

The Wanderer

August-September 2022

Interviews with...

the diesel mechanic, ecologist and medic!

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™
The Mouse-Free Marion Project



Winter field work

A time to Explore
What's the weather man up to?

MARION'S
MARVELOUS
BIRDS
Grey Petrels

Circle of Life
Part 3: Breeding
season is in the air

Sports' Time
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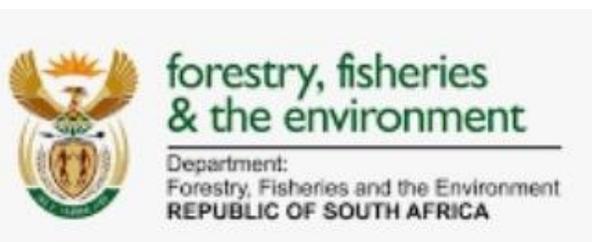
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COVER IMAGE:
Gentoo penguin chick
(*Pygoscelis papua*)
Elsa van Ginkel



letter from the *editors*



These past two months have brought visible changes to the island scenery. The hills have become greener, and the numbers of animals have multiplied, especially at the coast. At night, at the huts, you can hear all kinds of burrowing birds making themselves at home; and the night skies are now painted with White-chinned petrels.

The beaches are bursting with elephant seals - breeding season is upon us. Life at the base has its comforts, and the team is managing well. Enjoy this edition!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elsa van Ginkel'.

Elsa van Ginkel
Editor

August passed by sooner than expected, accompanied by work challenges and learning new concepts. We started the month pretty well with Women's Day celebrations, shortly followed by two birthday celebrations. As the breeding season approaches, the hectic time is slowly starting for mostly field personnel. We see fewer and fewer field assistants as they spend more time going out. Sometimes, the base feels very quiet when most are not around concurrently. However, it's still going to get even busier for the field assistants.

As for September, the beginning of Spring, it started off perfectly. On the very first weekend, we had a beautiful event where we celebrated another two birthdays for the month. There were a few setbacks, but we always bounced back. It was indeed the most spectacular event we've had so far. All team members were looking forward to it, and we made the most of it. We were all dressed to kill! 😊 I wish all the field assistants luck with their work in the field. Round Islands are continuously taking place, where field assistants spend several days out of the base. So, please be safe, guys! I hope this edition is fruitful for all our readers!



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tankiso H. Moso'.

Tankiso H. Moso
Co-Editor

Interviews...

Meet the diesel mechanic, the ecologist and the medic!

- by Tankiso H. Moso and Elsa van Ginkel

Base Diesel Mechanic - Sanele Action Mkhize

Qualifications

Mechanical Engineering - National N Diploma.
Advanced Professional Certificate of competency in hydraulic and pneumatic systems.
Fitting and turning - level 2 - National Certificate.
Basic arc and gas welding Certificate.
Diesel mechanic trade test Certificate.

Your passions? what led you to Marion Island?

I am always looking to challenge myself and learn new things. Coming to the island, is a way of developing my career through a forward thinking and well-established project.

Favourite animal or plant on the island so far?

Azorella selago - a curious cushion-like plant.
Northern and Southern Giant Petrels (*Macronectes* species).

Who do you miss most from the mainland?

My son.

Any food cravings?

Maas or Amasi.

Achievements during this year?

Career advancement - the upward trajectory of my professional journey.

Any advice for future Marionites?

Do your job to the best of your ability and be open to change.

Any lessons so far, from the island experience?

Always strive to avoid stagnation – the lack of activity, growth or development.

Favourite event so far, on the island?

Elsa and Monica's birthday celebration – the Quiz night.

What do you love most about your job?

Autonomy - the quality or state of being self-governing.

Hobbies?

Working out at the gym is my hobby.

Favourite quote

'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.'

Anything extra you would like to mention?

I would like to thank the department for the opportunity given to us to be one of the few to experience such a great island.



MFM Ecologist – Elsa van Ginkel

I'm employed as an Ecologist on the M79 overwintering team, under the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project, through the University of Pretoria. The MFM Project is a collaboration between Birdlife South Africa and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE). My work focuses on mice, plants and invertebrates.

I studied at the University of Pretoria, where I completed my BSc in Ecology and my Honours in Plant Science. I'm currently finalizing my MSc, focusing on the plant-invertebrate interactions on Marion Island. If an opportunity arises, I would like to pursue a PhD focusing on ecological processes, preferably in pollination ecology.

I'm 100% passionate about nature, especially bird life and botany. I love spending time in the field: hiking, taking photographs and identifying plant species. I heard about Marion Island for the first time in high school from my geography teacher. She was brilliant – she always put in much effort to keep us informed and entertained. At that stage, I never thought I would have the privilege of spending two overwintering periods on this beautiful island. After that, during my second and third years, I had two lecturers who were passionate about ecology and involved with projects on Marion Island. This eventually led me to Marion Island, and I am truly grateful to be here.

Marion Island is so diverse. I would struggle to single out a plant or animal species as my favourite. I rather enjoy the Antarctic Buttercup (*Ranunculus biternatus*), a small yellow flowering plant with a faint sweet smell which is abundant at the coast and occasionally at higher altitudes. I'm also fascinated by all the bird species. Truly. The Wandering Albatross chicks form an intricate part of our existence here on the island as we see them grow and change daily. The burrowing bird species are intriguing, especially their beautiful yet haunting calls at night.

All the seal species also contribute to a lot of entertainment. I enjoy watching the fur seal pups play in the big pool in the Van den Boogaard river. Elephant seals are also an absolute treat at the moment. The beaches are bursting with these gigantic seals, and what makes it so special is that you won't likely ever see these large mammals again, especially up close.

I miss my close family and friends and the familiarity and comfort that comes with them. In terms of food that I miss: fresh fruit and vegetables will have to take the prize. I miss all forms of fruit: avocados, grapes, bananas, peaches, kiwis, strawberries, and mangos, and fresh basil pesto is also high on the list.

If anyone would like to apply for a position on Marion Island, my advice would be to do thorough homework regarding your position and about the island and its accompanying weather conditions. Every second on this island is worth it, but it depends on the eye of the beholder. Firstly, you need to be mentally strong, and secondly, you need to be physically fit. Lastly, people skills play a much more significant role than you could ever have imagined.

The lessons worth mentioning so far are that regarding base life: don't make a mountain out of a molehill, and regarding life in the field: always respect mother nature. The unexpected can still happen even when you are prepared for the worst. Be humble at all times.

One of my favourite quotes is by Edward Wilson: 'A happy life is not built up of tours abroad and pleasant holidays, but of little clumps of violets noticed by the roadside, hidden away almost so that only those can see them who have God's peace and love in their hearts; in one long continuous chain of little joys; little whispers from the spiritual world; little gleams of sunshine on our daily work...'



Medical Orderly – Mndeni Aaron Hlatshwayo

Qualifications

National Certificate of Emergency Care.

Your passions? What led you to Marion Island?

I am passionate about service to the community through the medical field. This passion was integrated into my life while training as a military soldier. I was chosen to be trained as a military operation emergency care practitioner.

My friends, whom I trained with in the military, told me more about the clinical position found on Marion Island – it's similar to military operations, with which I have handfuls of experience as a medical orderly.

Favourite animal or plant on the island so far?

The Gentoo penguins. I like how they are colour-coded. Their walk alone already makes me laugh.

Who do you miss most from the mainland?

I miss my children, especially my daughter.

Any food cravings?

I miss fresh avocados and spinach – they are my favourite.

Achievements during this year?

I would like to keep my team medically fit and ready for their duties for the whole year and learn about the island and its wildlife. I would also like to maintain my fitness and my body weight.

Any advice for future Marionites?

Find information from the personnel working on the ground; they are good sources to collect information from in order to plan for your overwintering period.

Any lessons so far, from the island experience?

Live your life on the basics. Patience is the key to survive here.

Favourite event so far, on the island?

My birthday was great. Oh! The weekend braai's take me to Mzansi - awesome.

What do you love most about your job?

The challenges that come with every medical/clinical case sharpen your knowledge and skills in approaching a situation.

Hobbies?

Athletics, reading, physical training.

Favourite quote

'Tell my people that I love them, and they must continue the fight. My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom—
Aluta continua', by Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu.

Anything extra you would like to mention?

I am happy to be part of the Marion M79 team. Morale boosting should be our daily concern. Keep up the good work in all seasons.



MARION'S MARVELOUS BIRDS

- by Lucy Smyth

Grey Petrels

Marion Island is home to an incredible variety of seabirds: a wildlife biologist's dream come true. While reading books and marveling over photos undoubtedly provides one with all sorts of valuable and interesting seabird information and is something I have spent and still spend a lot of time doing, there is something exceptional about working on these amazing animals and witnessing first-hand their intricate behaviours, fascinating interactions and astonishing adaptations. As the year progresses, I will try to convey some of my interactions with and observations of these wild and wonderful creatures in their natural habitat. Everything I recount refers to events that I have been lucky enough to see with my own eyes. However, my goal is not to provide another version of the scientific information commonly available in books and papers but to provide a glimpse into the less commonly recorded but equally fascinating, heart-warming and hilarious reality of working with these magnificent feathered beasts.

While the bigger birds who call this beautiful island home tend to build nests out in the open, many of the smaller birds nest in burrows which provide some protection from various vicious predators. Grey Petrels are one such species. As one of the larger burrowing birds, they tend to prefer caves as opposed to the more traditional burrows, in which burrowers dig into the ground under thick layers of vegetation, as these seem to provide a bit more space for nest making. Unlike many birds on Marion, Grey Petrels are winter breeders and one of the few species to raise their young in the chilly, sleepy months of reduced daylight and general quietness on this sub-Antarctic island. They lay their eggs in April, right around the time that we arrived for our year on the island, and I have been monitoring them ever since.

Monitoring burrowing birds is not an easy task. The cold temperatures and general wetness of Marion Island pretty much guarantee that you will finish your day of poking your arms around in muddy dark holes, with sopping wet gloves and frozen fingers. However, the glimpses of the beautiful birds on their nests more than makes up for this reality. One major benefit of doing this kind of work on Marion, is that there are no biting or stinging snakes, spiders or scorpions sharing this habitat with us, meaning that I am at least sure that I will be able to extricate my arm from the hole in question without any unwanted venom added into my blood supply.

Given the affinity that Grey Petrels show for caves however, monitoring generally ends up requiring more than simply putting my arm down a burrow with a very useful little camera, called a burrow-scope, held tightly in my hand. This useful tool allows me to see round the twists and turns that my line of sight cannot navigate, to determine if anybody is home. Grey Petrel monitoring is more of a whole-body-acrobatics session, requiring one to wedge oneself between slabs of rock or into narrow crevices to get the hand holding the burrow-scope far enough in, that the camera can see the nest. In the absence of a need to squeeze into small rock enclosures, getting my hand far enough into a cave sometimes requires a lying down flat approach, where I plonk myself down on my front, chin in the mud, and try and will my arm to be even longer than it already is so that it can reach the next corner. The third option, which is also required on occasion, is the bum-in-the-air approach, where one stuffs the top half of their body into the beginning of the cave, resulting in just the bum sticking out, with legs flailing behind.



One of the first Grey Petrel chicks of the season.

I must mention that all of these activities are done with the utmost respect for the birds and do not damage the caves, burrows or nests. This monitoring is, however, critical in light of the current mouse problem on the island. The large avian predators that naturally inhabit Marion cannot fit into Grey Petrel caves, but mice can, and do, with devastating consequences. We, therefore, monitor nests to keep track of chick survival rates.

Spotting the first chick who hatched made for a very exciting day. After seeing parents dutifully incubating their precious eggs for many weeks, the appearance of a little ball of fluff, more or less resembling a small grey pom-pom, was a much-anticipated event. They don't stay small for very long, though, and after hatching towards the end of May, they are ready to head out to sea and forage for themselves by October. Currently, they are busy growing the adult plumage which they will require for flight, and this transition involves a hilarious, mad-scientist-like appearance. Their downy fluff seems to fall off the top of their heads before it falls off the sides. So, at the moment, they have these funny bald-looking patches on top of their heads,

which are covered in their smoother, more elegant adult plumage and tufts of fluff sticking out the sides.

As they grow up in the safety of their caves, the Grey Petrel parents head out to sea to find food and return with meals which they regurgitate to feed their fast-growing babies. During my last Grey Petrel monitoring session, I had just extricated myself from the last cave of the day and was putting various bits and pieces of equipment into my backpack when I heard flapping overhead. I initially thought the visitor was a skua, who had just come back from his winter holidays further north and was investigating the strange human in a bright blue rain suit plonked on the ground. I was wrong, though – an adult Grey Petrel had landed next to me and scuttled into the cave with a snack for its chick. The chick was thrilled about this occurrence and began squeaking excitedly as it prepared for supper.

I sat in silence for quite a while, listening to the noises of parent and chick and returned to base that evening covered with mud from head to toe, hair full of leaves and heart full of wonder.

Fashionable Field Gear

Sub-Antarctic style advice straight from Marion Island

- by Monica Leitner

Welcome fashionistas! Do you find yourself looking for ways to spruce up your work wardrobe? Look no further as we bring you the latest fashion trends and advice from M79, who don't let the sub-Antarctic weather or isolation from mainland South Africa cramp their style.

This month's feature: The O&C birders



Samuel



Andile

Keeping our Oceans, Coasts and Island free from fashion fiascos



Sam and Andile are searching our oceans and coasts to bring us the trendiest field gear this spring:

By hook or crook, Sam scans the horizons and works the catwalk in search of Wandering Albatross and White-chinned Petrels, but not without considering the spring weather and wardrobe. This low-key classic 'black-and-blue' look is a tribute to how we sometimes feel after some Marion wind and rain.

Sam is dressed in blues but completes the look with a black beanie, backpack and gumboots. Adding some flare and bling, he accessorizes with the birder crook (a favourite accessory on Marion).

Andile makes a statement this month with colourful monitoring flags to signal that spring has sprung! Patrolling for Giant Petrels, Andile makes his fashion work for him: a walking stick for the terrain (and today's trends), sunglasses for the glare (and his bright future) and the trusty buff to keep out the frosty wind (and any critics' comments about his look).

Now back to work you two!



**Stay tuned for more fun fashion trends and inspiration
in our next edition!**

Memorable shots!





Monica Leitner



Elsa van Ginkele



Michael Ross



Michael Ross



Sealer diaries

Leopard seal sightings at Marion Island

- by Banele Dosi

The Marion Island Marine Mammal Program (MIMMP) has been up and continuously running for an incredible 40 years, counting this year. This makes it one of the longest-running monitoring research programs ever. About a year ago, if someone had told me I'd be here today and be part of MIMMP, I would have laughed at them in disbelief. The selection process to becoming a Sealer is highly competitive. However, I made it and am truly grateful for the opportunity.

So far, being here has been extremely rewarding. I work with and interact with the Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic fur seals and Southern elephant seals almost daily. During the breeding season, around mid-August to mid-November, the sealers and the overwintering expedition team members occasionally observe visits from vagrant species such as the Leopard seal and *Hydrurga leptonyx*. This species travels thousands of kilometres in search of food and may sometimes use Marion Island as a resting place or an escape from predators such as the enormous Killer whales.



Our first sighting at Gazella Plains



Leopard seal sighting at Sealers Cave

This year, the M79 MIMMP team has been incredibly lucky and privileged to have had more than eight leopard seal sightings on the island, including at Boulders beach, Ship's Cove, Gazella Plains, King Penguin Bay and Sealers Cave. It's every Sealer's dream to leave the island with fond memories and the achievement of having had at least one leopard seal sighting. Some previous sealers have had to reapply and return for their second overwintering expedition to experience it. We don't spend long periods with this species, but observing them live in the field is one of the greatest highlights of my stay here and makes the long walks and hours worthwhile.



Winter field work on Marion Island

- by Keith Springer and Elsa van Ginkel

With the planning work for eradicating mice from Marion Island well underway, the opportunity arose for gaining additional field information with the employment of two overwintering field assistants in conjunction with the University of Pretoria. Elsa van Ginkel and Vhuawelo Simba were selected for these roles and travelled to Marion Island on the *S.A. Agulhas II* in April 2022. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen medical circumstances, Vhuawelo had to return to South Africa in early July.

A work programme that included long-term ecological monitoring and mouse eradication planning was drawn up. The ecological monitoring work is founded on the need for baseline ecological data to compare future ecological data after the intended removal of mice in 2025. There is a well-established dataset of some aspects of the Marion Island fauna and flora, especially the marine mammals and seabirds, but fewer detailed studies on aspects like invertebrates and plants and the associated impacts of mice on insects and plants. The ecological monitoring work will mostly be conducted in the 2022/23 summer.

In the meantime, the winter months provided an opportunity to conduct some trial work to inform the planning of mouse eradication. The aerial baiting operation to eradicate mice will largely be carried out in late autumn and winter, so we were keen to replicate this timeframe to undertake field trials, as we were keen to learn more about several aspects.

One of these aspects was to evaluate 'typical winter weather conditions'. Whereas meteorological records kept by the South African Weather Service (SAWS) can provide a broad picture, we wanted to understand the likely frequency that weather conditions conducive to aerial baiting were being experienced. Or not.

Conducive baiting conditions revolve around three weather phenomena. Firstly, we don't want to spread bait in winds much over 20 knots, perhaps 25 if we had to. So, recording wind speeds daily would give us a feel for how frequently winter days had winds below that threshold. Of course, we know that the base is on the lee side of the island and near sea level, and average wind speeds are typically higher on the windward side of the island and at higher altitudes, but wind data from the base does give us a benchmark. The helicopters will be stationed at the base; therefore, if it is too windy to fly from there, it is likely too windy to spread bait elsewhere.



One of the bird species that suffer mouse attacks – Wandering Albatross.

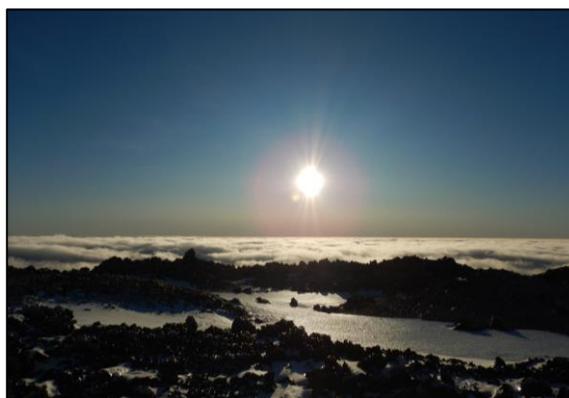
Secondly, cloud cover and the base of the cloud ceiling are important. Helicopter pilots can't fly around mountainous terrain in the cloud, so we need mostly clear conditions to conduct baiting, although – if working on lower parts of the island – a cloud base of a few hundred metres may still be workable for a period.

Finally, notwithstanding its special formulation, we don't want the bait getting soggy immediately after spreading, so we look for periods with no or minimal rain in the following days in which to bait. We then combine all these aspects to make operational decisions on when baiting will occur, so ideally: a day with no rainfall forecast in the next 48 hours, where the cloud base allows sufficient visibility and the wind is lower than 25 knots. Being an isolated island in the middle of the Southern Ocean, of course – these conditions rarely combine!

Elsa says, 'I have a range of ways to monitor and record these conditions. A fixed camera at the base points to the high ground of the interior and takes hourly photos from dawn to dusk. Comparing the images with spot heights of known features, the cloud base throughout the day can be worked out. Combined with wind and precipitation records from SANSA (through assistance from the M78/79 engineers) and SAWS, I can determine how many hours on a given day might be suitable for baiting work. Of course, each winter is different, and the records I collect this winter do not guarantee the same weather conditions will occur when the eradication team are here, but it does give an idea of what they might expect as far as the likely number of flyable days per month goes. When I am in the field away from the base, I also take notes at 9 am of the wind and cloud base so that we can build up a picture of conditions around the island.'



View towards the interior from the base. Junior's Kop in the foreground – this is typically what the interior needs to look like for successful baiting operations (combined with low precipitation and optimal wind conditions).



The views, while at work, are spectacular – above the clouds in the interior.

During the winter, Elsa is also undertaking several non-toxic bait trials. Some of these represent a range of altitudes and habitats and seek to understand how long bait remains available in different parts of the island.

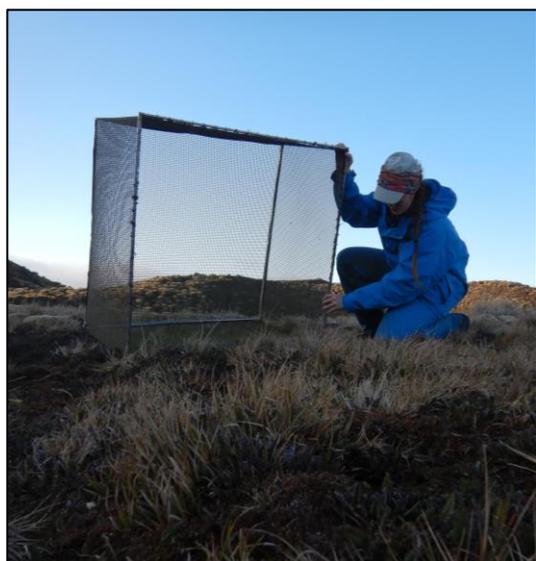
In 2021, during a mouse eradication attempt on Gough Island, it was noticed that less bait than expected remained in some lowland parts of the island. On investigation, it was determined that an introduced slug species was consuming considerable amounts of bait. This raised the question of whether slugs dominated access to bait and ate it before mice could find and consume it.

As an introduced slug species is also present on Marion Island, we wanted to determine whether slugs there might also consume significant quantities of bait because, if that was the case, it could have considerable implications for the amount of bait required to eradicate mice. To test this, we set out a number of trials using non-toxic bait. Some of these were camera trials, where we used trail cameras on both photo and video settings to determine whether slugs were attracted to the bait pellets and, if so, who was quickest at removing it – mice or slugs.

We also used some 1-m x 1-m enclosure cages to put over areas of good slug habitat to take mice out of the equation and see what slugs did to the bait when undisturbed by mice.



'Access to bait trial' set up near the coast.



Mouse enclosure trial set up near the coast.

Finally, we put out some transects with 25 x 10-m² plots every 20 m in a range of different habitats. We put bait pellets in the transects at a similar rate as the intended operational application rate. Some plots within each transect had cameras on to help identify what animals were removing bait over the seven nights of the trial.



Bait removal by a mouse during a trial.



Bait availability transect set up at Mixed Pickle on the north-western side of the island.

The Wanderer – The Mouse-Free Marion Project

In terms of results, the primary trend during the ‘access to bait trials’ has been that all bait pellets were removed each night by mice (most pellets being cached, with a few being nibbled in situ) unless a combination of heavy snow or extremely low temperatures inhibited access to the pellets or presumably decreased the mouse activity during the night. Additionally, at this stage, whether slugs were in low or high abundance on the bait, they did not prevent mice from consuming the bait.

The transects focused on a much larger area than the ‘access to bait trials’, and throughout these transect trials, the general trend at the coastal and mire-slope (lower altitude) sites was that mice removed bait within two nights, with slugs not deterring mice from the bait. At the polar desert (high altitude) sites, with lower temperatures and thicker snow at times, only a few pellets were removed by mice over the duration of the seven nights, reflecting the known lower density of mice in this habitat type (over 400 meters above sea level), where food resources are scarce.



Transect set up at a high altitude site, near Katedraal in the interior of the island.

With winter now behind us, the focus of the fieldwork on Marion will shift to the collection of priority invertebrate and vegetation data. This data is required to help establish the long-term monitoring programme that will be used to assess and track the ecological outcomes of the eradication operation. We look forward to keeping you posted. Visit www.mousefreemarion.org for more information.



On the way to the interior. The region between the coast and 400 m a.s.l. has high levels of mouse activity.



Island life



August and September Birthday Celebrations!

- by Thendo Sikhwari and Gladys Kemei

HIP HIP HOORAY

There were two birthdays in August: Elsa's birthday was on the 11th of August, and Monica's was on the 17th of August. Elsa spent a blissful day on a long walk to Katedraal with her friend and colleague, Tanga. Monica had a special hut birthday at Kildalkey hut, where several of her teammates surprised her. There was even some birthday cake!



Tanga and Elsa on their way to Katedraal.



Preparations for Monica's surprise birthday party.



The Kildalkey Birthday crew: Monica, Banele, Mike, Lucy, Tanga and Elsa

On the 13th of August 2022, we celebrated Elsa and Monica's birthdays in style at Marion base, 2300 km away from South Africa. The braai team prepared a nice meal for the event. We also had a pub quiz, where we played some fun games. Indeed, there was a new Chappies game (a.k.a. South African bubble gum brand – 'Did you know?' game). The team members wrote down their general knowledge questions and gave them to the birthday champs to ask during the game. Below are some of the questions you can try to answer and score yourself (answers on the last page):

1. How many bones do sharks have in their bodies?
2. Marion Island is a RAMSAR site; it is internationally recognized. What does this mean?
3. What is the size of Marion Island in square kilometres?
4. Who was the first woman to set foot on Marion Island?
5. Which South African female singer is the S.A. Agulhas II dedicated to?



Elsa and Monica

We enjoyed the party on that day as it was also a good time for the team members to get together. WHAAAT! Why are you having inner questions about the cake? It's a lunch bar, and the delicious cakes were baked by Lucy and Monica. Also, the birthday champs received many gifts and birthday wishes from the team members. The most played song on that night was 'I've got a feeling', by David Guetta.

CUMPLEAÑOS EN EL OCÉANO

Nice try... reading that sub-heading, it is Spanish for 'Birthday in the ocean'. If you keep reading the M79 newsletter, you will learn new things every time. On 3 September 2022, we celebrated Thendo and Gladys' birthdays, with Thendo's Birthday on the 3rd and Gladys' birthday on the 8th. In honour of this heritage month, the birthday theme was cultural attire.

Remember, on this island, there are no shops to buy the requested outfit; you have to work with what you have. Amazingly, the team dressed up in a variety of cultural attire. The best thing about celebrating a birthday on this island is that you don't spend a cent. That evening, team members participated in the Pictionary game, showing off their drawing skills while the other team members guessed the answer. It was quite entertaining to experience the competitiveness of the team.

The mystery of the blue cake: 'Now you see me, now you don't'. Are you ready for version 1 of the blue cake story? Relax, this is a story for another time, and maybe you will be lucky to find the encrypted file of the blue cake short story in the following edition.

Gladys baked both cakes for the 3 and 8 September birthday celebrations with limited resources on the island. Let's give credit where it's due; the cakes were beautifully decorated and delicious!

To M79, thank you so much for showing up for the birthday celebrations and the multiple gifts that were received.

Thank you, Gladys, for using your international baking skills, and I hope one day you will share your secret recipes.



Thendo Sikhwari and Gladys Kemei

Most memorable moment(s) on your birthday?

Birthday Champs Respond:

- **Monica:** My surprise hut birthday party at Kildalkey!
- **Elsa:** My walk to Katedraal, the misty 'picnic', and my beautiful and colourful birthday cake.
- **Thendo:** Not spending money.
- **Gladys:** The video session we had.

To our family and friends all over the world

Thank you very much for all the birthday wishes on various social media platforms and also via calls.

We really appreciate your love and support in this isolated environment.

God bless you!



Birthday Moments



Sports' Time

- by Thendo Sikhwari

The team members decided to participate in a pool tournament as part of team building, and a means to get together regularly. The tournament started on 9 July 2022 and concluded on 17 September 2022. The tournament was so competitive that participants practiced during their free time. The matches were a trending topic around the base from Monday to Friday. The phrase 'It's just a game' was coined from this competition, but in reality, when two bulls meet on the pitch, the grass suffers. The energy and the mood from day one were unbeatable.

Definitely, in every competition, there must be a winner. Congratulations to Jufter Munyai, the M79 pool tournament champion! All the way from Limpopo province to Marion Island.

Thank you to all the tournament participants, and extra thanks to other team members who came to cheer and support the players.

Let's wait for the 2022/23 next tournament to begin! Please register on time.



Pool Tournament Results

	9-Jul-22		16-Jul-22		23-Jul-22		30-Jul-22				6-Aug-22				20-Aug-22				27-Aug-22		10-Sep-22		17-Sep-22		Totals		
Names	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	Balls	Points	
Jufter	1	3	2	3	2	3	0	3	3	3	2	3	5	3	0	3	0	2	0	0	1	3	0	0	16	29	
Thendo	3	3	0	3	0	0	1	3	1	3	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	1	3	9	27	
Gcobani	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	3	3	0	0	8	27	
Sihle	0	3	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	0	3	4	3	0	0	0	0	3	3	2	3	4	3	4	13	24	
Banele	0	0	1	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	1	3	0	3	0	0	1	3	1	3	4	24	
Mishumo	0	0	5	3	0	3	3	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	12	20	
Mike	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	4	3	0	0	2	3	0	0	3	3	4	3	0	0	2	3	18	18	
Tankiso	1	3	2	3	1	3	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	6	3	15	18	
Mndeni	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	3	3	2	3	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	10	15	
Andile	0	0	0	3	3	1	3	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	9
Sanza	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	9
Samuel	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	9
Lucy	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	9	

'It's Just a Game'

A day in the life of a Marion Sealer

- by Michael Ross

Before I came to Marion Island, I asked several old Sealers what a typical day looked like on Marion. They generally replied that on Marion, there was no such thing as a “typical day”. An answer which, although undoubtedly truthful, was nevertheless not especially helpful. Since I have now spent some time on Marion and have been inducted into the hallowed community of Sealers, I will do my best to provide an answer to the typical day-on-Marion question, which is both truthful and informative. Though if nothing else, I will at least describe a single day in the life of a Sealer on Marion Island. Bear in mind that we Sealers have only just arrived on Marion (well, three months ago, but it feels much shorter than that) and that we are yet to experience the mayhem of the breeding season, which will be quite different to a day during the quieter winter months. This is a typical day...

The typical day is coming, but first, some background. Sealers on Marion work with both southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*) and two species of fur seals, though mainly elephant seals. Our schedule is generally governed by the 10-day elephant seal census, which covers all the beaches on the island’s eastern side. Every seal born on Marion is tagged, with all individuals born in a year given the same colour tag (a different colour to those born in other years) but a unique tag number.

The census typically takes five days (and a sixth if you include the walk back to base from one of the further huts), with three nights away from the base at various huts scattered around the island and involves recording all the elephant seals one encounter at beaches around the island, both tagged and untagged. While simple in principle, it is somewhat more challenging in practice, as one has to get close enough to read the numbers on a tag while avoiding getting chomped by the relatively large and occasionally quite irritable seals. The remaining four days are spent tagging fur seals, recording previously tagged fur seals, processing scat, entering data or helping with killer whale observations. Back to the crux of this blog!



An elephant seal

For some reason, I woke up at 5:30 am, and given that I’m a morning lark, I decided to make the most of my alertness and get stuck into this blog post. After an hour of writing, I packed the last few items into my bag. I was scheduled to finish censusing elephant seals just north of the base but planned to return to base in the afternoon, so my bag wasn’t too full. I packed my notebook and pencil, waterproof slate (for when it invariably starts raining), binoculars, PG camera (more on this later), tags for foreign seals and tag applicators, waterproof pants and rain jacket, PLB (personal locator beacon in case of emergency), personal camera, a flask full of tea and snacks (you can never have too many, but you can certainly have too few – a most unpleasant experience).



Fur seal pup taking a swim.

The Wanderer – Typical day of a Sealer

I quickly ate breakfast, signed myself out on the register (so people could locate me if I didn't come back) and left just before 8 am. I decided to walk to the furthest point and census the beaches on the way back. The weather teased me – it was sunny over the interior, but I was walking in a soft drizzle, a classic Marion soft, subtle soaker. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the 1h30 hour walk to Blue Petrel Bay to the north of the base and marvelled at the growing Wandering Albatross chicks and Giant Petrels I spotted along the way. I sometimes find myself taking these sights for granted, but am quickly reminded of how lucky I am when I take a moment to reflect that 'I'M ON MARION FREAKING ISLAND' (a direct quotation I discovered on the inside of one of the hut doors which seems particularly apt). At Blue Petrel Bay, my work for the day began in earnest.

The beaches are relatively quiet at the moment, with most of the seals fattening themselves up in the ocean before the breeding season. As a result, the census went quickly. I came across many tagged seals and recorded their tag colour and number. The highlight was seeing my first Red White (Red White 029), an eight-year-old male, tagged in 2014. So far, we haven't seen many fully grown adults, but they will surely be on their way as breeding season approaches. I proceeded to PG the Red White. Essentially you take multiple photographs of the animal from different angles. You can combine all these images to produce a 3D depiction of the animal, which can then be used to estimate the animal's weight. Effectively you can weigh a multiple-ton elephant seal with one finger. There are nine beaches between Blue Petrel Bay and the base, though some beaches have multiple divisions, and I checked all of them, encountering 84 seals.

While, unfortunately, I didn't see any killer whales during my census, I briefly stopped to admire the view from the top of one of the beaches called Ship's Cove. Just before I reached base, I stopped to check in with Monica (one of the other Sealers, though focused on killer whales), who was at Kill Point on the lookout for killer whales. By 2:30, I had arrived back at base.

The day wasn't done yet. After a quick lunch, Banele (the third Sealer) and I headed out to catch a fur seal mom and her pup. We hoped to deploy a GLS device (a rough GPS) on the mom and tag her pup. Alas, the pair conspired against us, and the pup went swimming with his friends, leaving us unable to identify him. Banele and I sat behind a rock for 20 minutes, hoping the situation would change, but it appeared in vain. I checked in with Monica again (she was at Kill Point for 8 hours, so there was plenty of time for that) and then headed back to base. Once at the base, I spent the next hour inputting the data I had collected from my day in the field and clearing the slight data backlog. The workday was now officially over. I'd walked 15.6 km outside (though walking on Marion is much harder than the distances alone suggest) and would go on to do over 28 000 steps for the day.



Elephant seal bull.

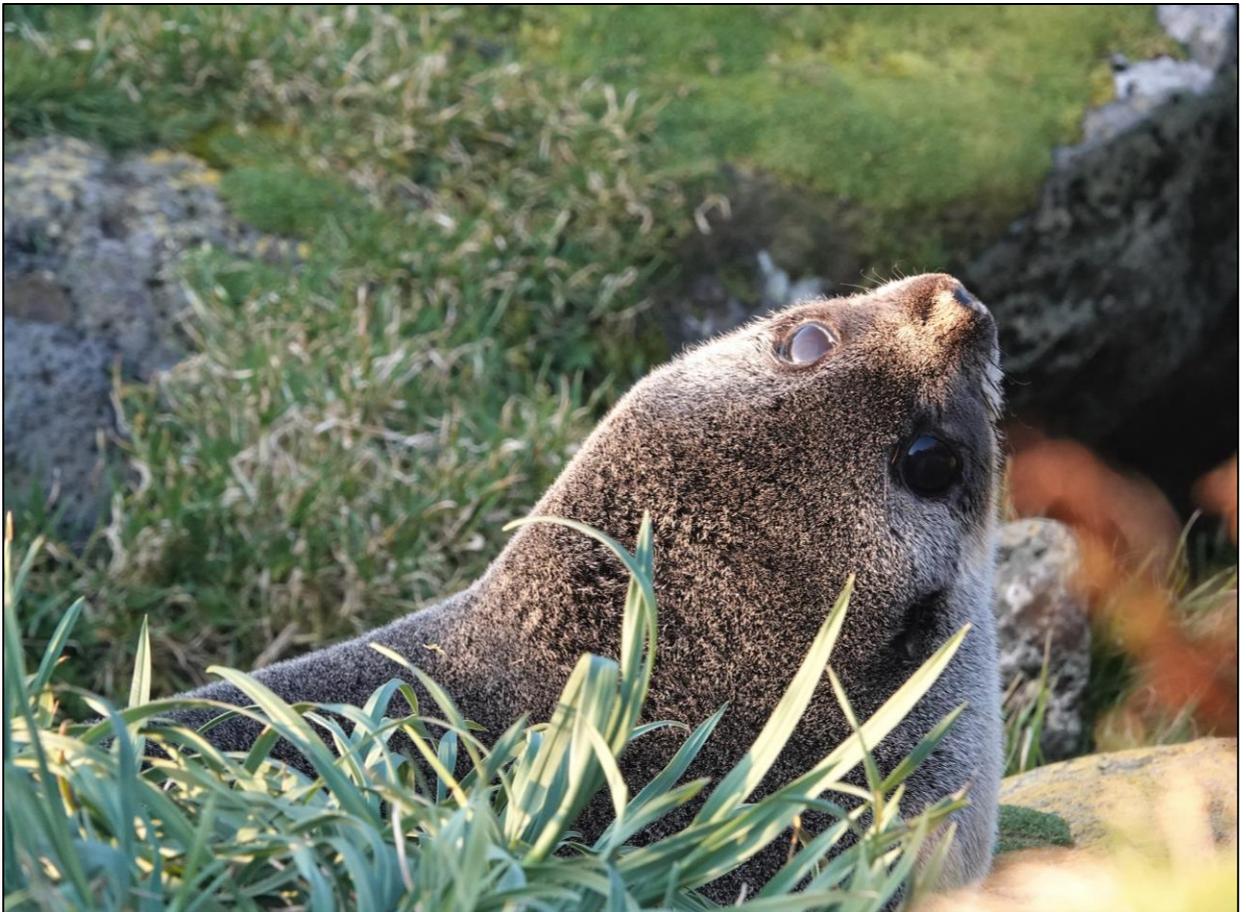
The Wanderer – Typical day of a Sealer

Still, the day wasn't done yet. On Marion, we seem to have never-ending skivvy (cleaning) duties, including the base skivvy, the science corridor skivvy, our accommodation skivvy, the kitchen skivvy and the braai skivvy, which we do on a rotational basis. Today, being a Monday, was base skivvy, so I spent 30 minutes cleaning various sets of staircases, my job for the day.

The last thing I desperately needed was a shower. By the end of the day, one tends to exude this awful stench of seal and penguin excrement, which you become somewhat accustomed to as a Sealer, but the rest of the base personnel do not. Having a shower, therefore, constitutes an essential part of maintaining relationships with everyone else on the island and avoiding being kicked out of the base.

By 7 pm, I had finished everything, just in time for dinner, which is always a highlight after a long day out. After dinner, I organised what I would need for the following day and then caught up on messages and emails. The day ended with some quiet reading, and I was off to bed, ready to do it again tomorrow.

Census repeats itself at least every ten days throughout the year, and while every day is different, I hope you have some idea of what a typical day looks like and, if nothing else, at least what happened on this particular day. Marion is the most incredible place, and I feel lucky to be here. While this post dives into what exactly a Sealer gets up to on Marion, upcoming posts will help explain why the island is so special and why our work here is so important, so stay tuned!



An adorable fur seal pup.



M79ers



A time to Explore

- by Thendo Sikhwari

The cold weather and gusting winds on Marion Island have not yet stopped me from exploring the beauty of this environment. Every day is a good day on Marion Island - no Mickey Mouse games. My first trip to the field was with the Sealers: Banele Dosi and Mike Ross. I joined them on one of their regular work trips, which involved weighing and tagging fur seals. It was an amazing day—an experience of a lifetime.



Mike and Banele weighing fur seals.

It has been six months since we left South Africa. Marion Island is a peaceful and protected area with various species like albatrosses. Did you know that albatrosses only lay one egg per year, and if this breeding attempt fails, they cannot try again until the following year? They can go years without touching the land, and their life expectancy is 40 years or more.

After my previous experience on Gough Island in 2019/2020, I have developed a strong love for all the albatross species. Albatrosses tend to mate for life; mate selection is not rushed. It can take roughly 15 years to select a mate, and once the pair is formed, they develop a unique language for communication. The partners do not always stay together; they reform pairs during the breeding season and tend to return to the same nesting site. *Wow!* It is an amazing lifestyle that these seabirds have.



Wandering Albatross – an adult back from the sea to feed its chick.

It can take up to 280 days for the larger albatross species to fledge, which is when they can take flight in search of food and, eventually, a partner.

Even when the winds are gusting outside, these albatrosses soar through the skies, seemingly without struggling against the wind. Albatross species truly need to be protected on Marion Island against invasive mice. I am a keen seabird watcher when I have time to spare here on Marion Island.



Snow covering the landscape.

If you don't get it, forget about it, you can call me the *Weather Man*. It was the first time in my life that I experienced full snow cover. Here on Marion Island, the snow falls like manna from heaven. It feels like I am living in a scene out of BBC: the volcanic island, a variety of seabirds, four seasons within one day and the constant rough seas. I am from the Limpopo province, where during summer, heat waves can be like a hot braai-stand; to experience this cold weather and rainy days for about 28 days per month is a luxury to me.

On 27 September, we also experienced ice accretion on some of the base's steel structures due to low temperatures and snow - a rare phenomenon in my province. I'm glad I have this opportunity under the South African Weather Service. They provide us with daily weather forecasts, which play a crucial role in planning some field assistants' work schedules.



Ice accretion on the cat walk.

Katabatic Shots



SONG PICK FOR AUGUST

- by Gladys Kemei

HERE COMES THE SUN

- The Beatles

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright

Little darlin', it's been a long, cold, lonely winter
Little darlin', it feels like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright

Little darlin', the smile's returning to their faces
Little darlin', it seems like years since it's been here

Here comes the sun
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright

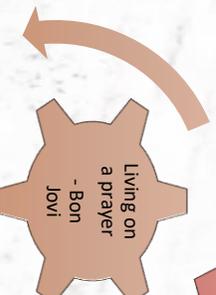
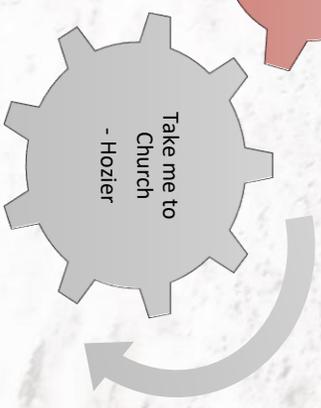
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes

Little darlin', I feel that ice is slowly melting
Little darlin', it seems like years since it's been clear

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright

Here comes the sun, doo-doo-doo-doo
Here comes the sun
It's alright

It's alright



Circle of Life

Part 3: Breeding season is in the air



- by Elsa van Ginkel

The clouds of Marion are ever-changing. The terrain may remain somewhat familiar, but the intense variation in the white candy floss clouds dancing in a blue sky makes every day something novel. The clouds can shower you in cold, wet misery; or challenge you with 5 m (or less) visibility whilst soft, misty rain accompanies you to your site. On rare occasions, the clouds may take a day off, showcasing the island's interior and all its beauty and splendour – a welcome invitation to an adventurous soul. These days are gems.

The past two months introduced us to the idea of longer daylight hours, making our lives much easier. This also allows one to get a lot more work done within a day. At the crack of dawn, you have this urge to get into your 'blues' and head to the field, especially if the sun welcomes you from the horizon, unfiltered by clouds. At the moment, my work entails monitoring a variety of sites for mouse activity and behaviour. I find this somewhat entertaining.

I had a 10-day stint at Kildalkey hut in August. Kildalkey is situated on the southeastern side of the island, where we also celebrated our killer whaler's birthday on the 17th of August! What a blessing to spend a birthday at a hut, on a sub-Antarctic Island, amongst friends.

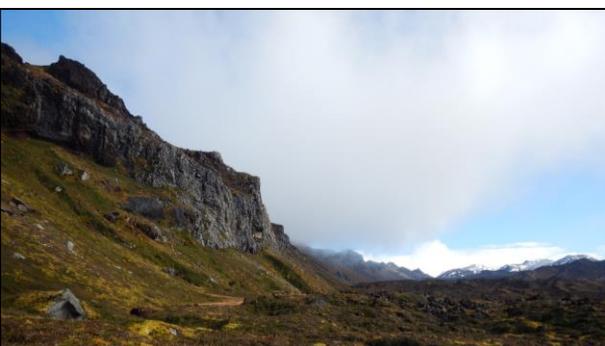
It is such a simple existence, staying in a little, cosy field hut. Early mornings and long days in the field where it is just you, your work, and your endless train of thoughts. Each day you experience the many moods of the local weather phenomena, which are quite astounding. You can't imagine how many seasons you can experience on the same day. Overnight, the island can transform from a dark blend of black and grey lava with the dark green *Blechnum* hills... into a glaring, snowy landscape, sometimes covering up your tracks and trails. On this dynamic island, one constantly feels like a pioneer.

In September, I had a trip to Rooks (in the south), where I had to stay for about 11 days.

This basically meant living at Rooks for a third of the month. The route to this field hut can be a daunting walk. The hut is situated about 20 km from the main base, as the crow flies. The path, however, meanders across a greater distance, leading you through diverse terrain. When you head off from the base, you mainly walk through mire-slope terrain. These areas consist of sections of vast, grassy mires as well as many *Blechnum-Acaena* hills. *Blechnum penna-marina* is the most common fern species that occur on the island. *Acaena magellanica* is a flowering species from the rose family. This plant produces seeds that every glove-wearing being on this island despises, as the small sharp-edged seed coats have a remarkable tendency to get stuck on your gloves at the most unfortunate times.

After about 4.5 km of walking through mire-slope terrain, just as you pass Fred's Hill (one of the many scoria cones on the island), you hit a section known as Stony Ridge. This is an area of fellfield with grey lava boulders strewn across the landscape, with *Azorella selago* cushions usually having grassy patches on top of them. This differs from the coastal areas, where grass rarely grows on top of the *Azorellas*.

After Stony, the terrain transforms into a combination of mires and black lava rubble. This is essentially extremely brittle, black lava rocks covered with thin layers of vegetation. This area would have been a treacherous stretch of walking if it were not for a path leading through these mounds of black lava.



Black Haglet Valley.



The views on the way to Watertunnel hut.

The path then goes past Middelrooikop, which leads towards the Black Haglet Valley. This is one magnificent ridge on which several Sooty Albatross (*Phoebastria fusca*) have started nesting. Climbing up Black Haglet's Ridge, you occasionally contemplate your existence, but as soon as you reach the top (and if the weather allows), you know the suffering was all worth it as extraordinary views welcome you. However, this is Marion Island, and you never have too much time to enjoy the moment.

When relief washes over you as you climb that Black Haglet, you realise Karookop is your next nemesis. Now this area, for most field assistants, is quite a troublesome stretch as it can either be a beautiful walk or an absolute nightmare, depending on the prevailing wind speeds. I was lucky enough to miss the wind, but I hit thick mist and had to navigate the path with limited visibility (in other words... I'm uncertain when I actually passed Karookop).

After old Karookop, things start looking better as you approach the Feldmark Plateau towards Watertunnel. As soon as you see Watertunnel, you're in high spirits again. The walk from Watertunnel to Grey-headed, then from Grey-headed to Rooks, is quite the 'breeze' compared to the preceding trek. The Santa Rosa Valley, located between Watertunnel and Grey-headed hut, can sometimes be challenging, especially if the previous night had heavy snow. Otherwise, this section is generally a lovely walk.

Rooks hut has a beautiful view of the coast. The ridge next to the hut is filled with Sooty Albatross, the occasional Grey-headed Albatross (*Thalassarche chrysostoma*), and Grey-headed Ridge (situated next to Grey-headed hut) and the cliffs surrounding Rooks Peninsula are currently packed with hundreds of Grey-headed Albatross. The plains are dotted with fur seals, especially gazellas (*Arctocephalus gazella*), while the Brown Skuas (*Stercorarius antarcticus*) are also back in full force. I also paid a visit to Goodhope Bay (situated near Grey-headed field hut) with the Sealers, where the beach was also buzzing with activity, filled with Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*), multiple fur seals, and King Penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*). It is always pleasant to meet fellow Marionites in the field, especially if you have been away from the base for an extended period. Knowing you are not alone out there in this unpredictable weather is somewhat comforting.



Gentoo chicks; Wandering Albatross juvenile.

Near the base, the Gentoo penguins (*Pygoscelis papua*) are thriving. Gentoos are the third largest penguin in the world, and these penguins live up to their Latin name, *Pygoscelis*, which means brush-tailed. I spotted an entire Gentoo penguin crèche near one of my camera sites, where the small chicks are growing rapidly. They are quite the spectacle, pecking and chasing each other, while the few adults amongst them keep careful watch, as the Giant Petrels and Skuas are always close by, waiting for an opportunity to snatch one of the weaklings.

At the coast, the elephant seal pups are abundant and truly adorable with their black, fluffy fur and shrill sounds. You can hear them from afar. Early in September, I also saw my first leopard seal (*Hydrurga leptonyx*) for the year, which was definitely the month's highlight!

The fur seals at the coast occasionally still fright you as they look like small, black lava outcrops that growl at you unexpectedly. Especially when you interrupt their cherished afternoon nap, as they clearly have the busiest schedules, and this is their only chance to get some rest...



Elephant seal pup; Leopard seal; Fur seal pup.

The high-pitched calls of the Antarctic Terns (*Sterna vittata*) are heard more often across the island, and the Wandering Albatross chicks (*Diomedea exulans*) are still increasing in size but with a touch of humour... Most presently have a bedraggled appearance as they dress in their juvenile outfit. They are covered in patches of new dark brown feathers and the remaining disarranged tufts of white, baby fluff. Occasionally, some of them even appear to go bald during this transition. The young take approximately 11 months to develop from egg to fledgling. These juveniles will soon start testing their wings and flight ability, and we look forward to seeing them take to the skies.

There is never a dull moment on this island, and I look forward to sharing my next adventures with you...

Weather

for the brave

- by Sikhwari Thendo, Tshitavhe Tanganedzani and Faltein Siphesihle

SAWS Weather Stats: August-September 2022

		AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
TEMPERATURE	MIN	-2.5 °C	-3.4 °C
	MAX	12.8 °C	13.5 °C
	AVERAGE	4.3 °C	4.8 °C
	AVERAGE LOW	0.4 °C	1.2 °C
	AVERAGE HIGH	8.0 °C	8.1 °C
PRESSURE	MIN	977.3 hPa	984.4 hPa
	MAX	1026.0 hPa	1027.8 hPa
	AVERAGE	1004.1 hPa	1005.6 hPa
RAIN	TOTAL	119.6 mm	123.2 mm
	DAYS WITH RAIN (≥ 1mm)	24 (21) days	23 (18) days
	MAX IN 24 HOURS	32.0 mm	25.4 mm
WIND	MAX	117.7 km/h	112.6 km/h
	DIRECTION	North West	North West
SUNSHINE	TOTAL	78.7 hours	121.7 hours
HUMIDITY	AVERAGE	78 %	79 %



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