



Meet the Team



The Mires of Londani



Celebrations and Mid-winter



ExploRoundy

THE WANDERER

August 2024



Making a difference on World Albatross Day

Exploring the Island with a birder

How to Escape a Mire

A winter island crossing

Another world - welcome to the marine mammals

A message from the Team Leader

It's a great honour and privilege to be M81 Team Leader. We are done with the first quarter of our expedition and so far everyone is doing well from the base personnel (Technical team, chef, medic, SANSA, SAWS) to the field scientists (birders, sealers, MFM, ECOs). I want to express my gratitude to all those who are cheering us on in this journey; our families, our colleagues and our friends back home. It is not an easy journey but it is a rare and beautiful experience. With courage and determination we will continue and we will finish stronger than we started.



Our first quarter was not without challenges but thanks to the technical team and all those who assisted in making sure that the base is still running smoothly. The team has shown team work, team understanding and patience when we were faced with challenges and I think this is the strength of this team.

Everyone is looking forward for the next quarter which marks one of the busiest times on the Island 'the start of the breeding season' and all the best to field personnel during this season.

- Bubele Nongwejana, M81 Team Leader Extraordinaire

In a nutshell

Mid-winter has passed. The longest night gave us wild weather with ice crystals beating against the windows and howling winds. But the team of M81 are well-used to this now.

The day the ship left on May 10th was a big day for all of us. We were all ready to get on with the year and make our way forward into our projects, taking on the responsibilities. But it is a momentous event seeing the last of the Takeover passengers boarding the chopper and flying back to the SA Agulhas II, which soon after changes position, starts steaming and is gone. And the 20 members of M81 are left to our own devices for the next year on this wild island in the Roaring 40s, looking forward to getting to know our new neighbours of albatrosses, penguins, seals and killer whales.

Number of Koppies climbed so far: 11



Number of Biscuits devoured: Unmeasurable



Number of Hectares sponsored for Mouse-Free Marion:

1



Number of Kilometres run on the treadmills during the Mid-Winter celebrations:

20

The Takeover period is a busy one. Team M80 are packing up and finishing off tasks, M81 are learning a huge amount, ready to take over and there are supervisors, members of Public Works, DFFE, helicopter pilots, engineers and team members, all working towards making this island and its projects run as efficiently as possible for the coming year. With Takeover done and the corridors reduced from 100 people to 20, Base was suddenly very quiet – but not in a bad way.

The M81 team is a wonderfully strong one who have banded together quickly. We worked to get Base ship-shape again after it hosted so many people, figured out our tasks and got to grips with getting on with it all.



Various challenges emerged almost immediately, but that is inevitable in such a remote and tempestuous place, far from the nearest hardware store or delivery driver and our team has been meeting those challenges so far with humour and good nature.

For many of the field teams, we get to ease into the island over the winter period, working to get our fitness and stamina up. However, the days are still filled with long hikes and the challenges of data collection in torrential rain or 50

knot winds. It's surprisingly tricky learning to walk on this island that is in places spongy and sucks all the energy from your legs; holds icy mires that will drench you and hold onto a muddy boot; provides fields of crumbly black lava to bite at hands and feet and provide not a single firm footfall and endless uphill kilometres into thick mists. But despite the toughness, there is astonishing beauty all around that keeps you going.

The Mouse-Free Marion researchers have a busy winter though and have been out daily, monitoring mice densities, invertebrates and vegetation. A lot of their work is focused on the mountainous interior which has led to them seeing a lot of snow and sampling in weather conditions that are hard to imagine anywhere back home in South Africa.



The sealers too are straight into the thick of things, tagging and monitoring seals, censusing and diet sampling. They're covering vast amounts of ground but the breeding season is looming in just a couple of months and things are going to get a great deal busier.

Why did you come to Marion?

- To work and travel at the same time – Siphamandla
- For adventure – Peter
- To contribute to the conservation of this remarkable, remote environment – Xolani
- To experience something uniquely different- Elmar
- It's been calling me for years. I couldn't ignore that call anymore. - Vanessa
- To experience a life-long dream and explore – Monique
- For life experience – Marcello
- To serve and to enjoy the environment - Bublele

The Oceans and Coasts birders are currently monitoring the shy Gentoo Penguins as they sneak onto land to breed as well as several burrowing petrel species and the UCT FIAO and SAPRI birders are mostly monitoring the albatross colonies and deploying equipment to measure the effects of potential climatic changes to albatrosses and petrels. The team from the South African Weather Service are keeping on top of all the weather – (of which there is a very wide variety)!

Our diets will remain without fresh fruit and vegetables.. We will all have the occasional yearning for a tangerine, tomato or avocado. Luckily we have a great chef who can ease those cravings with a well-placed profiterole or two!

In a nutshell, M81 is the team of teams - a grouping of wonderful, talented people who are about to have one of the best years of their lives - creating stories, playing games, having adventures and making discoveries, building on an important body of work and living a very lucky life.



- [Monique and Vanessa](#) - Editors and unbelievably incredible people (Peer Reviewed).

Best thing about Marion?

- The team – Sibusisile; Bubele
- The weather – Peter, Eddy
- Time to yourself. If you want to read or even write a book, you can. - Toko
- The beauty of pure nature – Megan
- Getting mired while it's raining – Elmar
- Its geographic location and all the seabirds – Chilli
- The sound that Grey-headed albatrosses make when they fly overhead – Vanessa
- To have the whole island to explore as your backyard – Monique
- Nature in its wildest, rawest form - Marcello
- Wildlife – especially the birds - Rhiannon



An ode to Duct Tape



Meet the team

M81 has it all! With the old team (M80) leaving us with good motivation, M81 has continued to have high spirits. We are a team with great diversity and have banded together like gum sticking to a shoe. Our team has now settled in for 4 months and it is starting to feel like home!



First up is our team leader and medic, **Bubele Nongwejana**. Bubele has the premium responsibility of taking care of us. While he might spend most of his time at base, he is keen to venture out and help the field assistants. He stays active by going for a run on the treadmill every day. He also manages the food stock and logistic stores, and he does this in close collaboration with our dearly beloved chef.

Our chef, **Daniel Baatjes**, is spoiling us 24/7 with good food. He is a world-class chef with lots of advice and skill. Daniel spends most of his time at base but is always keen and ready to go out in the field. Daniel knows his way around the kitchen and always surprise us with a warm desert now and then.





Our base is always warm and comfortable, and this is all thanks to our technical team (Diesel mechanic, electrical engineering technician, electronics engineer-SANSa, and communication engineer). Our diesel mechanic, **John Skelete** is a pro in this game. He has gone to both Gough and SANAE and this is his third time overwintering on Marion Island. John has a huge responsibility and role to fulfil as he must make sure that the base has power (This is quite a tricky and complicated situation with only one working generator, but we trust in John). Our electrical engineer, **Eddie Xaki**, is the warm “Hellllloo, how are youuu?” around the base. Eddie’s duties are to maintain and repair the base infrastructure and various equipment around base. Eddie is also planning to visit all the field huts to maintain and repair the equipment.


Anele Magobiyana is the electronics engineer for the South African National Space Agency (SANSa) and maintains the instruments monitoring the near space environment (aka the ionosphere), ensuring they collect good quality data. Anele is currently busy with a project using python to visualise the quality of the data from these pc instruments (So, he is basically extremely good with computers!). Anele is also the gym bro and our personal fitness instructor. He is keeping himself active and others motivated by gymming daily.

Another core member part of the technical team is **Toko Mdleleni**, - the communication engineer. She is the radio host and mother figure, checking that all her field assistant babies are back safe in their nest in the huts. Toko maintains all the communication equipment (Radio, Wi-Fi, and satellite communication). She’s also coming to terms with how to walk on a mire. :)







Weather on Marion Island is something extraordinary, hence we have the South African Weather Service (SAWS) team on Marion to study these crazy conditions. **Siphamandla Gumede** (Snr), **Tanga Tshitavhe** and **Tshililo Kharivha**, are a power team. Working day and night shifts they observe cloud phenomena, report on significant weather conditions, launch twice-daily weather balloons and maintain all weather equipment.

Next up are **Londani Rambao** (Snr) and **Xolani Madiba** who are the environmental control officers. They are responsible for the control and eradication of alien species. Their focus is to minimise the effect that us humans have on the island and setting up biosecurity measures. They spend most of their time at base however, go out on a Round Island every second month. 



Furthermore, we have our buzzing and busy field assistants who spend most of the time out in the field. The sealers and killer whaler are known for their adrenalin rush work. This team of three, **Peter Cunningham**, **Dylan Manyoka** and **Megan Clarkson**, are part of the long-term monitoring of marine mammals, doing mark and recapture of the Southern Elephant Seals and Sub-Antarctic fur seals. Dylan and Peter walk a **lot**, doing up to 2 round islands a month! Megan is mostly on the rocks looking for Killer whales, monitoring and deploying tracking devices, however, she also helps out with monitoring the seal populations. Megan has strong endurance, as she sits for up to 10 hours in the freezing cold, on the rocks outside looking for killer whales. 



Next up are the mouser and ecologist, **Monique van Bers** and **Elmar van Rooyen**. Monique is part of Mouse-free-Marion (MFM) which is preparing for the upcoming mouse eradication program. She is determining the invasive house mouse densities and conducting bait trials to see how long the bait for the eradication can last in the crazy and rough weather conditions. She also monitors the weather to see if there will be enough helicopter flying hours in the baiting period. Elmar is the ecologist, from the University of Pretoria (UP), who helps Monique measure various impact of the house mouse on the diversity and function of the terrestrial ecosystems of Marion Island. Elmar is collecting additional baseline data on invertebrates and plants. Elmar's thirst for knowledge on plants and inverts is out of this world! He keeps himself extra busy by updating all previous insect collections and has started to collect and identify all moss species on Marion (which is difficult as most of the moss species looks similar). 

Lastly, there are 4 birders on the team. **Rhiannon Gill** (SAPRI) and **Vanessa Stephen** (FIAO) work closely together on the long-term monitoring of Albatrosses and many petrel species. These birders walk far distances between nests and all around the island between the mires to count and ring these wonderful creatures. Vanessa is also working on a project to see how a warming climate is affecting albatrosses and Giant Petrels. Vanessa is usually seen carrying heavy equipment and will ask a general pack mule to carry some equipment to the other side of the island :). The other 2 birders are the DFFE Oceans and Coasts birders (O&C birders), **Marcello Evertson** and **Sibusisile Kheswa**, who are doing the long-term monitoring of seabird colonies. They are determining seabirds' breeding populations and looking to understand their success, size, movement and diets, focussing on the penguins. Sibus and Marcello's monitoring have worn paths across the island as impressive as those of their Gentoo penguins. 

Our team has it all! Everyone has their own strengths and our time here is so much more than any pictures can describe. It is genuinely a once in a lifetime experience and we are so grateful to share this with such a lovely and motivating team. M81 is ready for more Marion action!

A true endemic - Marion's flightless moth, *Pringleophaga marioni*



The name *Pringleophaga* is derived from the vascular plant found on the island *Pringlea antiscorbutia* (Kerguelen Cabbage), which is quite ironic as there is no evidence that suggests that the species is associated with the cabbage in any way. In fact, it is one of few plants excluded from the larval diet.

The adults are short-lived (10 – 14 days), while the larvae are long-lived (more than 3 years). Its ecological role is fulfilled in its larval stage. Adults are unable to feed and the larvae are major detritivores and litter-dwellers feeding on foliage of mosses, plants and even earthworms!

Because of its long-lived larval stage, the larvae, pupae and adults occur throughout the year, but peak in during late summer. Adults have reduced wings and are unable to fly, but have adapted well developed hind legs that can easily be confused to the legs of a cockroach. The males actively walk on these legs to find a mate and after succeeding the female can lay up to 200 eggs on the leaf litter environment.

Its inability to fly has reduced its dispersal capability and therefore the island has become its home. Unfortunately, this precious wingless moth is a dominant prey item for the feral mice and represent a significant portion of mouse diets on the island. Another reason eradication of mice is of utmost importance.

- Text and Images: Elmar van Rooyen, M81 Epic Ecologist, UP, MFM



No more mice please



Celebrations at home :)



How many people does it take to change a heater?

Well if the heater is across 8km of mires, stony ridges and mossy banks, the answer so far is five!

Repetto's Hut heater was not working well. Field teams were creating a delicate balancing act with pickle jars on the ignition button to try and keep the flame lit. A hut without heat is not an enticing thought on Marion. Field researchers inevitably arrive wet and cold and in need of a change of clothes, a hot cuppa and a quick burst of heat to keep the shivers at bay and return feeling to numb fingers and toes. The hut was increasingly smelling of gherkin juice and the inevitability of not being able to keep the fire lit, crept ever closer.



Our Base personnel took this as a challenge to be overcome and set about to carry a new heater to Repetto's and return to Base the same day.

This is no small challenge. Long Ridge lies roughly half way and there are mires all the way on either side. If you're not used to walking on mirey ground and if you happen to be carrying extra weight, a mire will certainly be waiting for you -

especially if ECO Londani decides to show you a King Penguin colony and leads you straight into the thick of it. 'Ya, no problem bra - just follow me!'

Bubele, S'pha and Anele didn't make that mistake twice. Eddy had taken his own route and avoided that initial mire and so the other three followed him instead. But this turned out to be a bigger mistake. After about 8 mires, it has been said that Eddy is no longer the same person. He changed. He got quiet and he fell to the back of the group.

But despite the challenges of the environment, Repetto's loomed like Brigadoon at the end of a tough path. Inside was warmth (thanks to the new heater) and Lemon Creams!

After a short sit-down, meeting up with the MFM Mouser and Ecologist, and an assessment of life's choices, it was time to turn around and head back to Base.

Field workers heard the cries of joy from Skua Ridge when the group spotted Base again and knew that they were on the home stretch. It was a cry tinged with pain - but also much laughter, adventure and maybe just a smidge of pride.

Thanks guys! You are hotter than a working heater!



A killer-whaler's magical world

“Another world” a phrase used so often and by so many to describe the wonders and experiences of places so mystifying and breathtaking they leave one in awe with no other words. These words have doubtless been used often to describe Marion Island and like so many before, these are the only words that keep coming to my mind every time I look out the window or walk a few steps outside, walk around the island or just look out to the ocean. A harsh wilderness but a place of wonder, where we have the privilege of observing and experiencing the lives of the animals that call this island home.



Sub-adult Sub-Antarctic fur seal

Marion changes at the slightest of whims and with the hurricane like winds and rain, a passing cloud or the rolling of mist over the mountains and across the ocean, everything that has become familiar turns into a new world before your eyes.



Razor (Right) and Newborn (Left)

Changing one's view point and you feel like you have been dropped in the middle of a place only described in books.

My first few months here have felt like a waking dream, mountains and rocks that take on the appearance of mythical creatures to looking like statues of people in the mist.

Dreams come true are the numerous close encounters with none other than Marion's most graceful and awe-inspiring visitors, her

Orcas. In the short time I have been here, I've had the honour of a new arrival. A newborn killer whale (name still pending) born to Razor who is also the mother of Nimrod and forms a social group with Poseidon. Razor and Poseidon are also visitors to the islands of Crozet.

One eventful afternoon saw an action-packed hunt of an elephant seal. The seal roaring, the killers tail slapping, rolling and pulling the seal into the water. Scratches, mother to Ringo and Star, made multiple attempts with Ringo and another killer close behind her. The seal managed each time to pull himself out onto the large boulders. After a 10-minute intense rally by both the seal and killers, the seal made his escape and the killers left to the open ocean.

For now, all that's left for me to say is, I am looking forward to seeing every new side of Marion with her ever changing moods and the upcoming breeding season for most of the species on the island. Soon the arrival of more killer whales, the new generation of Southern elephant seals, Antarctic and sub-Antarctic fur seals, giant petrels, prions, penguins, Crozet shags and albatrosses will grace her shores.



Poseidon

- Text and Images: Megan Clarkson, Supreme Killer Whaler

ExploRoundy!

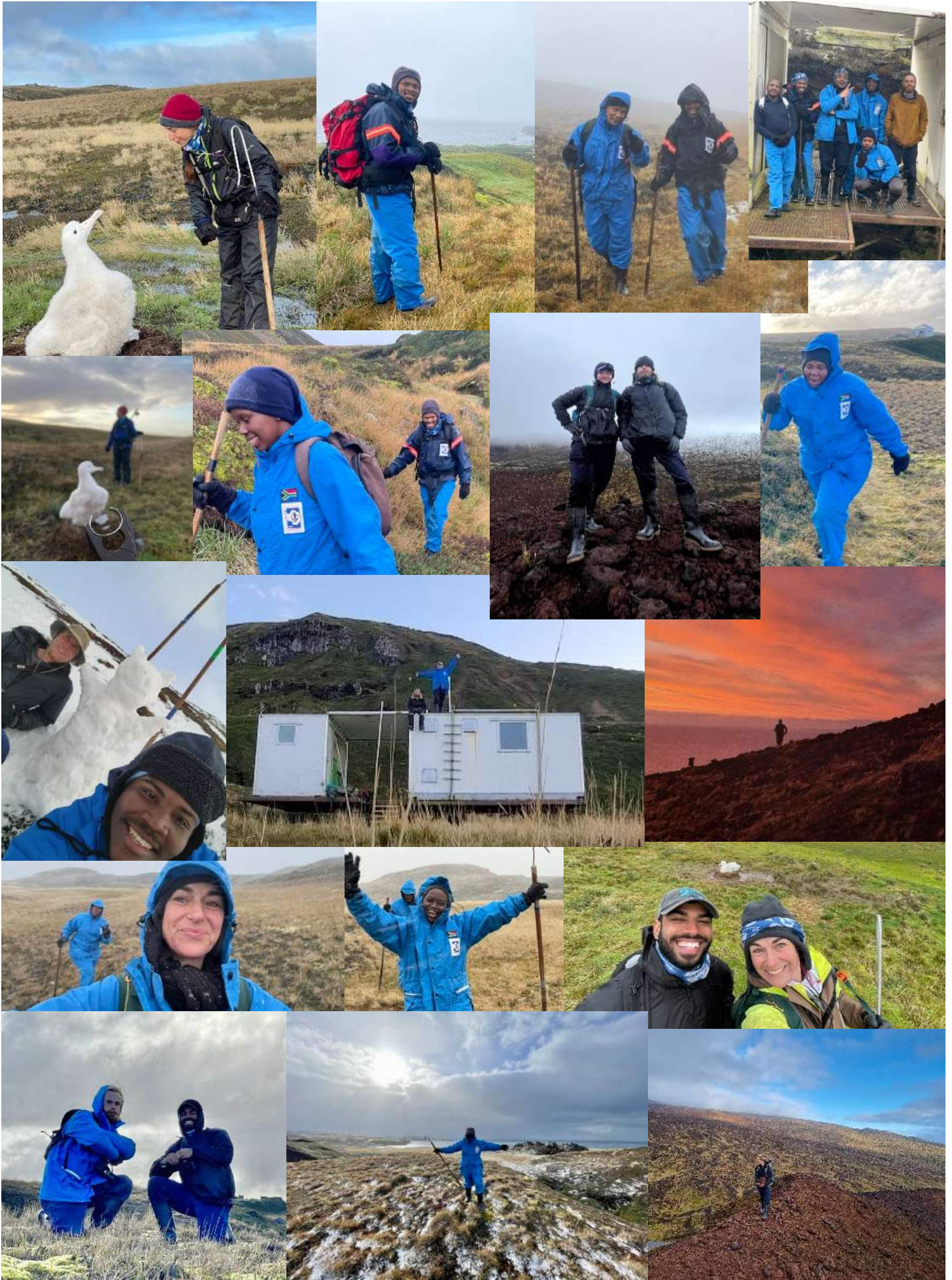
A new word for Island or Round Island exploration!



What do you miss the most?

- Socialising – Siphamandla
- My cat, Bubbles <3 - Monique
- My kids – Toko, John, Daniel
- My family – Everyone
- Going for a run. The treadmill isn't for everybody. - Rhiannon
- Drinking wine with my fiancé while we discuss some random, epic topic – Elmar
- My family, partner and personal space – Tanga
- Going out on weekends. There's no weekend here – everyday is Monday – Sibusisile
- Road trips – Chilli
- Trees – and certain people – Vanessa
- Cheese – Marcello







Worst thing about Marion?

- The weather – Siphamandla; Peter
- Being cut off from the digital world with no reliable internet connection – Xolani
- Falling into an ice-cold mire – Megan; Anele
- No trees - Elmar
- N/A - Daniel
- Limited communication – Tanga
- Extreme cold conditions – Londani
- Always all the seasons in one day – Chilli
- The kitchen washing-up sponges – and the mice – Vanessa
- Having a sock slide down inside your boot – Monique
- Too much wind that shakes the base - Bubele



A birder's introduction

My time on Marion so far has been a whirlwind and I don't think my feet have touched the ground yet, it all still feels too good to be true!

Having dreamt of being selected to go as a Field Assistant to Marion Island for many years, my day finally arrived after a wonderfully comfortable cruise on board the SA Agulhas II . It was certainly far more pleasant than my voyages to Gough and back, sailing yachts are not for the 'faint hearted'.

Flown onto the island by helicopter, followed by a quick tour of base and lunch, fellow birder Vanessa and I were whisked off for a quick walk down to Trypot, a little introduction to the terrain, a snippet of a preview into what we would be up against over the next 7 days.

With an early rise on the 21st of April, hiking bags packed with what we hoped would be all we needed for our first Round Island, we set off with M80's birders Michelle Risi and Christopher Jones, accompanied by Prof Peter Ryan and A/Prof Susie Cunningham.

There are no words to really describe the terrain or how it seems to alter with every step you take, you simply must experience it for yourself. The initial few kilometres are relatively easy going and after 5 days at sea, you are so thrilled to be on land and out walking in fresh air, the rubbing of your heels against your gumboots barely crosses your mind, that is until you reach the ascent of Black Haglet! The forming blisters on your heels and discomfort this brings begin to dissipate again once you're at the top and see the stunning rock formations, vast green landscapes, hills, and the ocean in the distance. You begin to take in all the beauty with the realisation that soon you'll be left here, just you and the 19 other members of M81, plus all the wonderful fauna and flora your heart has desired to see.

Once over the initial 'trauma' of climbing Black Haglet, the walk to the Water Tunnel Hut feels somewhat pleasant but this was a mere pitstop along the journey! A quick cup of something to warm the bones before leaving to Grey- Headed which introduced us to the stunning beauty of the Grey-headed Albatross and their fledglings. We got familiar with their colonies and the various tasks we would be undertaking during our year here.



After two nights, we left for Swartkops, passing Rooks Hut, and with more introductions into the surrounding areas. Along our route, we gained an insight into the number of Wandering Albatross nests around the island and assisted in checking on the chicks. Reflecting to those first days seeing the chicks on their nests, they were still small and bewildered by the world, now 2 months later and they're almost the size of an adult, more curious than ever as they shuffle around their nests investigating anything and everything they can reach!



An edgy walk to Mixed Pickle

After a pleasant night at Swartkops, we left for Mixed Pickle. A steady climb over Kaalkoppie, with stunning views, evidence of lava flows and incredible cliffs, you end your walk at the Mixed Pickle hut, one of the sealers' strongholds! Worth remembering, enjoy the walk to Mixed Pickle, as the one that follows is rarely spoken about with fondness!

The following day, Vanessa, Susie, and I were handed a GPS, told 'aim high but not too high, we'll meet you all at Cape Davis.' Our introduction to Azorella as new islanders, was memorable! Barely

able to see due to the constant incoming mist, we did our best to follow the tracks on the GPS, not always successfully! Susie liked to aim high, Vanessa preferred going low and I preferred to aim straight for the middle, not too high or too low, pick a feature when the mist breaks and head for it! After numerous stops to decipher our path, a quick stop to greet the incoming Sealer team also navigating this arduous mountain, and a much needed mood and sugar boost of sour jelly babies, we eventually found our way to Cape Davis.

Cape Davis comes equipped with beautiful sunsets and rises, a view of Boot Rock and the sound of crashing waves against the rocks. From here to Repetto's Hut and back to base the walk feels easier and less like a struggle (some may disagree as they get mired), and it is along these final stretches you realise what an incredible first 7 days on Marion Island you have had and thank yourself for having ensured your fitness levels could keep up with the likes of Prof Peter Ryan! So, much of my first trip round island has somewhat blurred into one, as you find yourself overwhelmed with trying to take in a wealth of information from those more experienced islanders you have with you, whilst navigating the changing terrain beneath your feet, breath taking scenery and the soaring Wandering Albatross above you, a bird you have dreamt of for most your life.

I leave you with some words from a book I recently read called: Thorns to Kilimanjaro by Ian McCallum. 'On those slopes, I was struck by what it means to live in a world of paradoxical time, to live both in a world of clockwork and in a world of time. I was reminded that I had all the time in the world, it was as though the world had slowed down for me. I felt a sense of participation with the trees, the birds, and the animals.

I belonged'.



Boot Rock and SUN

- Text and images: Rhiannon Gill, M81 SAPRI Birder of brilliance

The ESSENTIAL guide to escaping a mire.

Have you ever been mired? Have you ever had your boot fill up with icy water and inside your boot, your sock is sliding down? Well, fear no more! Here are nine steps on how to get out of a mire. This is inspired by all past victims and dedicated to all future victims.



Step 1: Get mired (be prepared for ZERO help).



Step 2: Realise you are in a sticky situation. Save face by declaring loudly, "Is that an Elaphoglossum?" as you spit out some soil soup.



Step 3: Swing one leg at 87 degrees perpendicular to the mired boot. Work those hip flexes!



Step 4: Use walking stick as an implement to lever stuck boot while launching body forward at high velocity.



Step 5: Regret not following through on your goal of 6 daily sit-ups as your arms follow walking stick deep into the mire.



Step 6: Use brute strength to miraculously flip onto all fours. Now you are in full control, contrary to popular belief.



Step 7: You're now in the position to look up again. Reassess life choices as you see your workmates have left you and you will have to run to catch up if you ever manage to get out of this soil-sucking mire!



Step 8: Have courage and stand up.



Step 9: Walk away as if nothing happened and be aware of the next mire! Put phone in rice once back at base.

Now that you have the complete guide to avoid getting stuck in a mire, please be safe out there and remember to do your 6 daily sit-ups. Thank you, Peter Cunningham who took this series of pictures, and especially to Megan Clarkson and Elmar van Rooyen who did not lift a finger while laughing hysterically.

- Monique van Bers- MFM Magnificent Mouser

World Albatross Day

...falls on the 19th of July each year and was established in 2019 to bring awareness of the plight of these very rocking birds. Marion Island holds a quarter of the worlds population of breeding Wandering Albatrosses. Together with Prince Edward island, that figure increases to nearly half. - a phenomenal statistic! This makes these little isolated landmasses critically important. The Southern Ocean is a wild and lonely place. You could sail from the southernmost tip of New Zealand and not hit land all the way to Argentina or Chile. These islands are amongst the only refuges and breeding grounds for these birds - there is nowhere else they can disperse to if things get rough(er).



Marion Island's seabirds are being hit hard by a tiny mammal. House mice were accidentally introduced to Marion by sealers, who came to exploit the vast number of elephant and sub-antarctic seals. A warming climate means that they rodents can persist further into the winter at higher

numbers. But the food that they rely on in the summer is in short supply - particularly after many years of being eaten by the mice. Instead, they turn to nesting birds, nibbling wings, skin and flesh.

We are carefully monitoring the grey-headed and wandering albatross colonies, watching them grow;



seeing them fed by their parents; new feathers growing; the exploration of their surroundings; padding their nests - and then suddenly a gaping, bleeding wound and, shortly thereafter, a carcass.

There are enough conservation challenges in the world beyond Marion without an invasive species attacking them in the place where they should be safest. The good news is that there is a plan to eradicate these mice. It has been successfully done in several islands around the world - with New Zealand having pioneered this approach. It is not easy and requires a lot of planning and research in advance. It is also prohibitively expensive. The Mouse-Free Marion Project is currently raising funds for this eradication.

In celebration of 2024's World Albatross Day, the team of M81 wanted to do something meaningful - and got together to sponsor 1 hectare's rehabilitation. Seeing the reality, it's the very least that we can do.

What do you wish you had brought?

- My PlayStation – John, Daniel
- Better fitting work gloves to keep you warm but keep dexterity - Megan
- More music, I did not bring enough – Elmar
- DIY electronics kit for a side project – Anele
- A lot of movies and TV series – Tanga
- A good quality camera – Londani, Monique
- Quality rain paints – Vanessa, Monique, Xolani
- Cheese – Marcello

- Vanessa Stephen, M81 FIAO Birder, UCT; Top Tannie.

An Over-island Tale

27/05/2024 – DAY OF THE BLIZZARD

Sometimes plans don't always work out as you had planned them. Sometimes the inevitability of chance and fate bring about such changes that could not have been imagined even in your wildest dreams.

Today was not one of those days.

But neither was it a day where even the most complicated plans run with a strange simplicity that confounds the senses.

Today was the bastardised version of these two extremes.

It all started with the 26/05/2024 – Day of the rainbow. I was missioning back from Kildalkey after making a quick, pointless trek to Hooker to do TAPS in the afternoon. Dylan and Megan were continuing with the monthly round island, whilst the plan was for me to go back to base, do TAPS and pack my bag with all the essential equipment that needed to get to Mixed Pickle, but was somehow left behind during the hut restock. The next day I was to walk over the interior, making a quick stop at Katedraal to liberate some of its copious amounts of Game, to Mixed Pickle. Simple plan.



Packing my bag with two trays of PIT tags, tag applicator, medical waste holder, spare blue thing for the PIT station, tin of game and all my usual census and living equipment I started to wonder if going over-island was wise. My doubts were fuelled by a quick weather check in the evening and the onslaught of snow/ice rain. If the weather was not going to be kind, then I would have to take the less exciting and far longer coastal walk to Mixed Pickle. Something I wasn't particularly keen on.

Alas the morning brought with it perfect weather! I woke up to what was the most snow there had been on the island since we had arrived. Ice lay in dustings all around the base and looking to my destination I saw clear skies (well partially clear; but it is Marion Island after all,) and snow-covered peaks. Today would be the day that I truly discover what snow is like. Armed with a GPS and my sealer stick I hoisted my rather heavy bag onto my back and began the expedition.

What is the best food here?

HELLS YEAH!

- Daniel's! - Megan
- Home made pizza! - Toko, Sibiu, Tanga
- Oxtail – Eddy; Siphamandla, Khariuha Tshililo (chilli)
- Rump steak with golden brown chips - Anele
- Calamari – Monique
- Eet-sum-mors, lasagne, macaroni cheese – Vanessa
- Cheese – Marcello
- Daniel's soup – Rhiannon

PART ONE: FIND THE ROUTE TO KATEDRAAL AND THEN FIND THE HUT.

Having never been to Katedraal I had no idea where the path there even began. The mouser and ecologist, Monique and Elmar told me that the path was there behind E-base and that I should just follow the pipe. There behind E-base. Follow the pipe. Quite specific. So naturally behind E-base I find the pipe and start to walk along it. Turns out this wasn't quite exactly where the path begins because I followed the pipe right into the mire it went over and nearly &ucked my whole day up by getting icy wet socks. Fleeing from the trap I happened upon where the path actually began. Phew, situation averted.



I was happy as a child walking through snow covered fields with sunshine and no wind. It was a first. As I walked higher I began to see some of the small ponds were frozen. This provided more entertainment to me as I went to almost every one to break the ice. This first section was the time of innocence. Moving on I started to lose the path but no matter I was told to just aim for First Red and walk up along the left side of it.

Walking up First Red I realised how nice it was to walk up a steep scoria cone when there was ample snow on it. I flew up the hill only to be greeted by a brisk wind on the top. I should have known all good things come to an end. Here I lost the path (which I hadn't really found) and ended up on the wrong side of Katedraal Krans. No matter I thought, I'll just go over it. Quite steep, that thing is but I managed. Finding Katedraal is a skill. One walks randomly on a flat plain and sees cairns and helicopter landing sites but no hut. That is until you take a gander amongst the rock outcrops. There I found the frozen hut. Two and a half hours. Step one done. Now it was time for tea.

PART TWO: THE %UCKENING.

After my hot cuppa I realised time and tide wait for no man and that I should get the show on the road. Here I would make full use of a dodgy GPS (it takes its time to sometimes not find satellites). Walking out of the rock outcrops I realised things were not ok. That brisk wind

was blowing ever stronger and dark grey clouds were boiling towards me from the west. Rounding Neds I was blasted with a full on blizzard. Snow, ice and wind were to be my companions for the next few hours. Visibility dropped to about 50m and only God knows the wind speed but I can attest that it was rather strong. Forwards! Aim for Knopkop on the GPS and don't forget the idiotic arrow points backwards!

The difficult thing about aiming for a point on a GPS in a blizzard is that you can't really see much in terms of choosing the best route. A few glances up and what felt like bruised eyeballs from ice pellets taught me today would be all about my feet. And there I was, stumbling forward. Knopkop. That accursed hill. Never once did I see it but it took me two hours to walk around it slipping and falling as I went. Snow drifts so deep I thought I wouldn't make it out of them, tried to swallow me whole and steep, frozen slopes sent me sliding down into more blizzard. For that is all there was. Snow and ice and wind. That and the random "This place is crazy" coming from frozen lips.

After a lifetime I realised I was actually starting to move downwards. I was relieved but soon realised that the landscape between Knopkop and Azorella was a sea of crumbly, frozen and slippery black rock complete with waves.

An island of flat and smooth terrain behind Spitskop gave me hope for an easier ending to my journey. The blizzard was beginning to calm down and I actually saw the slopes of Spitskop. Tragically going down meant going into the land of rain and defrosting. Until then I was walking covered in snow and ice complete with icicles hanging off my rain jacket hoodie. Now it was time to get truly wet and miserable. Trudging down, I remembered that the ECOs were also en route to Mixed Pickle today and

wondered if it were possible to beat them to the hut.



Four hours after leaving Katedraal I eventually arrived at Mixed Pickle. What a day and to top it off I beat the ECOs! Exhausted but pleased with my achievement. My first and the only successful winter over-island crossing for M81 (so far)!

- Peter Cunningham - M81 SAPRI Savage Sealer

What food do you miss?

- Hot Wings – Siphamandla
- Fruit – Peter; Toko, Eddy, Bubele, Xolani, Rhiannon, Megan, Tanga
- Pap and mopane worms - Londani
- Avocados – ya, everyone
- Sushi – Monique
- Cheese – Marcello
- Greek salad, Caesar salad - Daniel

Glossary

- ECO: Environmental Control Officer
- FIAO/ Fitz: FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology
- MFM: Mouse-Free Marion
- SAPRI: South African Polar Research Infrastructure
- SAWS: South African Weather Service
- TAPS: Tagging and Poking Seals - or something like that.



Lastly... a weather update by SAWS



WEATHER SUMMARY 2024		MAY	JUNE	JULY
TEMPERATURE (°C)	MIN	1.0	1.0	-1
	MAX	14.9	14.6	12.8
	AVERAGE	8.0	6.2	5.8
RAIN	DAYS WITH RAIN	27	27	30
	DAYS WITH RAIN >1mm	24	19	22
	TOTAL (mm)	345.8	192.0	167.6
SUNSHINE (hrs)	TOTAL	90	66.4	57.0
HUMIDITY (%)	AVERAGE	82	81	87
WIND (KNOTS)	MAX WIND GUST	55.2		

