

Bird Island, May 2004



In March I left Rothera and had a pleasantly smooth voyage North through Drakes Passage, en-route to Stanley. I was due to return to the UK however when I was offered the opportunity to stay for a few months at Bird Island, plans changed. After a couple of weeks in Stanley, sailing, running and enjoying the surprisingly warm breezes I boarded the James Clark Ross and we sailed south. Unfortunately the seas were not so smooth, but after an enjoyable, if sometimes bumpy ride the James Clark Ross arrived at Bird Island. We were loaded into Tula, the JCR launch, and we headed in to Jordan Cove.

As we bumped into the jetty, lines were passed and I met Sarah, Zac and Chris for the first time. First impressions count and I had to stop myself staring at Zac's moustache.

After an efficient introduction to the workings of the base by Richard (thanks again), a bit of lunch and a little walk about, Tula returned. Very soon after Chris, Sarah, Zac and myself were the only people standing on the jetty. It was an exciting moment waving the JCR off, people make a place and I was keen to get to know my new colleagues...but that was April, so I'll stop there.



Isaac the school teacher.

May started (as all months apparently do) with a Wandering Albatross count. I have been allocated a plot on the western side of base and the month began with a peaceful day visiting chicks on nests. The weather was fantastic; I managed to sneak an extended lunch break, dozing without my t-shirt on a rock shared with a few fur seals and a marconi penguin at the most westerly point of the island. I was told repeatedly that the weather on Bird Island isn't usually so pleasant.

My role at Bird Island is to make up numbers and carry out running repairs and routine maintenance as required. Zac has obviously thrived on the fresh vegetables we ate after relief, his strength has increased further than his own expectation and as a result I have been busily replacing all the handles that have just 'dropped off' during normal operation. First the paint shed door handle, followed by the compactor room handle then to top it all off Chris' sandwich toaster was damaged (also losing a handle) during loading, it was an impressive sandwich. There have been a few faces of concern over the latter mishap, nearly 5 months to go and a mono-handled sandwich toaster...no second chances in the Antarctic.

I have built a new hut for Sarah to make use of on the seal survey beach (or SSB), it needs a few finishing touches before installation, but that will have to wait until after mid-winter. The Chippy shed has been a hive of activity for the last fortnight, we have all started our mid-winter presents and unsurprisingly, progress is varied. Everyone is being quite secretive about what we are making for each other, which I think is adding to the building anticipation of the mid-winter celebrations.



Girls...making mess in the chippy shop.



Early in the month, although I couldn't be sure of the date, an RAF Hercules flew over the base. Zac and I had just returned from adventures at the most easterly end of Bird Island, science apparently. We discarded all our outdoor clothing and headed to the Aga for food and warmth. Through the window we suddenly saw the aeroplane, unexpected, low and green flying directly for us, we waved madly and spoke to the crew via the VHF radio. It was surprisingly exciting, not just seeing such a large and impressive plane 'dipping wings' so close to the floor, but also the idea of the distance they had travelled. They told us that they would return in approximately an hour but by the time they returned it had started to snow again and we heard more than we saw.

Chris celebrated his 25th Birthday on the 12th of May. Early in the day we had a three-way conversation on the HF radio with Rothera, Halley and ourselves (South Georgia were heard, but due to a poor signal they had to give up). It was hard for Bird Island and Halley to squeeze a word through Phil Harding's monologue, amusing though it was! It was a fun hour for us and all and hopefully it is an event that will reoccur during the winter. Good to hear a few familiar voices and catch up with friends from other bases.



View to the west of the Love Shack

On the following Saturday we had a mid-month, overnight outing to the love shack (a luxurious hut to the west of the base); it was a good fun night as we all sat down at the same time for a few hours. No e-mail, work or similar distractions, just good company, food and a drink or two. Fresh snow and a short but pleasant morning walk home. Chris did all the hard work, it began with cleaning the hut a week or so in advance, then cooking a Saturday meal and finally carrying it to the love shack...good call Chris, cheers.

During may we have had a few good snowfalls. The snow has now reached depths sufficient to allow us to ski. The first skiing reconnoitre was (in hindsight) optimistic, fantastic powder snow but sadly just rocks beneath. It was good exercise though, carrying the skis on our backs. The second outing (Chris, Zac and I) was more successful, a gully full of drifted snow, a pair of skis, and two plastic bags provided most of the entertainment, although not all of it. I think Chris' bruise has faded over the last few weeks and he seems to be gaining mobility. Zac, Sarah and I had another more recent outing, the snow conditions were great but the day was overcast and really windy. It was a fun outing and Sarah and I managed to ski all the way to the door of the base.



Really Dancin'



Ice and a slice darling?

After all the skiing we needed to wind down so whilst cleaning the water holding tanks we knocked up a quick Jacuzzi, water jets, bubbles and a few cocktails...very relaxing.

Time on Bird Island is flying by at the moment. It is June 6th today, so I'd better get this newsletter finished. All that remains is to say hello and goodbye to all those at home, M and D. Tom and his chickens and Mr. and Mrs. R. Hunt – congratulations!

Cheers then,
Alex.