



The month began with a beautifully calm and clear night with a full moon. Nights like this are so few and far between you simply have to make the most of them. Zac and I decided to go for a moonlit walk to the top of Tonk Ridge.



Full moon over the base

Looking all around as we climbed the hill, the scene was captivating. There were none of the typical sounds that you come to associate with this part of the island in summer, like the susurrantion of thousands of penguins or the chattering of white-chinned petrels; all that broke the silence was the light crunching of compacting snow underfoot. The moon was full and bright and the stars were infinite in their array, the mountains of South Georgia precipitous and foreboding, and the buildings of base black and lifeless far below. I chatted with Zac in the darkness, both of us taking turns to gulp a mouthful of hot chocolate from a thermos while we absorbed the sights and sounds.

‘...it is a kind of personal identification with the hills themselves, which brings with it a wealth of philosophical content. Above all, in my view, the attraction lies in the memory of these rare moments of intellectual ecstasy which occurs perhaps on a mountain summit, perhaps on a glacier at dawn, or in a lovely moonlit bivouac, and which appear to be the result of a happy coincidence in the rhythm of mind and scene...Such exaltation of feeling is achieved more often, I imagine, and in more normal circumstances by the mind of the creative artist, but for ordinary folk it would seem that it is more readily found in close contact with nature.’

Eric Shipton, ‘Upon that mountain’

We’ve continued to enjoy many excellent sightings of leopard seals and there was great excitement when ‘Pierce’ hauled out on Freshwater Beach. Pierce has been visiting the island off and on for a number of years and judging by his size and the state of his teeth, he is a pretty old guy. We all crouched down nearby, eager to get a good look. Sarah was able to retrieve a tiny tracking device that had been attached to one of his rear flippers. Data from this instrument (which was fitted this time last year) will hopefully provide a good indication of where he has spent the summer months further south. He is a massive beast, his huge head resting somnolently against the snow. With no natural predators they are generally not bothered by the presence of people.



A snoozing beast

We have spent many afternoons honing our skiing technique on the slopes below La Roche. With continued instruction from Alex and Sarah, Zac and I have now mastered the rudiments of the snowplough and can negotiate the turns without ending up with a face full of powder. Bird Island is not the easiest place to ski as the runs are short and snow conditions forever changing, but it has certainly whetted my appetite for the sport.



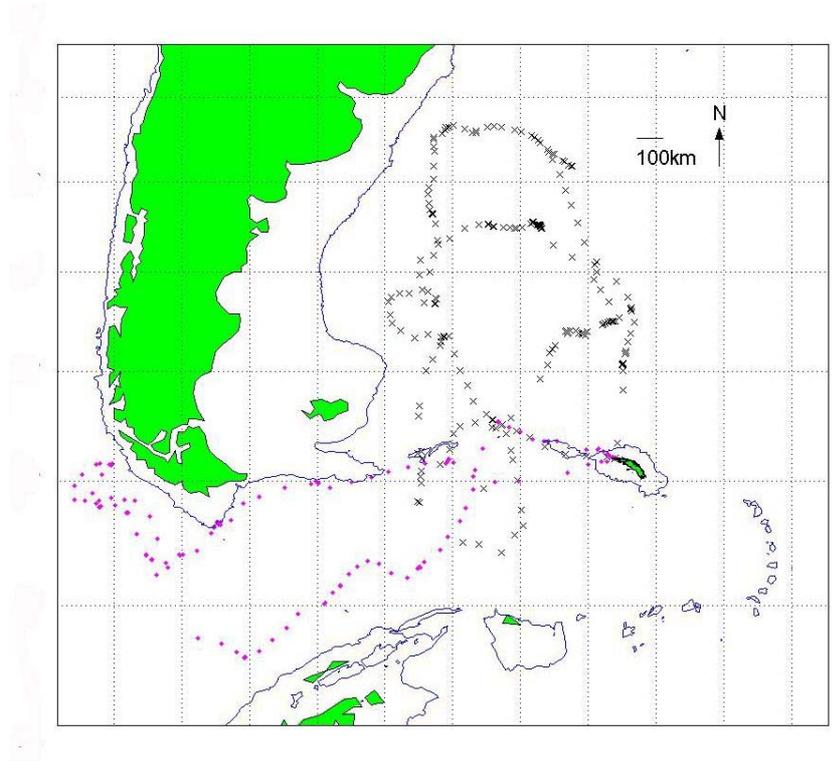
Skiing lessons – turning practice (Zac & Sarah)

In stark contrast to the night on Tonk, a few days later, Alex and I stood together on a rock promontory at Goldcrest Point while being buffeted by a howling southerly gale. At that moment I had the words of Captain Cook's in my head: 'Doomed by nature to everlasting frigidness and never to feel the warmth of the sun's rays, whose horrible and savage aspect I have no words to describe' (Cook's first impressions of South Georgia after landed at Possession Bay on 17th January 1775). Huge waves (some of the biggest I have yet seen from the island) were being whipped up, sending tonnes of green water crashing down repeatedly against the rocks. The lenses of my glasses were soon covered in a fine haze from the salt spray hurled 20 metres or more into the air with each successive roller. We were completely enthralled at the awesome display of power before us. Such conditions appeared not to phase the fur seals that proceeded to come and go from their usual haul-out spots on the rocks with amazing nonchalance. No doubt once they dive below the waves, the noise and confusion of the surface waters are quickly forgotten for the serenity of the submarine world.

The Wandering Albatrosses continue to ferry squid to the island to feed their ever-hungry chicks. After decades of field work on Bird Island their terrestrial breeding activities are well known to us; their day-to-day lives at sea less so. Once they leave dry land they are out of sight for days, even weeks, at a time. Upon return, they may have flown thousands of kilometres. We have shared none of that with them. However, the development of sophisticated tracking device has enabled us to follow their lives at sea to a much greater extend than was previously possible.

Zac has been deploying small GPS (Global Positioning System) loggers to adult Wandering Albatross in order to ascertain the locations of their primary foraging areas. The length of their trips varies depending on the breeding stage and the longest trips occur during incubation of the egg. By any standards they are quite extraordinary. Study the map below. One female (black) during incubation covered a distance of 12071km in 25 days with a maximum speed of

80km/h, and reaching latitude of 35°S (level with Buenos Aires). Another (pink) flew 6928km in 21 days reaching a maximum longitude of 76°W, just off the coast of Patagonia. The open ocean is truly the domain of the albatross, and man can only sit back and marvel at the distances they travel and the speeds with which they navigate the vast ranges of the Southern Ocean.



Foraging trips of two Wandering Albatross from Bird Island

Alex is a keen amateur radio enthusiast, and often to be found in the communication room calling up other stations around the world. The range of HF radio signals are impressive and, with a powerful enough set and favourable atmosphere conditions, you can easily speak to people in the northern hemisphere. Alex has chatted with a number folks (particularly lighthouses) in South America and is in the process of rigging up a new antenna to improve the range so we can speak to people further a field.



'Houston, we have a problem...with hair'

Alex and Zac have spent many hours in the chippy shed constructing a new barbeque, which is big improvement on our former dishevelled unit. Eager to put it through its paces we dined alfresco at the end of the jetty, consuming the beer and beef kebabs with alacrity.



Testing out the new barbeque (a big thumbs up!)

As always, time is flying and we will soon be welcoming the return of the first of the islands feathered summer residents: the Grey-headed Albatrosses. I can hardly believe that I have been living here for nearly two years already and will soon be witnessing the summer breeding cycle for the final time.

That brings an end to the exploits of the BI posse for this month and I'll finish off by sending my love to family and friends back home.

Chris