

BIRD ISLAND OCTOBER 2004



This is the month that Bird Island slips off her winter overcoat, swapping frozen white for boggy brown. The overriding theme being both animals and people gearing up for the summer season. All except the wandering albatrosses that is. The chicks have



successfully resisted the chilling winter winds and now the fluffy down coats are being discarded in favour of proper feathers. The big black chicks (it takes them a number of years to gain the mostly white adult plumage) can be seen all over the island exercising their huge wings ready for a November take off.

But as one group prepares to leave, the rest of the island has started to fill with the sounds of summer. The blackbrowed and greyheaded albatrosses have returned and the empty colonies are now full of noise and colour. With the speed that a short Antarctic summer dictates, by the end of the month these birds are already sitting on eggs. Amongst the other flying residents, the northern giant petrels are also busy incubating their eggs and it looks like it will be a good year for them. The majority of the giant petrels leave the island for winter. Indeed one individual, identified by its leg ring, ended up in New Zealand over 4700 miles away (as the petrel flies). By contrast, the tiny pipits are one of the few creatures that stay on the island all year round. They have already begun their breeding and the first chicks were recently spotted hidden deep in the tussock, away from the prying eyes of the hungry skuas.





On the penguin front, it was a slow start for the gentoos. The first egg was not laid until the 18th, over eight days later than the previous year. However, macaroni penguins are bang on schedule. One of the most spectacular sights on the island is the macaroni penguin colony affectionately named Big Mac. The first male arrived on the 19th of October and there followed the usual exponential rise up to 40 000 just ten days later. What was, at the beginning of the month, a barren expanse of rock is now a cacophony of black and white noise (with a little splash of yellow on top). Timed with this mass arrival, there have been regular sightings of leopard seals in Mac Creek. The hungry seals have been seen patrolling the surf zone looking out for hapless penguins who don't time their landing correctly. One small female leopard seal has hauled out a few times on the beach in front of base. She is now the proud owner of a flipper tag from which we can identify her. Because of their solitary behaviour and remote location very little is known about leopard seals. Through such tagging we are building a unique data set with which to understand and monitor these elusive animals.

On the 31st it was the last of the daily leopard seal observation rounds for the year. There are two reasons for this. Firstly the leopard seals disappear from the island during the summer months and secondly it is now virtually impossible to walk around the beaches. The reason for this? The return of everyone's favourite, the fur seals! OK so I exaggerate slightly. Fur seals do not have the best reputation with many people who encounter them. Their constant bad moods, pungent smell, and tendency to chase people means not everybody appreciates them as much as me. But generally they are just misunderstood and only by working closely with them for a length of time are their hidden charms (very well hidden in some cases) revealed.

Although not usually an abundant breeder on Bird Island, it has been a good year for elephant seals. Twenty-two pups have been born on the island so far (equalling the highest number recorded). Beginning life looking like empty black bags, they suckle almost constantly for three weeks. As the days go by the Mums become smaller and smaller whilst their little charges expand so much that they look like they are going to almost explode.



The rapid rise in animal activity is mirrored in the human inhabitants. Returning birds need to be recorded along with who is partnering whom and who has laid an egg on which nest. All this has kept Issac busy for most of the month. Chris has also dabbled in similar work with the giant petrels but his main role is with the penguins. Since the return of the macs he has been visiting Little Mac (the main penguin study colony) every day, checking for newcomers. For Sarah it was not the return of seals that brought the beginning of the summer season but more the input of myself. I have returned to Bird Island after an absence of 4 years to carry out some work on the fur seals. In this species there is a huge size difference between the two sexes with males reaching up to 200 kg compared to only 50 kg for the biggest females. Although we have studied the movements of female fur seals for many years, the males have been



largely ignored. With the development of new technology that can transmit information about an animal's diving behaviour as well as its location we can now see where and how these big males forage. So far the information streaming back from the satellites has shown big behavioural differences between the sexes with males reaching depths of 350m compared to females that rarely dive beyond 150m. This

information will help us understand the role of these important predators within the South Georgia ecosystem.

But it is not all animals; Alex has been busy making sure the base is in tiptop shape, patching up the aging facilities for just one last summer. Next winter the guys will hopefully be in a brand spanking new building. One of the great things about the base at Bird Island is its small size which means we all have to muck in to keep the place ticking, e.g. refuelling, waste disposal, cleaning and cooking. The guys (and gal) are fantastic cooks and, despite a lack of fresh ingredients, the culinary offerings have been superb. Honestly, if it were not for the active lifestyle I would be challenging the elephant seals in the waist department. With money having less use than a chocolate teapot an alternative currency has been developed with which to gamble. A simple rule, the loser bakes the winner a cake. Sarah took the prize this month, for seriously overestimating the weight of a male fur seal (people will bet on anything) she made a themed cake. The theme? Well as it was the last week in which she did not have to collect seal poo, take look at the picture and guess!



As well as high stakes gambling we have also managed to keep ourselves entertained in other ways. Darts, dice and card games have all featured as well as a musical night during which Chris tickled the ivories. Having all the musical talent of the spice girls myself, I saved my blushes and wrote a little ditty in homage to my fellow islanders:

Battered by winds, and shrouded in Fog
It's covered in tussock, meadows and bog
Bird Island Bird Island, the isle of the seal
Home to our gang, who are keeping it real

Seals for Sarah, and Alberts for Zac
Alex on Station and Chris in Big Mac
A hell of a team, but though they look well

They are starting to lose it and frankly they smell

You can't have it all, brawn, brains and looks

They're facially challenged but excellent cooks.

So if your marooned, and in need of a fix

Forget about this lot and go find some chicks (albatross chicks that is)

(Please forgive me Pam Ayres).

It is hard to describe to people just what an amazing place this is. As I write I can see from the window much of what makes this island magical. A group of young fur seals play around a large lump of ice grounded in the bay. One after the other they leap on the slippery surface then, turning, they slide back into the water with a seemingly inexhaustible energy. On the beach a two-week-old elephant seal rubs his hind flippers together but this does not stop him suckling from his Mum. He has to get as much milk from her as he can for soon she will abandon him to his fate, and he will have to moult alone on the beach. Well he will not be totally alone, in fact, quite the reverse. Hormonally charged male fur seals are already beginning to gather, fighting for a small patch of beach that will allow them access to the 60, 000 + females that will soon come ashore to breed. Come evening and squadrons of gentoo penguins porpoise into the bay, leaping from the water before shuffling comically up the beach to rest up for the night. Lastly, with the island living up to its name, the sky is full of birds. A couple of skuas swoop over the base like jet fighters dog fighting over the rights to the air. In contrast, a pair of light-mantled-sooty albatrosses gracefully arc around the bay in synchronised flight displaying total affinity for each other's movements. We are really very lucky people to be here.

Iain x