



April began with the usual census of all the wandering albatross chicks on the island. Any dead chicks or empty nests found are recorded for the database. Generally, chicks are most likely to die through starvation, or being eaten, once the adults stop brooding them at 3-4 weeks of age and leave to forage at sea. Once this crucial stage is passed they grow big enough to fend off predatory attack from giant petrels and skuas. In a typical year, one would expect 5-8% of nests to fail once the eggs have hatched, with between 73-92% going on to fledge successfully. This year the number of breeding pairs on Bird Island dropped below one thousand for the second year running since the first census was carried out in 1962. These data continues to confirm the worrying trend over the last few decades that the breeding population of wandering albatrosses is declining.



A chick waits patiently for its next meal

I like the chicks at this age; they have a goofy innocence about them and their experience extends to only what they can see, hear and smell within the immediate vicinity of the mound of mud on which they sit for 9 months. Their wings are little more than stumps covered in a layer of dense down, their overall spherical form sharing none of the sleek, streamlined characteristics of adult maturity.

Knowing that time was running out for them both as last call rapidly approached, Benny and Nick were keen to experience as much as possible before leaving. I spent one final night with them both at the Love Shack, next to the islands smallest macaroni penguin colony. It must have felt a little bizarre for them both in the knowledge that after 2.5 years of getting to the know this particular haunt so well, they will most likely never spend another night in it again. Benny kindly cooked up some bacon and sausages, which we munched with a few leftovers from the night before. We spent the evening playing cards, recounting stories about the winter we spent together and enjoying a few hours in each other company away from base. We have build up a very strong rapport and I know them now as well as some of my close friends at home. That is what isolation does; it brings people closer and heightens social awareness and understanding.

‘Those hut point days would prove some of the happiest of my life. Just enough to eat and keep us warm, no more-no frills or trimmings: there is many a worse and more elaborate life... the luxuries of civilisation satisfy only those wants which they themselves create.’

Apsley Cherry-Garrard, 1902, Member of Scott’s final Antarctic expedition

One evening during supper Benny jokingly bet me a chocolate log that I wouldn't jump into Square Pond fully clothed. Square Pond lies adjacent to a large gentoo penguin colony and is odoriferous and full of detritus. Always one to rise to the challenge I jumped in one afternoon whilst Benny, Nick and Sarah looked on highly amused. The pond was seriously festering and full of all sorts to rancidness. I submerged myself up to my armpits (I dared not go any lower) before they agreed that I had completed the challenge. Unfortunately, I looked forward to my cake presentation in vain. Benny never got around to baking it before he left which I consider seriously bad form. I won't forget this mate.



You have to imagine the smell!

The day when Benny and Nick had to depart this island after 30 months arrived. The James Clark Ross came into view in Bird Sound shortly before 10:00am and once we'd exchanged domestic waste for fresh supplies and had met our new wintering companion Alex, it was time for us all to say our final farewells. We shared a quarter glass of champagne (the rest had been rather extravagantly sprayed all over us by Isaac when he opened the bottle) on the walkway and exchanged some final goodbye banter, before they then climbed aboard the tender. It was a difficult moment and one of very mixed emotions. The lines slipped free from the jetty cleat, the engine chucked into gear and off they went. The four of us were left standing at the end of the jetty giving them the best send-off we could with the traditional goodbye flares. We then excitedly ran across the beach to let the remainder off above the seal study beach. We watched in silence, each collecting our own thoughts, as the boat got smaller and finally disappeared from view.



Nick and Benny climb aboard the launch

I stood silently, scarcely able to believe that 18 months have already passed and I'm beginning my second winter already. As the others began to walk back to base I took a few moments to gaze around the valley and coastline. 'This is an extraordinary place', I said to myself, thinking how much the island has touched and inspired those few people that have been privileged enough to spend time here. I remembered what Benny had once said to me: 'The

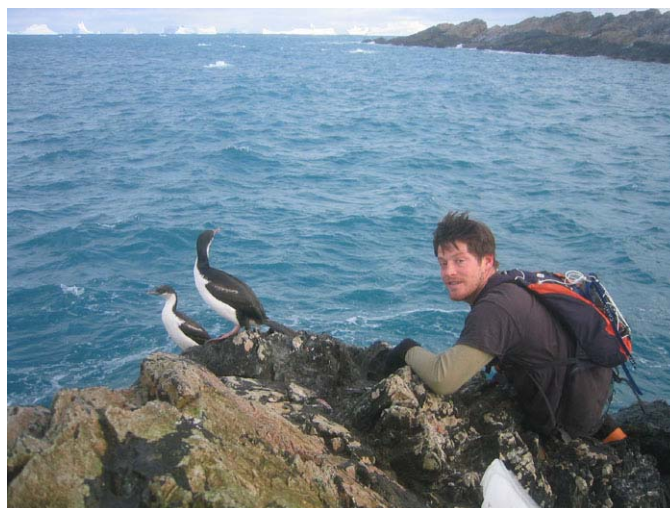
person you are when you leave, is not the person that you are when you arrive.’ By that remark, he did not mean you are in any way unhinged when the time comes to leave; rather that one develops personally in many respects, particularly sociality. You certainly get to know yourself.

Once the ship was safely on its way we headed straight back to base to unload all the fresh produce and open our post. It is difficult sometimes for people back home who are caught up in all the day to day distractions and stresses of life to appreciate just how gratefully received post is when you live in such an isolated spot. The rapid spread in modern communications such as satellite phones and the Internet has made staying in contact with people all over the world incredibly straightforward, yet I still think there is something a bit clinical and impersonal about email. There is nothing like the feeling of anticipation as you rip open the envelope and then set about deciphering the inky scribbles on the paper inside. Even if only a few lines are jotted on a postcard, it is still good to receive.



Mmm...fresh grapes

Alex quickly settled into the pace of life here, no doubt the transition facilitated by having already spent three summer seasons as a mechanic at Rothera. He seems able to turn his hand to almost anything practical and has already provided Isaac, Sarah and I with some invaluable advice in making our midwinter presents.



Alex enjoying a shag

BAS, as with many other national Antarctic research programs, often employ the same people from year to year, particularly in the technical services and field mountaineering roles. Many individuals who come south regularly have an understanding - camaraderie if you like - with those who they live with whilst south. Are these people a bit strange for wanting to live in isolation for extended periods? From my experiences of meeting men and women who have been coming south for years, I would have to reply with an emphatic no; they are entirely sane and rational, like anyone you might meet on the high street. However, many are addicts to the drug of the south, and the requirement for regular fixes is proverbial.

‘The stark polar lands grip the hearts of men who have lived on them in a manner that can be hardly understood by the people who have never got outside the pale of civilisation.’

Ernest Shackleton

Soon after Alex arrived and the summer crew had left we enjoyed a couple of good social nights together. Isaac, Sarah and I all know each other well having spent 6 months in each others company already, but we were keen to get to know Alex. Alex has lived quite a peripatetic life and has many good stories of his adventures. The choice drink of the night was Port and I think the picture speaks for itself!



We experienced a prolonged cold snap towards the end of the month, the first indication that winter is on its way. I'm always fascinated by the weather here. You can literally have four seasons in one day, as conditions are so changeable. If you want to know what the weather is going to be like in an hours time and there is a strong southerly blowing, simply face south and look towards the horizon. Weather fronts often race up from the south, a mass of dense cumulus moving relentlessly forwards, enveloping everything in its path. Shortly before the cloud is directly overhead the wind quickly builds, going from a general breeze to fearsome gusts in only a few minutes. Whenever I see these low-pressure systems heading towards the island I always stop to spare a thought for all those folks stuck on ships hundreds of miles from land and with no means of shelter. The southern ocean is an unforgiving place

...'This is the belt of the great west winds- the "Roaring Forties, Furious Fifties, and Shrieking Sixties." Throughout this zone, however, the most important climate truth is the inconsistency of the weather'...

Robert Cushman Murphy (1936)

When not being battered by the winds we do get some fantastic weather and, if cloud conditions are right, the sky can light up with a spellbinding array of colours as the sun sets. Looking up at the unobstructed sky the clouds seem massive, sometimes grandly reflecting the earth's curvature on their concave undersides.



A rare spectacle

Well, its time to wrap this up and all that remains is for me to say a big hello to everyone back in blightly and wish you all a great summer.

Cheers for now,

Chris