

Marion Island newsletter

# THE WANDERER

August 2015



The elephant seal edition

# FROM THE TEAM LEADERS OFFICE:



Hi everyone,

October has brought many surprises to the island's resident animal kingdom. We were surprised and delighted when a leopard seal decided to come visit us again this month. We (the lucky ones) also had the opportunity of meeting an Adelie penguin (*Pygoscelis adeliae*). Hopefully we will get to see it again this year or even a chinstrap penguin which visited last year.

My pass time during October was catching glimpses of the killer whales as they passed by the base. It is truly overwhelming to see these animals with your own eyes. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. It is even worth braving Marion's harsh weather to catch a glimpse of "Half moon" and the family.

Anyway back to my paperwork as the office calls. We have been here for 6 months now and biannual reports, orders and stores duties pile up on my menu from now till the end of the year as I prepare our stock and medicine orders for the forthcoming team. Our food stores amount is still good and even the ice-cream has survived thus far....but maybe spoken too soon 😊!

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank John Cooper for the interesting articles that he has contributed towards The Wanderer. Your contribution is always fascinating. The team and myself are waiting in anticipation to see what you will have for us next.

Cheers and all the best until next month!

**Sherwin Hiralall**

Team Leader and Medic

## A few small words from the editors – Tegan and John



October is probably the most mind blowing month during an over-wintering expedition on Marion Island. During winter months, there are some animals around and we enjoy them, as previous Wanderer additions have let on. However, come October, there are literally millions of animals (penguins, albatrosses, killer whales and seals) that seem to pop up over night.

I was lucky enough to spend my birthday (15<sup>th</sup> October) out in the field with a bunch of rowdy team members. While the sun went down, we stood on the beach of Kildalkey Bay. Around us were macaroni penguins by the hundred coming out the water to join the colony of over a million of them at our backs, an elephant seal giving birth, king penguins by the thousand, giant petrels and skuas fighting over penguin carcasses and killers in the bay. I mean come on! Could life get any better?

This months edition of The Wanderer will hopefully give you a small glimpse of what we where lucky enough to experience over the course of this month. This edition is a joint effort between John and myself. Where he focused on sealy things, I did the rest. I hope you enjoy it!

Tegan Carpenter-Kling (M72 birder & Wanderer editor)  
John Dickens (M72 Sealer & Wanderer co-editor)

# ABOUT THE WEATHER

By Nkoane



Pierre Joubert

I find weather on Marion Island fascinating. It differs so much from the weather we are used to on the main land. I would mention that it is warm at 10°C and the person at home would find that very hard to believe. For us here, partly cloudy at 10°C with calm winds feels like the perfect summer day. Those are the kinds of moments we enjoy knowing very well that it's not going to last. The wind makes a huge difference.

## **“partly cloudy at 10°C with calm winds feels like the perfect summer day”**

We've heard that some days it'll seem like experiencing all four seasons of the year in one day. It does feel like that at times. Depending on the type of system we are experiencing, the wind can change direction and pick up speed in a very short time. Clouds do pretty much the same. As we do hourly observations during the day, our recorded data clearly show these significant changes.

Sometimes a foggy day with visibility reduced to less than a kilometer around Base or the Weather Station, someone in the field about 8 kilometers away may experience a totally different weather, partly cloudy conditions for example. And if there are people walking from a hut to the Base, people in the Base tend to worry as poor visibility often results in disorientation. But to everyone's surprise in Base, those who were out in the field will mention that visibility was never a problem, in fact they had good weather until they were approaching Base.

However, there are times when it is very bad in the field, especially with the passage of a steep cold front. What normally happens with a cold front is that the air ahead of it gets warm, clouds form and later rain falls. The closer the front approaches to the area the lower the atmospheric pressure decreases and this is accompanied by decrease in air temperature and increase in wind speed. Ahead of the front, the wind is normally North Westerly and South Westerly after the front has passed.

On Marion Island, the South Westerly wind brings the cold air from Antarctica and that is when the wind chill comes in effect and the apparent temperature becomes unbearable. This is what we feel when we are out in the field which is why proper protective gear is issued and it would be unwise to venture into the field without it. Even if the weather doesn't seem bad, the best decision would be to carry protective clothing in a back pack just in case.

## **“you experience the wrath of the not so predictable Marion weather”**

Sometimes you would wake up and it'll seem like a good day and once you start walking then you experience the wrath of the not so predictable Marion weather. At times the system moves faster or slower than predicted in the forecast and you find yourself caught in bad weather. When that happens, we make sure we are suited up and then keep walking until we reach a shelter in the form of a field hut or the Base.



Energy break



Snow showers with gale winds



A calm day



On a clear but windy day

## “gale force winds with showers of snow and/ snow pellets”

Back to the wind chill and apparent temperature, these conditions could prove to be unfathomable to someone who has never been on the island. Take the kind of weather experienced after a cold front has just passed for example, gale force winds with showers of snow and/ snow pellets. It gets so cold and visibility is so poor that you can't see ten feet in front of you. That's when everyone walks close so as not to lose sight of any one. Toes and fingers suffer the most. A Bar One chocolate becomes rock hard and feels like it's taking forever to chew. Such energy break should not be more than five minutes as the cold will become worse and warming up again would take far too long and the pain on the fingers would seem like it will never leave you alone. Tegan, A J, Pierre and I experienced this kind of conditions I've just mentioned while doing a six or so hour walk from one of the huts to Base. Every field assistant has experienced similar circumstances since our arrival here on the island.

Some days you get caught in the rain and by the time you reach a hut or the Base you are soaking wet even with the protective gear. With foggy days, it doesn't matter how much you are familiar with the area, chances of being disorientated are still high. Then that's when a GPS becomes really handy

even though sometimes it seems like it also gets a bit disorientated.

In overall, we've experienced all kinds of weather since our arrival here. We've had a few days with thunderstorms which get everyone excited as it's quite a rare occasion.

We've had many days with showers from cumuliform clouds, which happen more often during the winter months. But these start sometime in April and May and last past winter as we are still observing showers of snow and/or snow pellets. I was hoping for a day when we'll experience continuous fall of snowflakes from stratiform cloud (Nimbostratus) at some point before the end of winter but it didn't happen. We've also experienced several days in a row without rain or any form of precipitation and some warm days which bring topics about climate change, a topic I'll leave to scientists who have been doing study on the ecosystem here on the island to try to understand its effects.

There's so much to talk about when it comes to weather and its influence on the environment and in our lives, the biggest challenge is to make it interesting.

**Until next time,  
N J Mathabatha  
(Metkassie)**

# Grey-headed Ridge/hut

## Fitz birders home away from home

-text and photos Stefan Schoombie

October marks the start of breeding for a couple of bird species on Marion Island, including the grey-headed albatross (*Thalassarche chrysotoma*). The grey-headed breed exclusively on the southern parts of the island with a large proportion of the nests found on the appropriately named "Grey-headed Ridge".



Counting thousands of birds can be a daunting task



Rook's peninsula with spectacular views



Our work on the ridge includes monitoring a colony of grey-headed albatrosses, looking at their breeding performance as well as counting all the incubating birds (~8500 in October 2015).





Candle light dinner.. . Looks better than it tasted

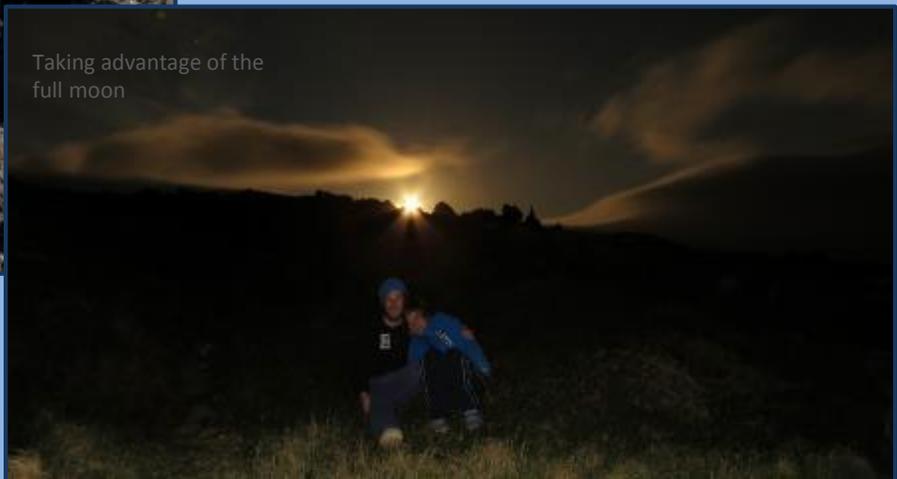
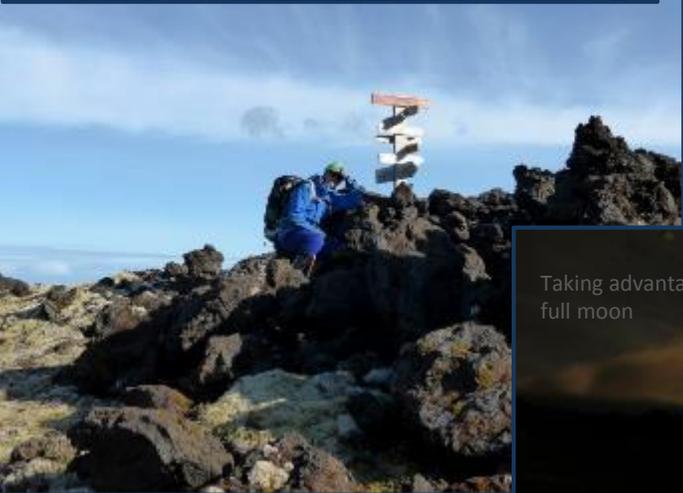
At the base of Grey-headed Ridge, nearing the coast, is situated Grey-headed hut. This is the newest hut on the island ~3 years old with some key features such as a raised roof (you can sit upright on the top bunk bed) and gutters allowing rain water to be captured for use in the hut.



Janine staying behind for a week

To get to Grey-headed Ridge we have to walk over the dreaded Karookop, where we are normally met with gale force winds and ice pellets in the face.

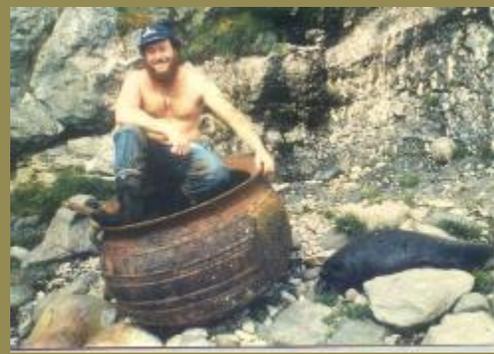
Apart from that, the ridge is about 18 km from base with the walk taking anything from four to eight hours (depending on fitness and weather). Thus, having a hut close by after such a long walk is much appreciated!



Taking advantage of the full moon

# The mystery of the missing try pots

By John Cooper, Antarctic Legacy of South Africa, Stellenbosch University



In the 19th Century small sailing ships visited the Prince Edward Islands after their seals. Fur seals were exploited for their skins but elephant seals were targeted for their blubber that produced a high-quality oil. To extract the oil the blubber, once removed from the seal carcass had to be rendered down by heat. A peculiar type of cooking vessel, known as a try pot, was used for the purpose to “try out” the oil. It must have been difficult to manhandle the cast-iron try pots ashore on boulder beaches and through rough surf from small boats and so it is not surprising that they were often left ashore for another time.

Try pots are thus to be found to the present day on beaches and shorelines of a number of sub-Antarctic islands, including Marion and Prince Edward. The most well-known try pot on Marion Island is to be found on Trypot Beach towards East Cape. Try pots, or broken pieces of them, also occur at Ship’s Cove, Bullard Beach and at Good Hope Bay.

The Antarctic Legacy of South Africa project has been collecting historical photos for its archive from when South Africa annexed the islands in 1948. Early photos of try pots allow us to see what may have changed over the years and it has come to light that two try pots have disappeared.

## The Bullard Beach try pots

In the first half of 1948, Marion’s first team leader, Allan Crawford, used his surveying skills to produce a map of the eastern side of the island. We are fortunate that he took a number of photos while in the field and that his son, Martin Crawford has made all his father’s pictures available to ALSA. Two of his photos depict two try pots side by side at Bullard Beach on Marion’s eastern coast. Only one of these try pots now remain and ALSA’s enquiries to team members and island visitors back to the 1960s have revealed only one try pot has been known from the locality, as do various photos taken over the years. So the other try pot (the larger) must have been removed early on, presumably to South Africa.

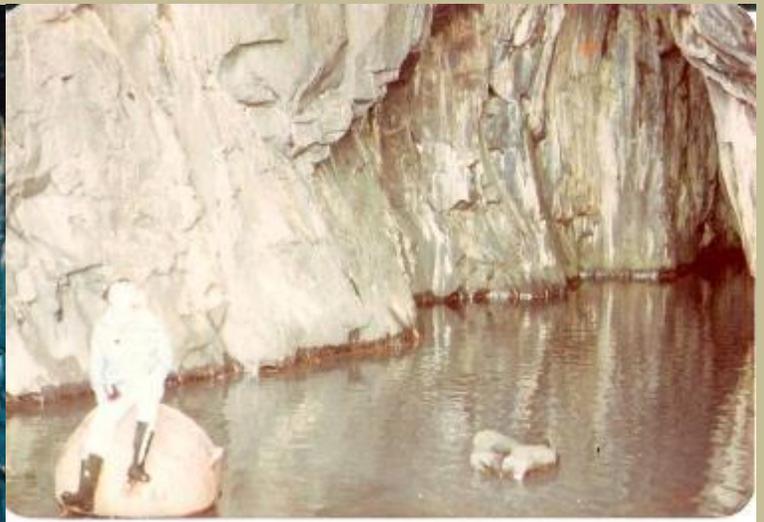
## The Cave Bay try pot on Prince Edward Island

The presence of a try pot within the cave at Cave Bay on Prince Edward Island was written about in 1948 at the time of annexation but the first photographic evidence of it so far found by ALSA was taken in May 1982. In September 1982 members of the crew of the *S.A. Agulhas* removed this try pot via rubber raft to the ship as shown from pictures taken by Jay Gates, then the ship’s Radio Officer. On the same visit the well-known try pot on Trypot Beach was also removed to Cape Town where I remember seeing it crated up in the then Government Antarctic stores in Leeuwen Street. It turned out that both try pots were removed without permission, so the order went out to return the Trypot Beach one, which was duly done. However it seems the Cave Bay try pot was not returned as no try pot is visible in the cave or nearby.

## Returning the “stolen” try pots?

ALSA now sees its task as to track down what happened to the two missing try pots, and if they are found ensuring they are either returned to the islands from where they were taken, or see them deposited in the Social History Collections Department of the Iziko Museums of South Africa, which is the official depository for sealing artefacts from the Prince Edwards. Needless to say, any information on where the two missing try pots may have ended up will be welcomed!

With thanks to Chris Brown, Graham Clarke, Martin Crawford, Bruce Dyer, Jay Gates, Martin Grobbelaar and Bill Leith for information and photographs.



The Cave Bay trypot in the cave and being carried away, photographs by Chris Brown, Jay Gates and Marius Grobbelaar



The Bullard Beach trypot site in 1948, in the 1980s and in 1994, photographs by Graham Clarke, Allan Crawford and Bruce Dyer



## A monster mouse in the middle of the Mountains



*By Marius Rossouw*

There is a mouse at Katedraal. His name is Quentin. He is the Mouse. The use of the word “the” indicates the definite article, just as one would say the Holy Bible or Jack the Ripper. In his house, Quentin is judge, jury, Robin Hood, Harry Houdini, Leatherface from Texas chainsaw massacre, Lenin and that cute critter from Ratatouille.

My first encounter with this maker of mammalian mischief was just after takeover. We went up to the highest hut, because I haven’t had a hut night since I arrived on the island this year. I was dying just to get out for a while. Whilst we made ourselves home, we saw mousey footprints in the snow, which was blown inside from an open vent. Mousey makes it sound cute and small. These footprints were the dogs of war unleashed upon the M72 wayfarers, large enough to trample hope and aspirations into a depressed pulp. Both the wrappers of the coffee and milo had been eaten off to a level where (we assumed) a mouse can jump to (about 15 cm from the bottom). We heard him in the night, scampering and scrounging around. Feasting. Gallivanting.

Our diesel mechanic went up a few weeks after we did, and told us he threw this elephant sized mouse with a boot, so he had to be dead. We did believe him... How time makes fools of us all...

Pierre and I went up to the hut a month or two later the boot throwing incident. Just to clean the hut a bit and to enjoy not being at base. This was the night we truly became afraid of the desperate and clearly superior rodent. We discovered that not only does Quentin eat the wrappers off coffee tins; he is also quite partial to candle wax, washing powder, dishwashing sponges, picnic ham, smash and wood. The picnic ham was our fault. We decided that tonight is the night we remove this marvel of mayhem from this world. Tonight we will claim our prize, the just and righteous assassins of the monster mouse. We (in colloquial terms) Mc Guyvered a box trap, using a spoon, a pot, some leftover picnic ham and the broom. I was proud of my plan. We would prop up the pot, balancing it using the spoon. When the mouse would walk underneath the pot, start chewing on the ham, Pierre would knock the pot with the broom, the spoon would fall away, and we would have caught

Quentin underneath... If this setup does not sound too familiar, think of the old box traps that Elmer Fudd used to catch Bugs Bunny. The stick replaced with a spoon, the box with a pot, the string with a Space Money with a broom. We both knew we saw this plan on television at some stage, but we did not remember where. After an unsuccessful first attempt (we used a pot whose handles protruded higher than those of its rim) we reset our trap with a bigger pot. To enhance the efficiency of our trap, we used a piece of ham about as big as the six nine-volt batteries. We thought, “How could a mouse give up meat that is larger than itself. This plan has to work!” With our headlamps blazing like floodlights patrolling the prison yard, we waited. Within ten minutes we spied Quentin, sneaking around the edges of the darkness, darting in and out of view. We lost him in the gloom under the counter, and seconds later Pierre spotted him slipping under the pot. He readied his broom.

“What are you waiting for?” I hissed, expecting the blow to be swift and merciless.

Pierre confidently replied, “Don’t worry, the pot will fall by its...”

Now, during this crucial moment of indecision, Quentin appeared on the other side of the pot, dragging a piece of picnic ham, twice his size, with expeditious clattering of claws under the heater. This dazzling display was reminiscent of a strongman pulling a car. We rushed to move the heater. The mouse was gone. All he left was a note thanking us for the ham and promising to kill us all in our sleep. Or I think that is what he meant. I am not fluent in random mouse droppings and a ten cent sized piece of picnic ham. The next attempts, involving mops and plastic bags and totebins were even less successful. We went to bed defeated. The rest of the night was spent listening to his squeaking insults, his ghostlike movements across the wooden beams next to the beds.

Who can we blame for this failure? Me, planning a trap based on cartoons where none of the intended victims were caught? In hindsight it was discovered that Elmer Fudd never caught Bugs with that box trap. Why didn’t I watch more Man vs Wild? He always made plans to catch things. Could we blame Pierre, who froze at a grave moment, who did not pull the lever for this mouse with a death sentence? Pierre, the engineer, who did not tell me my plan is stupid? Pierre, the one with the damn broom?

No.

There is no one to blame. We were beaten. By the Mouse. Our little Unabomber, still the mountains, preparing for his full assault on base, washing powder and candle wax mixed into explosives. Biding his time.

He has not seen the last of me though. I will catch you, Quentin. You will be the White Whale, displayed on my mantelpiece! (I am only halfway through Moby Dick. Blind obsession always leads to a triumphant conclusion, right?)

# Macaroni Penguin Weighing

By Kate



The Macchi weighing teams on the 4<sup>th</sup> (left) and 14<sup>th</sup> (right).



On the 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of October, the Oceans and Coasts' birders and many M72 helpers weighed 100 male, and 100 female macaroni penguins to get the mean weight of males and females on arrival. Below is a series of photos from the two days.



Pierre Jouber

Benoit (above left) with our last male maci to be weighed, and Pierre (above right) covering a macchi's eyes to prevent stress for the bird.



Oyena (above left) catching a macchi and Tegan (above right) with the macchi suspended in a strop and attached to a scale in order to get the weight of the penguin.



Abu holding a macchi while I (Kate) measure the culmen length and depth, males generally have longer and thicker beaks when compared to females.



Sherwin (left), doing the most important job of all: scribe. Making sure that all the length and weights are written down, so that it can later be add to the growing database for these penguins.

# ALIEN PLANT ERADICATION



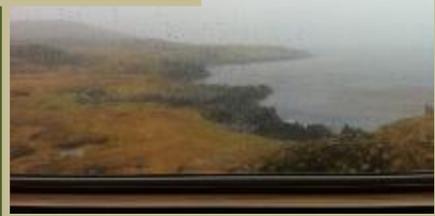
Telling you what you can't do and that you have been doing something wrong is our job BUT we also have a much less invasive one too, all thanks to the Prince Edward Island Management Plan (PEIMP). Having slept knowing that the weather prediction for the following day will be a gentle breeze to no wind at all, possibility of sun but you don't even mind some cloud cover because you would still be able to do the work. First thing when you wake up you open your blinds and find that it's snowing, WHAT? Yes unfortunately more times than we would like to, the predicted weather does turn out differently, I mean to the complete opposite of what was expected. Marion weather is very unpredictable! Weather is very important in our work, what might feel like a slight wind pick up or a few rain drops determines whether herbicide is applied or not. So when we find a window we go on our way to apply herbicide (Kilomax, Brush-off) and the aliens include *Luzula multiflora*, *Agrostis gigantea*, *Agropyron repens*, *Rumex acetolla*, *Festuca rubra*.

Some background, Marion Island is of volcanic origin with an area of approximately 290km<sup>2</sup> and is located 2300 km southeast of Cape Town, South Africa in the sub-Antarctic (Sanyika et al. 2012). It is also characterised by an annual occupation of 10-30 persons, with no vehicular transportation on the island (Gremmen et al. 2003). Sadly we have some alien plants on the island, but the programme aims to control and closely monitor them. Unfortunately the changing climate seems to be favouring the alien plants, accelerating invasion and therefore negatively impacting on the native plants and animals that evolved in cool humid conditions (Smith.2004a). Valdon Smith (2004a) summaries an importance of these islands beautifully when he says " Marion and Prince Edward Islands are ideal 'ecological laboratories' for studying effects of climate change, because global warming is especially intense in the sub-Antarctic region and because their ecosystems are relatively simple and sensitive to change". Being able to be part of such a valuable programme gives us so much joy knowing that we are making such a huge impact on conservation of the island and ensuring future research in this relatively pristine environment will be able to continue for many more years.

Environmental Control Officers (ECOs)

Nasipi and Mpho

(Always keep ECO-friendly 😊 )



Examples of the weather we wake up to on days that clear, windless weather was predicted

Gremmen, N.J.M., Smith, V.R. & Tongeren, O.F.R. Van, 2003. Impact of trampling on the vegetation of Subantarctic Marion Island. *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research*, 35(4), pp.442-446.

Sanyika, T.W., Stafford, W. & Cowan, D. A., 2012. The soil and plant determinants of community structures of the dominant actinobacteria in Marion Island terrestrial habitats, Sub-Antarctica. *Polar Biology*, 35(8), pp.1129-1141.

Smith, V., 2004. Valdon Smith explains how South Africa's Prince Edward Islands help us to understand effects of climate change on ecological processes and whole ecosystems. *Quest*, 1(2), pp 22-25.

# Recipe for October

## *"Pan" cake*

*By Janine*



### **Ingredients:**

3 cups	Flour
1/3 cups	cacao (for chocolate cake) OR mazena (for vanilla cake)
4 tsp	Baking Powder
1 tsp	Bicarbonate soda
2 cups	boiling water
1 cup	oil
2 tsp	vanilla essence
1/5 cup	white vinegar
Pinch of salt	

### **Method:**

Pre-heat oven to 180°C and prepare square oven baking tin.

Mix all the dry ingredients and sugar together. In a separate bowl whisk all the wet ingredients together. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and mix well (I prefer an electric beater if there is one).

Pour the batter into the prepared square tin and bake for 20min or until a skewer comes out clean.

### **Variation:**

Add a tablespoon of instant coffee to the wet ingredients and omit the vanilla essence for a coffee cake.

# ANIMAL CONFESSIONS

Article by Janine

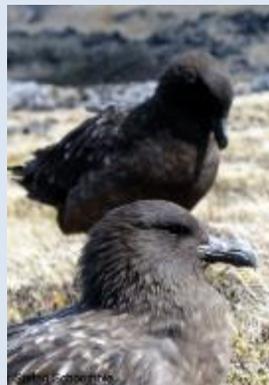
Here on Marion Island we encounter all kinds of animals every day. It's all we talk about. We don't just talk about all the animals, we often communicate with one-another by imitating some of the animals (this is more true for the field assistants). Basically the only time we're not talking about the animals is when we're complaining about the Norwegians (i.e. yr.no)...

So I figured it was only fitting to get the low-down on what everyone's favourite animal is on Marion Island and why.



## Janine (Fitz Birder)

Northern Giant Petrels – “They’ve been the most fun to work with.”



Abu (Geo.): Skuas – “Gangsters!”



## Moses (Base engineer)

Penguins – “I like the way they walk.”



## Oyena (O&C birder)

Gentoo penguins – “They’re so short and stubby and fluffy and cute!”

## AJ (Diesel mechanic)

Killer whales - “They are the only animals that don’t crap all over the place!”



## Pierre (Space monkey)

Macaroni penguins – “Because they’re feisty.”

## John (Killer whaler):

“Killers...”

‘Cause they’re just so amazing.”



## Mike (Sealer)

Rock-hopper penguins – “Because they’re cute and cuddly... and they do tricks.”



## Stefan (Fitz birder)

Sooty albatross – “Hours of entertainment watching them land.”



## Mpho (ECO)

Penguins – “Penguins are pretty.”





**Nasipi (ECO)**  
 “Can I say killer whales? They’re so pretty!”



**Jerry (Metkassie)**  
 “Penguins. I think they’ve been my favourite since I was young, because the way they walk”



**Tegan (NMMU birder)**

Paddy - “It’s the only animal I would take home as a pet.”



**Marius (Botanist)**

“Skuas. Evil, vindictive, smart bastards.”



**Sherwin (Medic)**

Wandering albatross – “They seem very peaceful and very graceful”



**Benoit (Sealer)**

“The elephant seal pup at Landfall. We’ve just gotten to know each other well...”



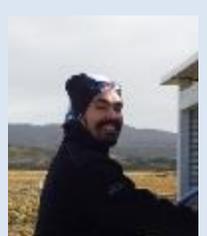
**Kate (O&C birder)**

King penguin chicks – “They’re so cute. And nobody else likes them... so I have to.”



**Boy (Senior metkassie)**

Sooty albatross – “Because of the sound they make 😊”



**Ewald (Radio technician)**

Grey-headed albatross – “Just because they’re beautiful birds.”



**Knoane (Metkassie)**

“Killer whales. I think they’re pretty amazing. Regardless of their size they’re still beautiful, they move so gracefully in the water.”

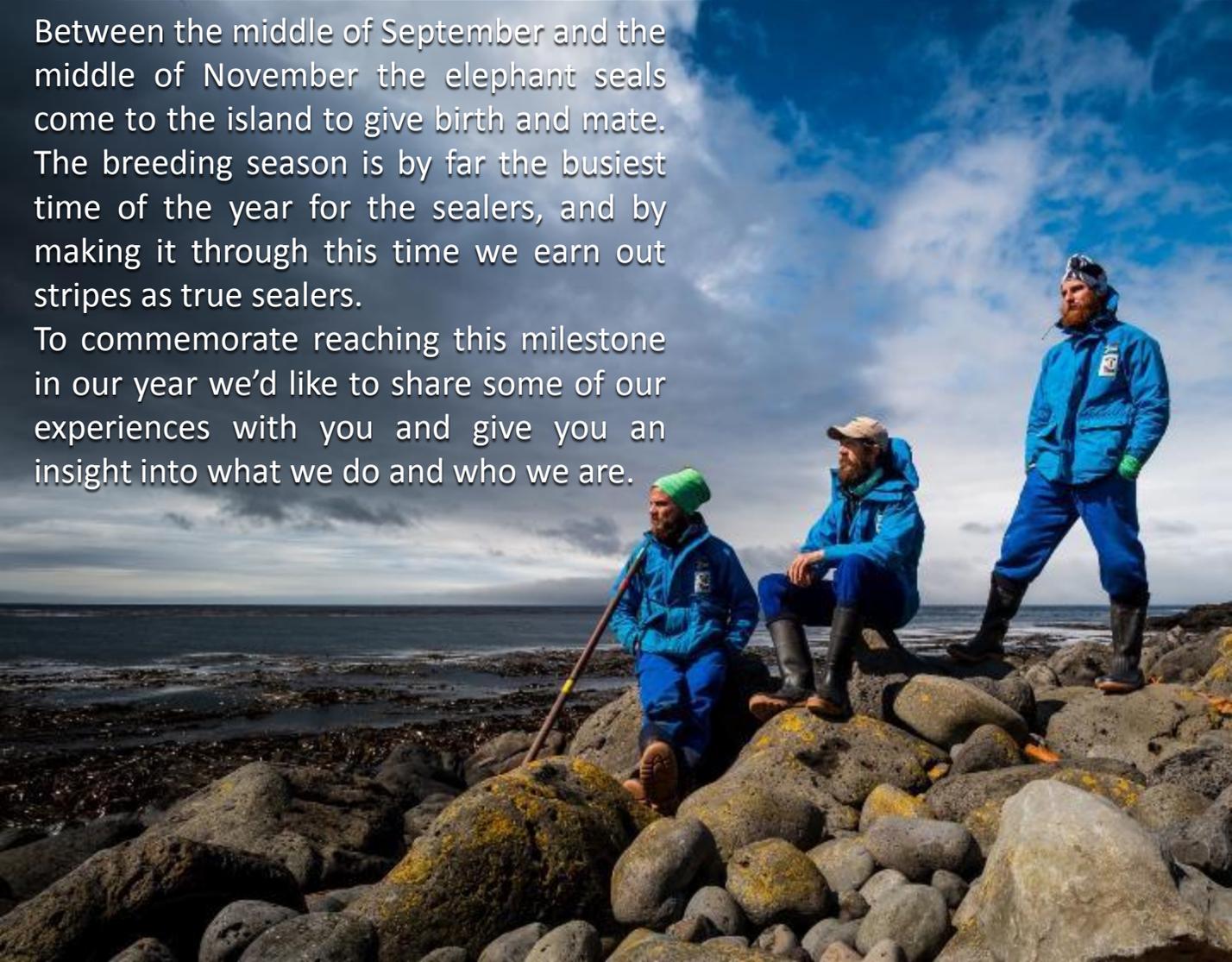


# Meet the Sealers



Between the middle of September and the middle of November the elephant seals come to the island to give birth and mate. The breeding season is by far the busiest time of the year for the sealers, and by making it through this time we earn out stripes as true sealers.

To commemorate reaching this milestone in our year we'd like to share some of our experiences with you and give you an insight into what we do and who we are.



# The Elephant Seal Breeding Season

Article written by Benoit



Georgie. We named the first elephant seal pup on the island Georgie. John and Mike, the other two sealers, would argue with me as to whether Georgie really was the first pup on the island, as on that same day that we found Georgie on Boulders Beach next to base, they were censusing the northern part of the island and came across another pup on Goney Beach. Regardless of which was born first, the two elephant seal pups were spotted on 16<sup>th</sup> of September. This marked the start of 6 weeks of chaos, adventure, and hard work. One thing I am sure the other two sealers would agree with me on is that the past 2 months has been the most challenging, chaotic, adrenaline-fuelled and rewarding time that we have ever experienced.

The elephant seal breeding actually started with the hauling out of the adult males a month before; around the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. Up until this point we, the new sealers, had only seen under-yearlings, yearlings and sub-adults; animals that we thought were pretty impressive. We were astonished and,

dare I say, intimidated by the sight of these two ton adult male elephant seals that suddenly appeared on the beaches. Thankfully, as there were no females around, the bulls were still rather relaxed then. We had heard stories of some of these bull; RR 408 or 'Reggie', as he was called, turned up at Blue Petrel Beach and later become beach-master at Sealer-East Beach; and PP 306 lived up to his reputation and ruled over the biggest harem at Goney Beach. Once the females hauled out, these males changed from lumps of lard to



One of the pups, only a few days old.



the animal and with a measuring stick placed next to it. Photogrammetry, as this practice is called, allows one to calculate the weight of the animal. Our work tasked us to photograph or PG, as photogrammetry is abbreviated to, the males twice: as they were arriving on the beaches and just before their departure again in late October and early November. The breeding females had to be PG'ed three times: on arrival, just after they had given birth and three weeks later when their pups were about to wean. This may sound easy but it anything but that. These large animals are surprising fast, sometimes quite aggressive and do not like hairy, two-legged beings jumping around their harems. It is dangerous work and Mike has a battle-scar on his bum to prove it. Thankfully without too serious an injury, Mike got a small bite on the back of his leg by an adult female.

The work is part of a tag/ re-sight census program over the entire island that has been going on for the last 33 years. It takes us to much of the coast and it involves a lot of walking; a lot of walking! We are often on our feet for 10 hours or more, only taking short breaks to stuff a sandwich into our hungry faces. With all this physical activity we have become quite fit. John says has now got himself a 'perky' ass and Mike claims to have become the 'perfect conditioned specimen'.

We named the first pup Georgie after the main character of the film, George of the Jungle. In the film the man who grew up in the African forest acts like a gorilla. We

thought that the name was only appropriate as, at birth, the elephant seal pups have very similar facial features to that of a small gorilla. Letting down my hard-core sealer visage for a second and risking sounding like a teenage girl, I must say that the little pups are unbelievably cute. They spend a short three weeks suckling their mums, and in which time they turn from a little gorilla-face into a fat boerewors sausage that weighs around 150kg. One of our job tasks is to weigh 100 of these pups just after they have weaned from their mums. Using a big net, a pole, hooks and a scale, two people attempt to lift the weaner and its many rolls of fat. Though tough, the weighing is great fun. With one or two of us sealers frequently being away from base, we often had to ask other team members to help us weigh the pups. We were most impressive by everybody's enthusiasm to help, and we are really grateful for it. The heaviest weaner we



Abu, our geomorphologist, and John weighing a pup at Ship's Cove.



Over the years the median pupping date for the elephant seals has been calculated to be the 15<sup>th</sup> of October. This is considered to be the elephant seal's birthday, and, within our records, all the seals age by one year. Though we would have liked to throw a party for the seals, it is also our busiest week. It is the approximate date of when the maximum number of seals have hauled out onto the island. Every year, over a two day period, we count all the elephant seals on the island. Again, this is a challenging task and it involves a lot of walking. This year we counted a total of 1014 elephant seals.

Now, looking back on the last few months, I am amazed with how quickly the time has passed. We were warned about this by past sealers – telling us to appreciate every moment – and yet it still happened. There were, however, many moments when we stopped, voluntarily or obligatorily, and took a breath of this cold, clear air and allowed the gravity and rareness of the situation to sink in.



Above the hard work, the many hours walking, the close-shaves with dangerous animals, the cold hands, the harsh weather, the sore bodies; it is incredible work that we found ourselves doing and in an extraordinary place. It is a privilege to work with these animals and on Marion. Georgie and the last few months will not be easily forgotten.



**Q:** Explain your job on the island

**A:** I am one of the three field assistants or ‘sealers’ to the Marion Island Marine Mammal Program (MIMMP). The program focuses on the southern elephant seal and two fur seal species, as well as killer-whales around the island. Our work includes monitoring the elephant seal population through a continuous tag/ re-sight census program, as well as deploying/ retrieving satellite tracking devices and tissue sampling. The fur seals behavioural patterns are also monitored and the killer-whales are observed and photographed. All three of us are involved in each aspect of this work to a greater or lesser degree.

**Q:** What did you do before and what lead you to apply for the expedition?

**A:** Last year I completed my BSc honours degree in conservation ecology at Stellenbosch University. What lead me to apply to the program were the stories that I had heard of Marion from past expedition members. Everybody spoke fondly of the island, told exciting accounts of their time here and recommended the adventure.

**Q:** What is your best memory on the island so far?

**A:** It would be impossible to single out a favourite memory amongst the apparent life-time of experiences that we have had on the island thus far. To mention a few: walking alone between Swartkops and Greyheaded in bitter cold, gushing rain; a wild walk to the top of Juniors in the full moon with a few of the team members; the many trying but rewarding days censusing with Mike and John, the other two sealers; nights in the huts with others; morning TAPS at Mixed Pickle; and seeing an elephant seal pup being born.

# Interview

Benoit Morkel

Q: Explain elephant seal breeding season in a sentence

A: (Four sentences) One day there was a seal. The next day there were 500 seals. They all had pups, had to be recorded, photographed and tagged; and the day after that they were all gone. Two months disappeared somewhere in there.

Q: What has been your toughest challenge so far?

A: I don't understand this question or more specifically the word 'challenge'. MIMMP lives by the slogan of 'dits nog niks', and the program leaders make sure to instill this philosophy in us new sealers. As a result of this

Q: If you could have one food item from back home what would it be?

A: Pasta; I would love some more pasta. Oh, and second to that, an avocado.

Q: Describe a sealers lunch on a busy day

A: A can of pickled fish scooped out on a ginger biscuit, topped with a few jelly-babies and seasoned, while eating, with a penguin-poop-covered hand. Finger-licking good!

Q: Describe your fellow sealers in 3 words or less

A: **Mike** – Efficient. **John** – Sarcastic...not.

Q: What are the pros and cons about not shaving for a year?

A: Pros – I feel that the benefits of having a beard do not need explaining. It is like asking an elephant what the pros are of having tusks; or the peacock, its feathers; or a lion, its mane. It is what makes a man, a man. Men without beards are women. This facial testosterone advertisement keeps me warm at night. It stores food for hungrier times. It provides me with a constant supply of dental floss. It allows me to sit for hours, gently stroking it, appearing to be contemplating the problems of the universe and world peace.

Cons – Go sit in the corner and think about what you just asked me!

Q: What are three things on your bucket list before you go home?

A: There are few obvious things that I am sure are common amongst many of team, that we would all like to do before we go home. These are: summiting Mascarin; attempting a one-day round-island; going for a swim, either in the sea or a lake; but above these things, I guess, I would just like to make the most of my time here and appreciate this extraordinary place. Spend more time outside, seek small adventures, get to know the team a little better, take photos and explore the island.





Q: Explain your job on the island

A: Teaching John and Benoit how to be proper sealers... Its tough!

Q: What did you do before and what lead you to apply for the expedition?

A: I just recently completed my MSc degree in Zoology and I was looking for something new, a chance to get out into the field and take some time off from studying. I was also looking for something crazy and an adventure.

Q: What is your best memory on the island so far?

A: Seeing my first elephant seal pup on the island. It was completely unexpected. We were told that we might only see the first one around the 19 October, we saw it on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October on Goney West. It was the strangest looking thing I had ever seen, but it was amazing. Then I had to super small it.

Q: Explain elephant seal breeding season in a sentence

A: The most: epic, jaw dropping, adrenaline pumping, exhausting, most rewarding, challenging, inspiring, beautiful, stunning, back aching, leg cramping, icy, hot, windy experience of my life 😊.

Q: What has been your toughest challenge so far?

A: Missing the rugby world cup. It was unbearable. I had jitters every time I woke up and realised that the bokke were playing. I found myself just wandering about the island as if I was in a dream. I avoided contact with friends and family back home...in fact I just can't talk about it anymore.....

Q: If you could have one food item from back home what would it be?

A: Avo!!!!cado!!!!

Q: Describe a sealers lunch on a busy day

A: Tinned can of fruit for sure, no spoon needed. Gulp it down in a few seconds and we as good as new!!! Really refreshing.

# Interview

Q: Describe your fellow sealers in 3 words or less

A: **Benoit**– walking cooking machine.

**John**– on time…not.

Q: What are the pros and cons about not shaving for a year?

A: Pros– Luckily I can grow a real beard, not like Benoit and John…So its super awesome, every real man wants to do it. The beard keeps my face warm, shields me from the wind. I also have more time to brush my teeth in the mornings because I don't have to shave.

Cons– eating is ridiculous, coughing up hair balls, the way people stare at me 😊, especially when I eat…

Q: What are two things on your bucket list before you go home?

A: Mascarin, one day round island.

# Michael Mole





**Q:** Explain your job on the island

**A:** My job requires me to walk and to sit. The seal side of the work requires walking, the killer whale side of the work requires sitting. We take turns sitting and walking, our schedule is set up so that the seal and killer whale work is quite evenly split between the three of us. On a slightly more serious note, there is actually bit more to it than just sitting and walking; Mike and Ben have discussed the seal work so I'll describe some of the killer whale work.

Every week we spend about 26, usually more when the weather is nice, hours a week doing dedicated killer whale observations. During this time we take photos of the killer whales that pass by in order to get an idea of who is spending time with who. Individuals have unique notches in their fins or markings and scars on their backs which makes them identifiable. Each individual has a name and a number and with a few years of excellent data we've got a pretty good idea of the individuals in the various pods. Knowing the individuals and the pods gives some insight into their movements around the island and a greater understanding of the social behaviour of the species. With long term data sets we can see the maturation of individuals and how the dynamics of the pods change over time.

Another aspect of the killer whale research is to deploy GPS devices on the animals in order to understand a bit more about where they go, both around Marion and when they leave the island. We also collect biopsy samples for genetic, isotopic and fatty acid analyses.

The evening killer whale sessions have been some of my best hours on the island. It is hard to explain the serenity of a calm evening on the rock. Rock hopper penguins and sub-Antarctic fur seals calling in the background, Prince Edward Island sitting majestically on the horizon, purple and pink clouds reflected in the mirror-like surface of the sea which is suddenly broken by a massive fin and an enormous exhale before the killer whale disappears below the surface again.

**Q:** What did you do before and what lead you to apply for the expedition?

**A:** I did my MSc in conservation biology at the University of Cape Town last year, the years prior to that I was taking photos, travelling, working as a volunteer field assistant in the Seychelles, teaching English in South Korea, studying marine biology at Rhodes. I heard about the island many years ago and the idea of visiting the island must have imbedded itself at the back of my mind, waiting for an opportunity to become a reality. I saw an advert for the killer whale position and gave it a shot. I was just completing my MSc and everything seemed to fall into place. Before I knew what had happened I was on the ship on my way here.

**Q:** What is your best memory on the island so far?

**A:** Had I written this a few days ago, I would have struggled to find a particularly outstanding memory to mention here. There have been so many incredible experiences on this remote, indescribably beautiful island over the past few months. The birds, the seals, the landscapes, the weather, the sea, every minute on Marion can leave you at a loss for words. Narrowing it down though, my most memorable experience, thus far, was during a killer whale observation yesterday. The sea was perfectly calm, there were a few snowflakes falling, the water was crystal clear and I was lucky enough to witness the killers hunting penguins. One of the younger killers, Seabiscuit, was chasing penguins just a few meters away from me.

**Q:** Explain elephant seal breeding season in a sentence. **A:** We did quite a bit of work.

**Q:** What has been your toughest challenge so far?

**A:** Dealing with the avifauna. King penguins are incredibly adept at getting in the way when a beach master is barrelling down on you. Paddys (sheathbills) are also rather problematic, I spent quite a while chasing one that made off with a set of elephant seal flipper tags. They also play havoc with photogrammetry projects as they have a habit of moving the calibrated stick that should remain stationary throughout the project. They are also a major problem during the killer whale observations, which turn into a constant battle to keep the local paddy from stealing sandwiches... A Crozet shag defecated all over my bag yesterday. (They are very photogenic though, so all their faults are forgiven)



# Interview

# John Dickens

Q: If you could have one food item from back home what would it be?

A: Only one!? Fresh fruit would be an obvious choice, but an egg would be amazing. Fried, scrambled, poached...

Q: Describe a sealers lunch on a busy day

A: I believe that Benoit and Mike have already described a typical sealer lunch, so I'll describe a typical sealer breakfast. Strong Ricoffy and a packet of rusks... each. A bowl of oats if time allows, and on special occasions, when Benoit is around, we are usually treated to pancakes 😊

Q: Describe your fellow sealers in 3 words or less

A: Mike – Efficient. Benoit – Challenge? No problem.

Q: What are the pros and cons about not shaving for a year?

A: Pros – Facial hair serves as a highly effective storage facility for snacks of all sorts, there is nothing better than finding a tasty morsel at the end of a long day. The moustache acts as a great condensation device, providing fresh drinking water in the field. It keeps the neck, chin, upper lip and cheeks warm. Saves on sunscreen. Earphones cables can be threaded through the beard to keep them out of the way.

Cons – Zips.

Q: What are three things on your bucket list before you go home?

A: 1) Spend a bit more time on the other side of the island, a few more nights at Mixed Pickle would be great. 2) Take the photos and timelapses I've had in my mind for a while now. 3) It would be great to witness the killer whales tackle something larger than a penguin.



# The Bulls



# The Cows



# The Pups



# PHOTO CORNER



Pierre Joubert

**Macaroni penguins.** During the first few weeks of October macaroni penguins begin returning to the island to breed. It is quite an astonishing sight to see as these penguins have not set a foot on land since they left the island in April/ May. Where there were no penguins, there were suddenly thousands, even hundreds of thousands in some places.

First to arrive are the males, they find a nesting site and defend their territory until the females arrive a week or so later. The fights between these penguins are quite spectacular, they definitely don't fit the stereotype of cute and fluffy!



Abuyiselwe Nguna



Stefan Schoombie



Stefan Schoombie

**Northern giant petrels.** Fluffy, snow white northern giant petrel babies have been hatching throughout October. Although they very cute looking, especially compared to their parents, they are quite ferocious and tend to throw up their breakfasts if you come too close.



John Dickens



Stefan Schoombie



**King penguins.** Both parents and babies are busy molting at the moment, making penguin colonies choc-a-block full. Walking around them you can expect to get a few feathers up the nose, full of poop and Austin Powers look-a-likes running around.



Abuyiselwe Nguna



John Dickens



John Dickens

**King penguins,** loving the rarity of a cloudless day on the sandy beach of Ship's Cove



**Kelp gulls.** Being as common as they are in South Africa these beautiful birds are often over looked on the island.



Kate du Toit

**Grey-headed albatross.** Many wouldn't deny that these are the "prettiest birds" on the island. Even more so, they provide hours of entertainment for any lucky observer. The not-so-gracefully landings, social displays and odd noises coming from these birds are an obsolete treat.



**Killer whales.** The killer whales have really been going bananas this past month. It is rare to not see them at least once or twice a day. We also had a new addition to local killer whales around the island, Peanut, a beautiful baby killer whale.



Alfred-Hugo Grunschloss.



Abuyiselwe Nguna



Alfred-Hugo Grunschloss.

**Sub-Antarctic fur seals.** This month we said good bye to last years puppies. They finally weaned from their mother and set out to, for the first time, forage for themselves. We will miss them but are getting very excited for the birth of the new puppies during Novemeber/December.



Alfred-Hugo Grunschloss.



The Adelie  
penguin



Once upon a time (on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October) there was a little Adelie penguin who accidentally caught the wrong current and ended up on Marion Island, hundreds and thousands of kilometers away from his home on Antarctica!

He found himself at Ship's Cove (MM065), surrounded by many confused looking king penguins and a few of his gentoo penguin cousins.

A few sealers spotted him and managed to take some photos of him before he swam around the corner to Boulder's Beach (MM001), close to a very strange looking orange house (Marion Base).

Some skuas came down and gave our traveler some directions, so he jumped back into the ocean and carried on with his adventure!

Whether this was the first Adelie penguin to the island is uncertain but it was certainly unusual to see one so far north.

We wish our traveler the best of luck!



# WHEN TIMES ARE GOOD, THEY REALLY ARE GOOD!

