

# Antarctica, The Falklands and South Georgia

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 22 January 2009



King Penguins on South Georgia



King Penguin



Leopard Seal



Zodiac/Glacier

Report compiled by John Carruthers  
Photos by John Carruthers and Rob Mileto



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

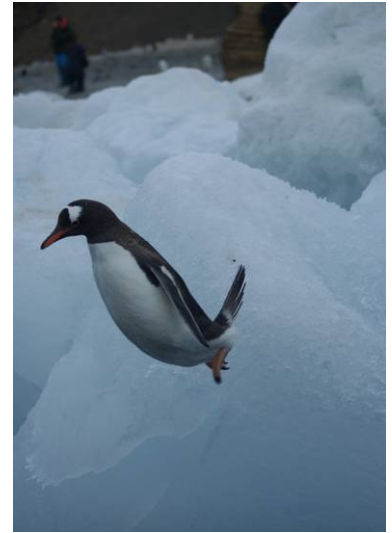
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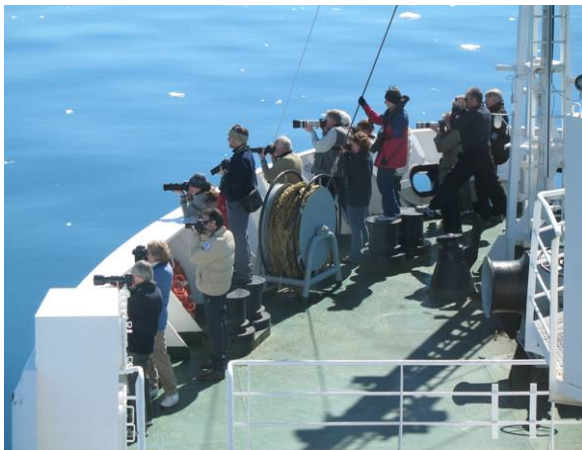
King Penguins



South Georgia



Gentoo Penguin



Naturetrek Group 2009



Gregory Micheev



Baby King Penguins



Iceberg

Tour leaders:

- Rolf Stange (Germany) - Expedition Leader
- Maarten Loonen (Netherlands) - Guide/Lecturer
- Ditte Hendrichsen (Denmark) - Guide/Lecturer
- John Carruthers (UK) - Naturetrek Leader
- Robert Mileto (UK) - Naturetrek Leader
- Angel Quiroga-Iturralde (Spain) - Hotel Manager
- Marcelo Canel (Argentina) - Head Chef
- Juan Almonaciél - Sous Chef
- Dr. Peter Thomas Nielsen (UK/Denmark) - Ship's Physician

Tour Participants:

- Colin & Jane Smith
- Gill Bailey
- Sara Philipson
- Liz Scott
- Val Potter
- David Bell
- Barbara Sharp
- Peter & Penny Williams
- Sue Carne
- Ian & Angie Lister
- Gordon Stuttard
- Neil & Carol Bourdeaux
- Cheryl Evans
- Christine White
- Ian Rose
- David Spilsbury
- Linda Bartlett
- Brian Rogers
- Liz Ellis
- Sue & Simon Murgatroyd
- David & Karen Anderson
- Ivan (William) West
- Robert Howie
- Jonathan Erlank
- Richard & Mary Lee
- Maurice & Mary Durham
- Jenny & John Bartram
- Martin & Debra Dinnage
- Trevor & Christine James
- Pat Cole
- Sue Stroud

## Day 1

Thursday 1st January 2009

### Heathrow to Buenos Aires

Many of us met up at Heathrow early on New Years Day for what turned out to be an unremarkable couple of flights to Buenos Aires (via Madrid).

## Day 2

Friday 2nd January 2009

### Buenos Aires to Ushuaia

Having spent the night in a Buenos Aires hotel, it was back to the airport and onboard for the domestic flight to Ushuaia where we arrived at midday to be greeted by our local guide, Estefan. Having settled into our hotel and had a bite to eat, a late afternoon stroll to the bay gave us our first real taste of some of the local birds. Unsurprisingly, gulls were most evident, with the very smart Dolphin Gull most numerous but the larger Kelp Gull also seen. A couple of Kelp Geese posed obligingly on the shoreline as did a Flightless Steamer Duck. King Cormorants (known by several other names) fished offshore whilst their cousins, the Rock Cormorants mostly roosted. Heading back to our hotel via a grassy area with trees, we had Chilean Swallow whizzing past our heads and, for some, glimpses of Black-chinned Siskin. Dinner was followed by a much needed long sleep.

## Day 3

Saturday 3rd January 2009

### Ushuaia / Tierra del Fuego, Argentina

For most, the day was to be spent touring parts of the Tierra del Fuego National Park, with our local guides Estefan and Allesandro. Our first roadside stop provided a host of new birds including Chimango Caracara, Patagonian Sierra-finch and Rufous-collared Sparrow (and Black-chinned Siskin for those that had not yet seen it). Moving on to a small bay, there were a couple of very obliging Dark-bellied Cinclodes, as well as (allegedly) the most southerly post office in the world from which many sent a postcard. At the back of this bay was woodland where a woodpecker was heard....surely the star Magellanic Woodpecker that many were hoping to see. After a few tense minutes and playing of a call, two were spotted, but gave us the run around for a while before the male gave up the game and perched on a dead branch in clear view for many a minute. Later, roadside stops and a short walk gave us more excellent sightings including; Southern Widgeon, Austral Thrush, Austral Blackbird and a cracking view of a Black-chested Buzzard-eagle.

We were joined at our picnic lunch by Chimango Caracara and the stroll, post-lunch, brought us Thorn-tailed Rayadito and, for some, White-throated Treerunner. As ship departure time approached, we made a quick visit to the municipal rubbish tip where we picked up Turkey Vulture and White-throated Caracara as well as close up views of several of the other birds we had already seen.

We boarded the good ship Grigoriy Mikheev at around 16:30 and were welcomed by the ship staff. We then had some time to find our cabins and unpack. Later, we met in the dining room for Rolf, our Expedition leader, to give us a short introduction to the staff and the ship, followed by a welcome from Angel, our hotel manager. Rolf, a geographer, has had many years of experience as a tour guide and expedition leader in both the Arctic and the Antarctic.

Having done this trip several times before, he knew many of the special places of the islands we were going to see over the next few weeks. Our other two on-board guides Maarten and Ditte were both biologists with lots of experience in the Arctic. Peter, the ships doctor was also introduced. We set sail at around 19:30. Gliding down the Beagle Channel in fine weather, there were Giant Petrels (probably Southern), Magellanic Penguins, King and Rock Cormorants to be seen, as well as what were probably South American Seal Lions, all set against a backdrop of majestic peaks mottled with snow.

## Day 4

Sunday 4th January 2009

### En route to the Falkland Islands

As we woke, we could still see the faint outline of the South American coast, but this soon disappeared and we were surrounded by ocean on all sides. Numerous birds had joined us or were busy feeding nearby (offering good photo opportunities in the sunlight). We managed to positively identify many including Southern Giant Petrel, Black-browed and the majestic Wandering Albatross, Cape Petrel, Sooty and Great Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm Petrel. However, some, like the Prions, remained, for now, as only possibilities, whilst awaiting photos and deliberations (most turned out to be Slender-billed).

The ship was rolling somewhat, but the weather was lovely and many went to the top deck to 'watch the horizon' and to get some fresh air. Guided tours to the bridge were organised, where the Captain explained the function of all the different instruments and equipment (including the garlic!), how to read the maps and measure distances etc. In the afternoon Rolf gathered us all in the dining room for a briefing on the plans for the next couple of days in the Falkland Islands, including how to behave near the wildlife.

## Day 5

Monday 5th January 2009

### Falkland Islands, West Point Island, Carcass Island

Approaching West Point Island we were all eager to see what wildlife was around. Anchoring in a small natural harbour, we could see Magellanic Penguins everywhere: on the beach, all along the green hills and swimming past the ship. The landing jetty was awash with Kelp Geese and Upland Geese grazed nearby. Quickly spotted here were also a couple of the endemic Falklands Flightless Steamer Duck. The landscape (and the wet weather...) might have resembled Scotland, but the bird life is clearly different! Some were taken by Land Rover across the island, but most opted to walk the mile or so to our destination and soon met up with several Striated Caracara, Turkey Vultures, Austral Thrushes and Long-tailed Meadowlarks.

Arriving at the breeding colony, we slowly moved through the Tussac Grass, and stood eye-to-eye with Black-browed Albatross and Rockhopper Penguins less than a metre distant. Occasionally an albatross would lift itself from its raised nest cup and we'd glimpse a downy youngster. Strolling back to the jetty, some spotted Magellanic Snipe and Falkland Pipit (and endemic race of the Correndera Pipit). Arriving back at the settlement we were all invited into the island owner's house (spookily topped with Turkey Vultures) for a superb spread of tea and cakes. Post lunch we arrived at Carcass Island and were greeted by a very friendly pod of Commerson's Dolphins which seem to play a game of chase the Zodiac. The beach landing also has a greeting party, this time the ridiculously tame Blackish Cinclodes (known locally as the Tussac-bird).

As this island is free of rats and cats, this species, and other small bird species, have persisted here, whilst declining or become extinct on other islands. A short walk brought us to Magellanic and Gentoos Penguins. The Magellanics were close-by, standing guard next to their breeding holes, the Gentoos were a touch more distant and moved in small groups to and from the sea. As well as penguins, we picked out a couple of the near endemic (to Falklands) Ruddy-headed Geese, in amongst the many Upland Geese, and a few Falkland Skuas wheeled overhead (an endemic sub-species according to most authorities). Walking back to the landing beach, several of us virtually stumbled over a Magellanic Snipe with a chick. From here, most chose to stroll the mile or so up to the settlement and were rewarded with fine views of Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers, Grass Wren, and the (Falklands) endemic Cobb's Wren – as well as yet another beautifully presented high tea.

## Day 6

Tuesday 6th January 2009

### Falkland Islands, Port Stanley and Gypsy Cove

Upon arrival in Stanley we met our local guide, Arthur, who was going to introduce us to Gypsy Cove and the local wildlife. However, first stop on the way was a small bay, a few minutes out of Stanley. Here, there were several smart Long-tailed Meadow Larks as well as Falklands Flightless Steamer Duck and White-rumped Sandpiper on the shore. We continued on to Gypsy Cove, where we had our first sighting of a lone King Penguin (many more were to come later!). The beach at Gypsy Cove looked like something out of an ad for a holiday in the Caribbean, with endless white beach and turquoise waters. Unfortunately, the unexploded ordnance from the Falklands War may still wash up on the beach and the bracing temperatures precluded a paddle. We followed a trail along the coast, first through some Tall Fern with several breeding Magellanic penguins, later along cliff tops. Here, we saw breeding Black-crowned Night Heron and Rock Cormorant on the cliffs, and a couple of South American Sea Lions eyeing us from the sea. From the top of the cliffs we could see our ship bunkering fuel in the neighbouring bay.

We were back in Stanley by lunchtime and had the afternoon at leisure to explore the town. Much tea was drunk and the museum, some 20 minutes walk from the centre, was popular, if a little distant. On display was a large selection of artefacts on life in the Falklands through time, its whaling history and the Falkland conflict. There was also a nice little display on the natural history of the islands. Along the coast, a few had been lucky enough to spot Tufted Grebe on the shoreline. Around 5ish the ship came to pick us up and as we sat down for dinner, the Falklands disappeared behind us and we began the voyage towards South Georgia.

## Day 7

Wednesday 7th January 2009

### On route to South Georgia

We woke up to the news from John, that a Wandering Albatross was trailing the ship. Today was a full day at sea but punctuated by talks and sightings. After breakfast, Maarten gave a lecture on sea birds, focussing on the tubenoses. We learned about the distribution of rich food spots in the Antarctic Ocean and the adaptations of these birds to a life at sea. In the afternoon, Rolf first explained plate tectonics – the delight that is 'spreading centres, subduction zones and transform faults (terms we can now impress our friends with). In the second part of his lecture, he showed how Antarctica was formed and how temperate it was even when it was over the pole and up until glaciation started, only 30 million years ago...a trifle in geological terms.

Seabirds came and went throughout the day and the decent weather allowed for the positive identification of many, including; Southern Royal Albatross, White-chinned Petrel, Black-bellied Storm Petrel and more unusually for these waters a Sooty Albatross and a Little Shearwater (we have the photo evidence!). On several occasions some distant whales were observed, some, but possibly not all, were humpbacks. In the evening, after the bird list, the first half of the film Shackleton about the life of this famous explorer was screened.

## Day 8

Thursday 8th January 2009

### En route to South Georgia

We were woken by Maarten, who greeted us cheerfully with an individual 'good morning' to everybody on the ship. During the early hours we had passed the Antarctic convergence, the zone where cold water from the Antarctic meets the warmer waters of further north. In this area there are more nutrients in the waters, consequently the zone is often rich in birds and whales. Frustratingly, though we spent most of the day on the decks and on the bridge, we only saw a few whale blows in the distance, though it was always good to see at least 4 species of albatross. In the late morning, Ditte gave a presentation on the biology of penguins, introducing both the ones we had already seen on the Falklands as well as those that we might see in South Georgia and the Peninsula.

After lunch, Rob announced a bird identification (and appreciation) session based on the photos taken on the trip so far. This session was interrupted by an announcement over the PA that there were Orcas in front of the ship. Everybody rushed to the decks, but only a few of us got a glimpse of them before they were gone. Soon after, we all met in the dining room again, where Rolf introduced us to the plans for our visit on South Georgia.

After dinner, having made good time, we got a bit of a treat, views of Shag Rocks in the sunset. These rocks actually form a small micro-continent of their own, being completely surrounded by a chunk of tectonic plate. The birdlife on the rocks is rich and, true to its name, we saw many, though distant, South Georgia Shags, which were new to our list. Later many watched the second half of the film on Shackletons expedition to Antarctica - the loss of the Endurance and the rescue to South Georgia.

## Day 9

Friday 9th January 2009

### South Georgia – Elsehul and Salisbury Plain

With South Georgia and our first icebergs in sight many were out of bed early. Birds were around the ship in profusion. Most we had seen, but the diddy Diving Petrels (probably Common) were a welcome sight. Having made good time, we were able to embark on our first activity earlier than planned – a zodiac tour of Elsehul. The beaches were packed with Antarctic Fur Seals and this is the main reason why we didn't land. We soon spotted two endemics of the island, the South Georgia Pintail and the South Georgia Pipit. Cruising around close inshore other highlights included groups of King Penguins, a large group of Cape Petrel feeding in a kelp bed, cliff tops lined with breeding Black-browed and Grey-head Albatross, scavenging Pale-faced (Snowy) Sheathbills and, sailing gracefully above us, some elegant Light Mantled Sooty Albatross. As a finale we passed by a breeding colony of intrepid Macaroni Penguins, many of which had chosen to breed at the top of a steep rock slope. The two hours in the Zodiac had quickly passed, but were also a bit chilly, so a hot drink on return to the ship was well in order.

After lunch, we moved on to Salisbury Plain, the second largest King Penguin colony on South Georgia. Negotiating the moody Antarctic Fur Seals (many making impressive charges but quickly fleeing when we banged two pebbles together and counter charged!) we made our way to the edge of the 120,000 strong breeding colony and made friends with the inquisitive inhabitants. King Penguins are not shy and both the smart adults and the relatively mature brown downy chicks came to investigate just what we were, which was lovely. After a few hours we had no choice but to return to the ship, leaving behind this truly magical place.

## Day 10

Saturday 10th January 2009

### South Georgia – Fortuna Bay and the Shackleton Hike to Stromness then Grytviken

Today we had the chance go on a proper and historical hike, which about half the group took up. The plan was to stride the last section of the famous Shackleton hike across South Georgia, the 7 km from Fortuna Bay over the hill to Stromness. Landing in the bay, we were greeted, as usual, by a party of bad tempered Antarctic Fur Seals. Initially quite lush and green the terrain soon changed as we climbed to rather barren rock. However it was here that we first spotted the Reindeer, introduced by Norwegian Whalers many years ago. These were somewhat shy and ran off as we approached. A few Antarctic terns were spotted, and judging by their dive bombing, they were probably nesting nearby. Rounding a corner, we had stunning sunlit views of the Shackleton Valley and the abandoned Stromness whaling station. The steep descent into the valley was tricky on the loose scree but we were rewarded with easy access to a small Gentoo Penguin colony.

The other half of our group had stayed on the Mikheev while it sailed from Fortuna to Stromness Bay, taking in the scenery and particularly to looking out for whales, which are usually plentiful in these waters, but not on this occasion.... This group spent their time exploring the Shackleton Valley. Their were more reindeer (these more approachable), those same Gentoo Penguins nesting in the hills and, on the beach hundreds of Antarctic Fur Seals, basking in the sun, including a few oddly cream coloured individuals. Near the shore there was a small 'paddling pool' crammed with ridiculously cute seal pups practising the art of swimming.

In the afternoon we sailed on to Grytviken, the site of the first of the whaling stations on South Georgia and currently a small settlement and research station. We landed on the beach near the graveyard - surely the only one in the world fenced in to prevent fur seal invasion. Here Shackleton is buried, along with number Norwegian whalers and one of the first casualties of the Falkland conflict. True to tradition, our guides and hotel staff had brought rum and glasses ashore and we all sacrificed a small drop of rum onto Shackletons grave before giving a toast to his name.

We then wandered along the beach towards the remains of the whaling station. Several huge Southern Elephant Seals had to be negotiated on the way; they were basking on their backs and hardly noticed our passing. South Georgia Pintail dabbling along the shoreline was a welcome site. The local Museum proved interesting with lovely displays of both the whaling and the natural history of South Georgia and the Post Office was a must for those wanting to send greetings from what must be amongst the most unusual of destinations.

Upon returning to the ship, we found the aft deck set up as a barbeque and dance floor and the staff happily dishing out baked potatoes, salad, grilled meats and shrimp. Set against the backdrop of snow covered mountains and decaying ships in the mist and drizzle, it was quite a surreal setting for the festivity and dancing that followed.



## Day 11

Sunday 11th January 2009

### Off the coast of South Georgia and Drygalski Fjord

Overnight we had a sharp drop in air pressure and the weather changed drastically to a westerly storm. We had planned a trip to Hercules Bay to see more Macaroni Penguins and to Prion Island for nesting Wandering Albatross. Unfortunately with the weather, this was impossible. Our best bet seemed to be to sail around the south-east point of South Georgia and hope for more shelter. However, during the morning the wind picked up even more to force 11 gusting force 12 (hurricane force!), so no hope of a landing but a bit of excitement and much photography of the bow of the ship ploughing through the waves! For lunch the Captain moved the ship closer to shore to minimise movement, but it was still a bit of a fairground ride and our waitresses gave impressive displays of how to balance trays full of porcelain whilst walking sideways.

In the afternoon, the boat sailed into Drygalski Fjord where we saw our first stunning Snow Petrels and some spectacular glaciers and waterfalls, many of these being regularly blown upwards or vapourised, such was the strength of the wind. With nowhere to land, we sailed for the South Orkneys. Appropriate evening entertainment was provided by David Attenborough in two episodes of the BBC documentary *Life in the Freezer*.

## Day 12

Monday 12th January 2009

### En route to South Orkneys

Although we were making a good speed (some 9 knots), it's a long way between South Georgia and the South Orkneys, so we still had 40 hours of sailing ahead of us. The wind had calmed somewhat during the night but was still blowing force 7 and there was a good deal of swell, but most by now had got their sea legs and almost everybody showed up for breakfast. Those on the bridge early spotted many a Blue Petrel. Later Ivan (aka Bill or William) presented a beautiful slideshow of wildlife in Norfolk through the seasons.

Many of us spent the afternoon on the bridge watching the waves and the albatrosses following us; Wandering, Black-browed, Grey-headed and Light Mantled Sooty all made a showing. Our first Southern Fulmars were briefly seen. We also saw several blows of a whale (probably a Humpback) at a distance, but sadly it didn't come any closer. In the late afternoon, Ditte gave a presentation on the seals of the Antarctic, summarising the biology of the fur seals that we had already seen, and introducing true seals (no external ears) we might hope to see further south. Rather bizarrely, despite being more than 100 nm to the nearest land, we saw several fur seals from the bridge.

In the evening some watched another two episodes of the BBC documentary *Life in the Freezer* before heading off to a good nights sleep.

## Day 13

Tuesday 13th January 2009

### South Orkneys

On waking, it was clear that the ship had encountered calmer weather. Having passed 60 degrees (S) latitude, we were at last in the Antarctic (in as much as this is where the Antarctic Treaty extends to).

In the morning all 5 'leaders' on board gave a small retrospective on our visit to South Georgia. Rolf talked about the origin of the rock that shapes the island, Ditte talked about the history of whaling and sealing, John showed his pictures of the Shackleton walk from Fortuna Bay to Stromness, Maarten explained the structure of a marine food web and Rob showed pictures of many of the birds we had seen.

In the afternoon some Humpback Whales and three Antarctic Minke Whales were spotted from the bridge. Approaching the South Orkneys towards evening, the number of birds increased, including excellent close up views of Southern Fulmar and fly pasts of squadrons of Cape Petrel. Also spectacular were the icebergs, many sparkling white but most also with elfish blue or green. Groups of Chinstrap Penguins began to appear, porpoising around the ship as we neared the Argentinian base Orcadas, nestled on small beach between big glaciers.

We landed our Zodiacs on the southern beach and were welcomed by 5 Argentinians, a few Fur Seals, several Chinstrap and a scattering of Adelie and Gentoo Penguins. We had tour around the base and were plied with coffee and cake. We returned to ship and set sail in great light through majestic icebergs, the largest measured as some 2.5 nautical miles (some 2.75 usual miles) long. After dinner we added the two new penguin species to our bird list and we prepared for a Scottish dance on the ice (see Day 15).

## Day 14

Wednesday 14th January 2009

### En route to the Antarctic Peninsula

Today, for a change (or maybe because it was the Orthodox New Year the night before?) we had a lie in and a brunch. On the bridge and outside there was not much to be seen as it was often foggy. A few Cape Petrels were following the ship, but sadly nothing that we hadn't already seen. In the early afternoon, Maarten gave a presentation on the human impact in Antarctica, touching upon issues such as invasive species, climate change and fishing. Later, we all gathered in the dining room again, as Penny had volunteered Peter(!) for a slide show on their recent trip to Kamchatka, complete with descriptions of the 'delightful' Russian architecture, mating bears and making sure you knew which time zones it was. After dinner, Rolf outlined the exciting plans for the next few of days on the Peninsula. We went to bed in great expectation of the adventure to come.

## Day 15

Thursday 15th January 2009

### The Antarctic Peninsula

In the morning, we arrived at the Antarctic Peninsula through the narrows of the Larsen Channel, full of icebergs and our first Leopard Seal. Our desired destination was Hope Bay and a landing at the Argentinian base Esperanza. Unfortunately, the local commander was on a 'patrol' and was unable to receive us or grant us permission for a short landing (the place was duly re-christened Hopeless Bay). So, we continued on to View Point, on the eastern side of the Peninsula. The landing here was our first on the continent and a good opportunity for a group photo. We took two; the first as a straightforward group, the second was us laying claim to the place by holding the British Ensign (as borrowed from the ship) - revenge on the base commander of Esperanza! Wildlife-wise, there was not much, a few nesting Kelp Gull and Subantarctic Skua and a lone Chinstrap Penguin, but it was good to have finally touched the seventh continent.

After lunch there was a small lull in activities, so Rob gave a short slide show (transporting us from the chilly pole to the SW coast of Africa and the jewel that is Namibia).

After dinner, some went for an extra landing at Beak Island. This too was not a place with much wildlife but it will be remembered as the unusual but surely fitting location of our rendition of a special Scottish County Dance, the story behind this is as follows. The Scottish National Antarctic Expedition was led by Robert Speirs Bruce aboard his ship "The Scotia". Between 1902 and 1904, he set up a meteorological station in the South Orkneys, now run by Argentina. As part of the centenary celebrations in 2004, the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society produced a CD of music and dances entitled "The Scotia Suite". Sixteen of us decided to mark the occasion by dancing "The Piper and the Penguin" here on Beak Island. Sadly, we were unable to dance to the original music, but a rousing rendition of "Scotland the Brave" more than made up for it. Before leaving we spotted a little gang of our first Crabeater Seals and it was good to see more Gentoo Penguins and Antarctic Terns.

## Day 16

Friday 16th January 2009

### The east Antarctic Peninsula - Devil Island, Brown Bluff

Rolf woke us shortly before 06:30 with an announcement that the ship was surrounded by ice and seals. Despite the groggy inertia of having to get out of bed earlier than planned, it certainly was worth it. During the night brash ice had drifted into the bay and the ship was completely surrounded. Many chunks had Crabeater Seals aboard. Sailing during breakfast to Devil Island, we first Zodiac cruised (and oohed and aaaahed at) the many bergs in the bay. Landing on the stony beach we were immediately amongst the Adelie Penguin colony. What a hive of activity it was with chicks chasing parents for food and a regular stream of adults popping (without warning) out of the frigid ocean. In contrast, entering the ocean seemed to be another matter altogether. Lines would wander up or down the beach and gather in large groups staring at the water, none wanting to be first penguin in. Then one brave (or foolish) soul would bite the bullet and take a dive, then it was a question of one in, all in, and off they all went accompanied by much honking and braying.

During lunch we set sail for our next stop and soon found ourselves passing a small berg with a large penguin on it – yes an Emperor (albeit a juvenile). The exciting news was announced over the PA as the ship was swung around to give everyone who had missed it chance to get a view and/or pikky. It obligingly stayed around for us all to see before deciding it had had enough and plopping into the water. We concluded the day's sightings of unusual penguins at Brown Bluff with an adult 'isabelline' Adelie Penguin, the 'black' on this individual being cream/light brown instead. Brown Bluff offered several new photo opportunities, as the beach was littered with sculptured ice blocks and the backdrop a massive striated cliff (apparently formed when a sub-glacial eruption broke out of the entombing glacier).

## Day 17

Saturday 17th January 2009

Mikkelson Harbour (Trinity Island), Cierva Cove, the Gerlache Strait and Wilhelmina Bay (our southernmost latitude)

We woke to sunlight, calm, and clear blue sky. With visibility unfeasibly high, we saw Humpback Whales before breakfast.

Arriving in Mikkelsen Harbour, we landed on a small unnamed island, home to many a Gentoo Penguin. Many of these had young fat chicks and the spot was busy with adults to-ing (and fro-ing) to the ocean where they often had a good wash before setting off to find food (their underwater 'flying' clearly visible in the crystal clear water). There was also the odd Antarctic Fur Seal, just as bad tempered here as on South Georgia, and a lone Crabeater seal, sunbathing (or more likely cooling itself) on a snow patch. As the sun rose, the temperature soared and some were seen stripped to a t-shirt, but topping this were Rolf and Ditte undressing to very little and diving in for a short but very courageous ocean swim!

Shortly before lunch we set off across the Gerlache Strait and were soon in the company of whales – many of them, Humpbacks. We trailed them seeing many tail flukes, some flippers and an outstanding view of two passing right up to our starboard bow before diving down to the depths in front of our eyes (and cameras). We finally succumbed to Angels increasingly desperate pleas that lunch was supposed to have been served half an hour ago and went below decks to eat.

Post lunch, the ship brought us into Cierva Cove, where we took a Zodiac cruise of the ice and berg-filled bay. On several occasions we saw and gently approached a chunk of ice with a Leopard Seal aboard. They have a strange look about them, often described a reptilian...you wouldn't want to meet on a dark night (or indeed any night), that is for sure! We were welcomed back on board by Angel with some warming hot chocolate, with or without rum, hardly needed given the lovely sunshine, but appreciated nonetheless.

Continuing our cruise down the Gerlache Strait, we were again surrounded by Humpback Whales. Again, they excelled themselves with at least two breaches and an absolutely stunning spot of 'bubble netting' right by the ship, dramatically concluding with a whale surfacing, mouth first, from the circle of bubbles. We sailed into the unfeasibly picturesque Wilhelmina Bay in the late evening sun and reached our southernmost point 64 degrees 40 minutes south before swinging back north. Surely a perfect day!

## Day 18

Sunday 18th January 2009

### Telefon Bay on Deception Island, Half Moon Island (South Shetlands)

Rolf woke us with the announcement that we were approaching the caldera that is Deception Island. As we approached it looked dark and gloomy in the overcast weather. Sailing through the narrow entrance known as Neptune's Bellows involved some tricky navigation as there is a large underwater rock in the middle upon which several ships have come to grief. We passed through safely, spotting little rafts of Cape Petrels near the cliff bases, and were soon anchored in Telefon Bay and landing on an ash and lava debris beach, then climbing one of the hills to get the view. The landscape was barren and stark and, though it was good to have seen the place, with little wildlife to entertain us, we did not dwell too long.

After some last minute re-arrangements, the last landing of the trip was Half Moon Island and a walk amongst by far the dirtiest penguins yet seen, a breeding colony of Chinstraps. There were many reasonably well grown chicks and so, as usual, adults were constantly on the move between the beach and the hilltop colonies. This seemed a touch odd and rather an effort, but maybe to do with these hilltops being the first to clear of snow in the spring, allowing an early start to breeding in what is a very short season.

It was also good to see some Pale-faced Sheathbills again and Wilson's Storm Petrel, daintily flying around the boulder screes presumably in search of their nest sites. All too soon it was time to return to the ship and prepare for the crossing of notoriously rough Drake Passage.

## Day 19

Monday 19th January 2009

### On route to Ushuaia, the Drake Passage and the Beagle Channel

Well, we did bounce around a bit in our beds, but no more than in other places. "John-from-the-bridge" did the morning call and reported grey weather with clear visibility but few birds and a bit of a swell. Since the birdwatching was not being very productive, a morning programme of talks proved popular. Firstly, John showed us the splendour that is the Arctic, with slides of what can be seen on the Naturetrek wildlife cruise around Spitsbergen. Then, after a short break, each guide/leader gave a short talk on an Antarctic theme; Rolf told us about the volcanic origins of Deception Island. Ditte showed us how some animals and plants had adapted to polar life.

Maarten outlined some interesting research that showed that, despite precautions, seeds, spores and small insects still hide away in the equipment and clothing brought to Antarctica by scientists and tourists. John and Rob closed the session with some photos of the lovely mammals and birds (respectively) we had drooled over during our visit around the Peninsula. The Drake remained in good mood for the rest of the day, and after lunch many joined Rolf for a talk about glaciers and later Maarten who looked at Antarctica from a 'heavenly' perspective, touching issues such as southern stars, polar lights and ozone. The last two parts of Life in the Freezer rounded the day off nicely.

## Day 20

Tuesday 20th January 2009

### On route to Ushuaia, crossing the Drake Passage

The wind picked up considerably during the night and by day it was a rocking force 7 or 8 - nothing extraordinary, but enough to give us a good impression why the Drake Passage had its bad reputation. However, given we were all hardened sea-dogs by now, breakfast was well attended, as were talks (as birds were still rather sparse). Ivan invited us once again to partake of some of his marvellous photos and descriptions of wildlife along the North Sea coast, followed by Ditte who gave us an overview of research in Antarctica.

In the afternoon, Rob briefed us about the exciting subject of our journey back home and then put on a self running slideshow of peoples own favourite slides – 160 (or so) stunning images. For those that wanted it, guided tours of the galley (remarkably small) and engine room (hot & sweaty) were laid on.

After a last, fine Mikheev-dinner, Rolf invited us one last time to the lecture hall for a final highlight that he had chosen to call "what have we done?", a further photographic recap of our remarkable 19 day journey from the Beagle Channel via the Southern Ocean islands of the Falklands, South Georgia and South Orkneys, culminating around the Antarctic Peninsula. It was hard to believe that we had done and seen all this within such a short time!

**Days 21/22****Wednesday 21st and Thursday 22nd January 2009**

## Ushuaia, Buenos Aires and on route to London via Madrid

In the early hours of the morning, the Grigoriy Mikheev reached the pier in Ushuaia and our long journey in the Southern Ocean came to an end. We left our luggage outside our cabins ready for collection and had our last breakfast together, then went down the gangway for the last time, saying farewell to our ship and expedition team who had been looking after us so well. Some chose to head for the hills, others succumbed to the internet café, many were spotted in an ice-cream parlour – well it was a lovely morning and they had lots of lovely flavours.

At lunchtime we headed for Ushuaia airport and a trouble free flight to Buenos Aires where a number of us bade their farewells as they were either travelling elsewhere or spending some time in the city. The rest of us took in the delights of the departure lounge with plenty of time on our journey home to reflect on the excellent adventure we had had - the warm and welcoming Falklands, the rugged and windswept coast of South Georgia, and the icy splendour of Antarctica.

Total length of this trip: 3 419 nm = 6 332 km = 3 935 statute miles (Ushuaia to Ushuaia)

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## Species Lists

## Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	January																			
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Great Grebe	<i>Podiceps major</i>		4																		
2	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>				2																
3	Wandering Albatross	<i>Diomedea exulans</i>			2			20	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	1					2	1	
4	Southern Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>						1	✓													
5	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Diomedea melanophrys</i>			✓	100+	6	25	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2				2	4	✓	
6	Grey-headed Albatross	<i>Diomedea chrysostoma</i>							3	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	1					2		
7	Light-mantled Sooty Albatross	<i>Phoebastria palpebrata</i>								✓	✓	✓	2	✓	2					1	1	
8	Sooty Albatross	<i>Phoebastria fusca</i>							1													
9	Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>	?			✓		✓	✓	✓											?	
10	Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Southern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>												3	✓	✓				✓		
12	Cape (Pintado) Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>			20+			3	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	
13	Snow Petrel	<i>Pagodroma nivea</i>										20+	4	5+			✓					
14	Soft-plumaged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma mollis</i>						3	1													
15	Great-winged Petrel	<i>Pterodroma macroptera</i>						1														
16	Blue Petrel	<i>Halobaena caerulea</i>			1				1	1		5	20+	✓	✓				✓	10	✓	
17	Antarctic Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	7	✓	
18	Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>			✓	✓		10		✓										1		
19	Fairy Prion	<i>Pachyptila turtur</i>					1	1	✓													
20	White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>						10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	10	✓
21	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>			10+			10+	1	1											3	
22	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>			10+	✓	50+	6													✓	
23	Little Shearwater	<i>Puffinus assimilis</i>						1														
24	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanites</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
25	Grey-backed Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites nereis</i>										1										
26	Black-bellied Storm Petrel	<i>Fregatta tropica</i>					?	20+	✓	1		✓		✓	✓					1	1	

	Common name	Scientific name	January																			
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
27	White-bellied Storm Petrel	<i>Fregatta grallaria</i>					?	?														
28	Common Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>								✓		✓								1		
29	South Georgia Diving-petrel	<i>Pelecanoides georgicus</i>								?		?										
30	Emperor Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes forsteri</i>														1						
31	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>					1			lots	lots	✓	✓									
32	Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>				50+			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	4			
33	Chinstrap Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis antarctica</i>												lots		✓	1		✓	6		
34	Adelie Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis adeliae</i>												5		lots	lots	✓				
35	Rockhopper penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>				100+																
36	Macaroni Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysolipus</i>								200+												
37	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>		4		✓	✓	2													2	
38	Rock Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax magellanicus</i>	✓			✓	✓														✓	✓
39	South Georgia Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax georgianus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
40	Antarctic Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax bransfieldensis</i>														4	6	2	✓			
41	King Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax atriceps</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓														✓	✓
42	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	1	2		✓	10															
43	Black-faced Ibis	<i>Theristicus melanopsis</i>		1																		
44	Kelp Goose	<i>Chloephaga hybrida</i>	2	✓		✓	1															✓
45	Ashy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga poliocephala</i>		✓																		
46	Upland Goose	<i>Chloephaga picta</i>		✓		✓	✓															
47	Ruddy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>				2																
48	Crested Duck	<i>Lophonetta specularioides</i>	5	✓		✓	✓															✓
49	Southern (Chiloe) Wigeon	<i>Anas sibilatrix</i>		✓																		
50	Yellow-billed (Speckled) Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>		7		✓							✓									
51	South Georgia Pintail	<i>Anas georgica georgica</i>								4	6											



	Common name	Scientific name	January																				
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
52	Flightless Steamer-Duck	<i>Tachyeres pteneres</i>	1	✓																			
53	Falklands Flightless St' Duck	<i>Tachyeres brachydactyla</i>				✓	✓																
54	Flying Steamer-Duck	<i>Tachyeres patachonicus</i>		✓																			
55	Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle	<i>Geranoaetus melanoleucus</i>		1																			
56	Striated Caracara	<i>Phalacrocorax australis</i>				20+	✓																
57	White-throated Caracara	<i>Polyborus albogularis</i>		✓																			
58	Crested Caracara	<i>Polyborus plancus</i>	1	✓																			
59	Chimango Caracara	<i>Milvago chimango</i>		✓																			
60	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1																
61	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>		✓		12	✓														+		
62	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>		2		✓	✓																
63	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>				8	3																
64	Southern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus chilensis</i>	2	✓																			
65	Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>					4																
66	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>					✓																
67	Magellanic (South American) Snipe	<i>Gallinago paraguayae</i>				6	1																
68	Snowy (Pale-faced) Sheathbill	<i>Chionis alba</i>		✓						20+				✓					15				
69	Falklands (Subantarctic) Skua	<i>Catharacta antarcticus antarcticus</i>				12	4																
70	Subantarctic Skua	<i>Catharacta antarcticus lonnbergi</i>						1		20+	✓	✓		✓	2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
71	South Polar Skua	<i>Catharacta maccormicki</i>														✓	✓	✓	✓				
72	Chilean Skua	<i>Catharacta chilensis</i>	1	✓																	2		
73	Dolphin Gull	<i>Leucophaeus scoresbii</i>	✓	✓			✓														✓		
74	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
75	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>	1	✓		✓	10														✓	✓	
76	Antarctic Tern	<i>Sterna vittata</i>								2	✓	✓	✓	8		✓	✓	✓	✓				
77	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>									1												
78	Austral Parakeet	<i>Enicognathus ferrugineus</i>		✓																			
79	Magellanic Woodpecker	<i>Campephilus</i>		2																			

	Common name	Scientific name	January																			
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
		<i>magellanicus</i>																				
80	Tussac-bird (Blackish Cinclodes)	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>				50+																
81	Dark-bellied Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes patagonicus</i>		2																		
82	Thorn-tailed Rayadito	<i>Aphrastura spinicauda</i>		✓																		
83	White-throated Treerunner	<i>Pygarrhichas albogularis</i>		✓																		
84	Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola macloviana</i>				✓	6															
85	Austral Negrito	<i>Lessonia oreas</i>		✓																		
86	White-crested Elaenia	<i>Elaenia albiceps</i>		✓																		
87	Chilean Swallow	<i>Tachycineta leucopyga</i>	4	✓																		
88	House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>		2																		
89	Grass Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>				✓	✓															
90	Cobb's Wren	<i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>				✓	✓															
91	Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falklandii</i>		✓		✓	✓															
92	Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>	1																			
93	Falkland Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera grayi</i>				✓																
94	South Georgia Pipit	<i>Anthus antarcticus</i>								2												
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓			✓															✓
96	Patagonian Sierra-Finch	<i>Phrygilus patagonicus</i>		✓																		
97	Rufous-collared Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia capensis</i>	2	✓																		✓
98	Black-throated Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>				✓	✓															
99	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Carduelis barbata</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓															
100	Austral Blackbird	<i>Curaeus curaeus</i>		✓																		
101	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella loyca</i>				✓	✓															

## Selected Plants

	Common name	Scientific name	January																			
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Diddle-dee	<i>Empetrum rubrum</i>		✓		✓	✓															
2	Fachine	<i>Chilotrichum diffusum</i>		✓																		
3	Pig Vine	<i>Gunnera magellanica</i>		✓		✓	✓															
4	Dog Orchid	<i>Codonorchis lessonii</i>		✓																		
5	Green Orchid	<i>Gavilea australis</i>		✓																		
6	Yellow Orchid	<i>Gavilea littoralis</i>		✓																		
7	Prickly Heath	<i>Gaultheria mucronata</i>		✓																		
8	False Mistletoe	<i>Misodendrum punctulatum</i>		✓																		
9	Sea Cabbage	<i>Senecio candidans</i>				✓	✓															
10	Field Mouse-ear	<i>Ceratium arvense</i>				✓					✓											
11	Berry-lobelia	<i>Pratia repens</i>					✓															
12	Arrow-leaved Marigold	<i>Caltha sagittata</i>					✓															
13	Balsam Bog	<i>Bolax gummifera</i>					✓															
14	Buttonweed	<i>Leptinella scariosa</i>					✓															
15	Christmas Bush	<i>Baccharis magellanica</i>					✓															
16	Marsh Daisy	<i>Aster vahlii</i>					✓															
17	Vanilla Daisy	<i>Leucheria suaveolens</i>					✓															
18	Almond Flower	<i>Luzuriaga maginata</i>					✓															
19	Scury Grass	<i>Oxalis enneaphylla</i>					✓															
20	Boxwood	<i>Hebe elliptica</i>					✓															
21	Prickly Burr	<i>Acaena magellanica</i>					✓				✓											
22	Orange Hawkweed	<i>Hieracium aurantiacum</i>					✓															
23	Falkland Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima andina</i>					✓															
24	Tall Fern	<i>Blechnum tabulare</i>				✓	✓															
25	Small Fern	<i>Blechnum penna-marina</i>					✓															

## Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	January																		
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1	Antarctic Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera bonaerensis</i>												6	1						
2	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>													5						
3	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaengliae</i>					✓	1	✓	✓			3	3	✓			lots	✓	1	
4	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>								3											
5	Hourglass Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus cruciger</i>		1																	
6	Peale's Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus australis</i>			✓																+?
7	Commerson's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commers</i>				✓															
8	Weddell Seal	<i>Leptonychotes weddellii</i>																1			
9	Crabeater Seal	<i>Lobodon carcinophagus</i>													10	20+	✓	✓			
10	Leopard Seal	<i>Hydrurga leptonyx</i>													1		5				
11	Southern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>								10	50+										
12	Antarctic Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus gazella</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1		✓	✓		
13	South American Sea Lion	<i>Otaria flavescens</i>		✓		✓	1	✓													
14	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>									85										
15	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓																	