



## **Bird Island Newsletter March 2004**

Where did all the time go?

I must start with an apology – it's now the middle of April, and I'm sitting on the RRS James Clark Ross on its way back to the Falkland Islands. Sorry to have kept you waiting. It doesn't seem so very long that I was here on the same ship, sailing in the other direction, but two and a half years have passed in the meantime, and as they have flown by, Bird Island has become a home from home.

Departing brought a flood of emotions – sadness at saying goodbye to this most special little island and to Chris, Sarah and Zac who have become such good friends; panic at having left everything to the last minute; excitement about the prospect of travelling across the Southern Ocean again, to more adventures in South America; a little bit of apprehension about returning to the Real World having been away so long... Despite the feelings of bittersweet loss, it does feel like it is time to move on. I have lived through more than two complete cycles of seasons at Bird Island, and got to know the island like an old friend. Furseals and wandering albatrosses have been as familiar a part of my landscape as cars and trees back home. Already we have left the icebergs behind – the sea will seem a bit emptier without them. But the time has come for new adventures and new experiences.



*Chris on Iceberg Point, surrounded by furseal pups*

As Nick and myself leave Bird Island, many of the animals are travelling north with us. The furseal pups who were born in December have grown up and moulted out of their shaggy black puppy coats into soft, smooth, silvery pelts. During March, the waters of Freshwater Bay bubbled and writhed with thousands of pups becoming comfortable in the water. They quickly developed into superb swimmers – such a transformation from the comical little creatures that have growled and galumphed and snoozed around the base all summer. Now, the beaches are largely deserted, and the pups have taken to the open ocean. Many won't make it – they will be eaten by killer whales or attacked by leopard seals, or simply won't be good enough at finding food for themselves and will starve. But those that survive will eventually return to the same Bird Island beaches to continue the cycle of life.

Black-browed albatross and Northern giant petrel chicks are also coming of age and starting their long and hazardous journeys. They will spend several years at sea and travel many thousands of miles before coming back to the island to breed. Nowadays, the greatest threat they will face is being accidentally hooked on a longline baited to catch toothfish, swordfish or tuna. Some fisheries are well-managed and take precautions so as not to catch albatrosses and petrels on their lines, but others are not. Something that anyone can do to help protect albatrosses is to ask questions about where the fish you buy come from, and demand fish from sustainable, well-managed fisheries, especially those with Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification.



*Northern giant petrel chick, close to fledging*

Wandering albatross chicks, in contrast to most of the other birds on the island, are still only at the beginning of their growing-up period. March has been the month when wanderer eggs all over the island have been pipping, and tiny beaks have been poking through holes as the chicks take their first breath of air. After as many as three

days of struggling, they finally break out of the eggshell, feeble damp little creatures with beaks like Gonzo's nose. They will have to sit out the winter through all the storms and snows, waiting patiently for their parents to return to feed them, from foraging trips that can last for weeks. This month, Zac and I have been deploying new GPS (Global Positioning System) satellite tags to track the albatrosses' movements with incredible precision. The tags are simply taped to a few feathers on the bird's back, and receive signals from GPS satellites orbiting the Earth. They can tell us where the albatrosses are to within a few metres – much more accurate than the satellite transmitters we have used in previous years. We need to carefully take the chick from the nest when we deploy a tag on an albatross, and there has been no shortage of volunteers to act as 'chicksitters'!



*Sarah looking after a wandering albatross chick while its parent is given a GPS tag*

Satellite transmitters have also been giving Chris and Phil some interesting results, from macaroni penguins which they deployed on earlier in the summer, both here at Bird Island and elsewhere on South Georgia. They are finding that penguins from different colonies have distinctly different foraging areas, even when the colonies are close together. Bird Island and the Willis Islands are only a few kilometres apart, but penguins from Bird Island generally forage to the north and northwest of the island, while penguins from Willis invariably travel south to a completely different area to find food. It seems that they are taking the shortest possible distance to the shelf-break (where the water suddenly becomes much deeper, and currents help to bring food such as krill nearer the surface). During the course of a single foraging trip during the brood-guard period, a female macaroni penguin makes over 1000 dives, on average to around 37 metres, but occasionally as deep as 100 metres. The vertical distance that they cover during a single foraging trip is therefore the equivalent of scaling Everest (and coming back down again) twice. Not bad for a little creature the size of a rugby ball!

We had a go at setting our own records this month – a competition to see how quickly someone could race from base to the top of La Roche and back again. I wonder how long my record of 29 minutes 55 seconds will hold for – the challenge is still open! Disappointingly, Munki (Neil Farnell) had to leave the island before he could give it a go. I reckon he would have put up some stiff competition, as a veteran fell-runner, though with less experience of the hazards of tussock grass and furseals than those of us who've been here a bit longer! Munki, and Simon Berry (who arrived this month on the JCR) have been working hard to replace the raised scaffold walkway at the Seal Study Beach (SSB). The walkway is raised above the beach so the seal workers (Nick, and now Sarah) can move around and carry out their observations without disturbing the seals or risking being bitten by territorial males.



*BEFORE: The Seal Study Beach with the old scaffolding removed*

The first task was to remove all of the old scaffolding, which had gradually started to rust away, and to carry over all the new materials. We did that at the end of February, and as it involved moving tons of heavy scaffold tubes and boards, we would still be doing it now without lots of willing helpers on their way out of Halley on RRS Ernest Shackleton. Big thanks to everyone for that! Munki and Simon, with help from Maggie, worked hard to assemble the new and greatly improved scaffold walkway, and it was finished in record time. The 'before' and 'after' pictures speak for themselves!



*AFTER: The Seal Study Beach with the new scaffold walkway*

On the 20<sup>th</sup> there was a New Moon, so Zac sent us all a cryptic message inviting us to come as the dreams our childhood imaginations might conjure up on a dark moonless night.

Does the sun renounce its kingdom, as the shadows fall?  
Does the fool rejoice in wisdom, as the twilight calls?  
Do you feel a flame that's burning, as the candle dies?  
Do you feel the spirits stirring, as you close your eyes?

Turn the lamp down low,  
Rising up to see  
Turn the lamp down low,  
Will there shelter be?

With an invitation heard before we find  
We will make the journey through the doors aligned  
Shadows on the mountainside  
Moonbeams find the souls they hide

So drawing down the moon, I can see it in your eyes  
I think it's too soon, I can still hear the cries  
So drawing down the moon, can't you hear me when I say?  
When darkness descends what will come today?

*Jeff Cohen*  
extracts from 'The Edges of Twilight'

We took all this as an excuse for another theme party, and you would never have thought that most of the costumes were assembled in less than an hour, as strange creatures ranging from space monsters to flying ninjas to ghosts (and a ghostbuster), even a baby, appeared in the darkened lounge.



*New Moon party: Chris as a space monster, and Zac mixing up some cocktails*

There were more nocturnal happenings later in the month, when six of us decided to bivvy out on Bandersnatch, a stony hill not far from the base. It was a beautiful clear night, with thousands of stars. As we wriggled into our sleeping bags and settled down for the night, clouds came in from the sea and we could hear the distant rumble of icebergs collapsing. Or was it the sound of the 'Bandersnatch Beast' awakening? We lulled Simon into a fitful sleep with stories of what the beast might do should it

emerge from its lair and find us. He got his own back though, with a series of practical jokes, mostly involving booby-trapping someone's bed, or rigging something to fall on someone's head. We retaliated again by spiking his shampoo with blue food dye (unfortunately he noticed) and wedging a piece of wood under his door handle so he had to climb out the window when he got up in the morning. But Simon had the last laugh when he and Munki left us at the end of the month and we discovered his legacy of soaked mattresses and fish hidden in places where fish were never meant to be. All in good fun.

Towards the end of the month, Simon and Munki rigged up an assault course, and the 'foreigners' (me being Irish, Zac Australian, and Nick and Sarah with dual UK and French and Canadian citizenship, respectively) took on the true-blooded English team (Simon, Chris, Maggie and Munki). The course required each team of four to carry two large tyres around it, without the tyres touching the ground or being held by anyone for more than 20 seconds at a time. We had an over-water scaffold balancing act, monkey bars, a wet tunnel, and an impenetrable wall to contend with, and the final times were so close that there was only a second in it. The losers got a soaking but they were gracious in defeat.



*The assault course: Simon helps Chris up, while Maggie and Munki wait their turn; and the winning team (L-R: Zac, Sarah, Ben, Nick)*

And so, that brings me to the end of the latest instalment of life at Bird Island, and the last one I will write. There are plenty of other memories from the month – some impressive sunrises and sunsets, playing rounders on the beach, lots of fantastic bread, watching the graceful but tentative courtship of wandering albatrosses, staying up chatting until silly o'clock, the sounds of the furseals outside the window at night, precious moments spent in the company of friends...

The best things in life leave you wishing for more.

Ben ☺



*Photos by: Ben Phalan, Sarah Robinson, Chris Green*