by the terrain, which looks stable and solid - when you step on it, it is all mushy and swallows you.

This is also the first time I heard of and experienced the pull from mires, which can pull you down, at least covering you to waist level in my case. This is negated by beautiful rainbows, which are a common occurrence on this serene island, appearing almost every third day. You are likely to experience all the different weather conditions in one day, although with no thunderstorms, and while I started off dreading working and/or walking in the rain, it has now become one of my favourite moments. My heart melted when I woke up one day to snowy white views and saw frozen streams, a sight like none I had seen before.

The magical island makes me appreciate biodiversity on a different level. I felt very grateful and blessed by the first sightings of penguins, seals and some of the largest birds I have ever seen - followed by a flock of large fluffy brown chicks. This enhanced my sense of purpose as an ecologist, and I'm grateful to be a member of a team working on the preparation to eradicate mice that are threatening biodiversity on the island.

The island changes the way we view and value things; for example, owning more pairs of gumboots and overalls is considered a luxury. It is rare to meet another islander when out in the field; we all wake up and venture out in different directions. This makes every time you meet someone along the way a selfie-worthy moment. Sometimes our ventures take up to 5 days in the field, where you sleep in the different huts (which I call free luxurious hotels always stocked up with food) on the island. It also changes the meaning of everyday phrases; for example, on this magical island, the phrase 'did you go out today' isn't referring to the social concept of partying; it is rather embedded in our greetings as an enquiry of whether one went out to the field to work. A similar concept is that the other person is hoping for some noteworthy tales of the outings and possible narration of interesting sightings.

The experiences on this magical island can be difficult at times, from navigating the tricky terrains, working in harsh winds, rains and snow to feeling anxiety from social isolation or homesickness. Alas, there is nothing that can't be fixed by endurance and a little help from this magical island offering a new experience every day.



M79ers



Circle of Life

Part 1: Island splendour

- by Elsa van Ginkel

Upon arrival at the shores of sub-Antarctic Marion Island, we were met by a large raft of King penguins, circling the vessel out of mere curiosity - the M79 overwintering team's personal welcoming committee. What a sight!



Curious King Penguins

Marion is jam-packed with astonishing life forms and as the year unfolds, I would like to share the island's splendour with all the passionate nature enthusiasts out there. I hope you will enjoy the island as much as I do, so I'm inviting you to experience the island through my eyes. You can accompany me to the interior, then to the field huts scattered across the island, and occasionally to the coast.



Frozen-over lake: on the route to Katedraal hut in the interior



Watertunnel field hut on the southern side of the island

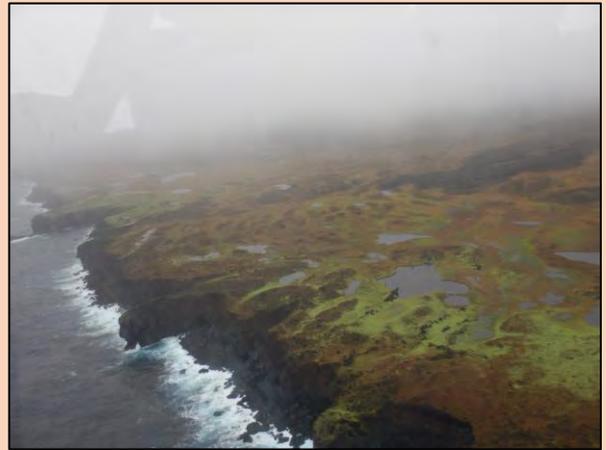


Junior's Kop – the scoria hill closest to base



Wandering albatross chick on its nest

The moment we set foot on this volcanic island, I realized again what a special place this is. It has a backdrop of dark red-brown scoria hills - the highest peaks coated in small patches of snow. Grey-green lowland slopes lead into yellow-brown coastal flats, on which white spots of fluff are haphazardly placed: Wandering albatross chicks (*Diomedea exulans*). These chicks are quickly growing as their parents are out at sea in search of food. The adult Wanderers are rarely at the nest. On the occasions that you do see them, you are humbled at the fact that you get the opportunity to observe these magnificent birds up close and in person.



Coastal region



Typical Marion Island scene: lowland flats, with green fern-covered slopes and snow-coated mountains in the background



S.A. Agulhas II with a pair of Wandering albatross



Skies painted with clouds

Now, during winter, the skies are mostly painted with large dark patches of feathered bodies, with dangling feet making the strangest noises. The Northern Giant Petrels (*Macronectes halli*) are quite amusing to watch as they soar the blue skies. Amongst these larger predatory birds, smaller feathered creatures also occur, especially on overcast days. These include smaller bird species, such as the Salvin's Prion (*Pachyptila salvini*) - a blue-grey coloured species - which are abundant across the island throughout the year. Occasionally, you also spot a Grey Petrel (*Procellaria cinerea*) or a Soft-plumaged Petrel (*Pterodroma mollis*), of which both, for the keen birder, are an absolute treat!



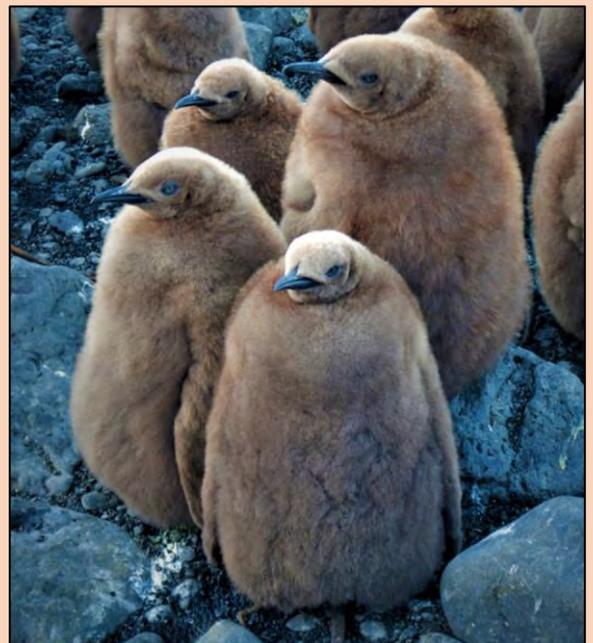
Northern Giant Petrel

Along the coast, you are likely to stumble upon a rock look-alike that has a sound similar to that of a screaming child. The seals, with their wailing cries, might give you the fright of your life - without warning! There are three seal species populating the island's beaches all year round, but the numbers erupt in the breeding season. These species include the Antarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*), the Sub-Antarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus tropicalis*), as well as the Southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*). Two interesting tuxedo-wearing chaps you might also find at the beaches at the moment are the King Penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*), as well as the rather skittish Gentoo Penguins (*Pygoscelis papua*).



Sub-Antarctic fur-seal pup

The weather accompanying all these rather marvelous creatures is probably a story for another day - but in short, it's like having all four seasons in a single day: ice pellets, gale force winds, snow, *and* rain can be expected at any moment during the day. Winter is currently in full swing, and the animal activity on the island is still relatively quiet. Still, I am truly looking forward to the upcoming summer months when the whole island will come to life. It's a privilege to be on the island and be able to contribute to the conservation of all the island's fauna and flora. I'm excited to share my journey with you.



King penguin chicks



Island life

Weather

for the brave...

SAWS Monthly Weather Stats – June 2022

TEMPERATURE	MIN	-3.2 °C
	MAX	14.0 °C
	AVERAGE	4.5 °C
	AVERAGE LOW	-0.1 °C
	AVERAGE HIGH	9.8 °C
PRESSURE	MIN	971.0 hPa
	MAX	1024.9 hPa
	AVERAGE	1002.6 hPa
RAIN	TOTAL	180.4 mm
	DAYS WITH RAIN (>1 mm)	23 (22)
	MAX IN 24 HOURS	25.8 mm
WIND	MAX	150.12 km/h
	DIRECTION	NW
SUNSHINE	TOTAL	34.2 hours
HUMIDITY	AVERAGE	79%



The SAWS team



Thank you to our Sponsors



MEERLUST



SHACKLETON
BREWING COMPANY™



DISTELL

CRAFTING BRANDS SINCE 1925



**TIERHOEK
COTTAGES**

And Organic Farm



MOUNTAINEERING GEAR



CREATION

Creating Wines of Distinction



FOR THE VERY BEST IN QUALITY FOODS

**INA PAARMAN'S
KITCHEN**



DARLING BREW

SINCE 2010



SAB

*The South African
Breweries*



Villiera Wines

STELLENBOSCH