



Bird Island Winterers Letter - 2013

Greetings from our magical little island in the Southern Ocean! The current wintering team of Jerry, Hannah, Steph & Craig are looking forward to welcoming you when the ship arrives.

The Island

Bird Island lies just off the northwest tip of the South Georgia mainland. It is renowned for being wet, shrouded in mist and very muddy! Admittedly this is often true, but we do get our fair share of gorgeous days with calm seas and blue skies, which make for ideal conditions for spotting whales from the cliffs. However, one of the best things about the Bird Island climate is that we can, and often do, truly see four seasons in one day. If the weather is lousy in the morning, the chances are it won't stay that way for too long. Strong winds frequently batter us, often straight from the icy south or southwest. Typically this happens when a ship is due and needs flat seas and no swell to work the cargo! The island is 5km long and 1.4km at its widest point and the terrain is steep and mountainous, rising to 356m at the top of Roché Peak. It is amazing how much variety of landscape is packed in to the small island: whereas the western end the island is dominated by tussock grass and grassy meadows, the prime sites for nesting wandering albatrosses, the other end is all steep scree slopes rising up from the south coast to a continuous cliff face that runs the length of the north side of the island. Year-round temperatures range between extremes of about -10°C in winter to $+10^{\circ}\text{C}$ over the summer season, although more typical temperatures would be -4°C during the winter and $+5^{\circ}\text{C}$ in the summer. The island's flora is almost entirely tussock grass, with areas of shorter meadow grass, moss banks and lichens on the higher, rocky slopes. The main reason the place is so special however, and why research has been going on here since 1958, is the fauna.



The Wildlife

As the name would suggest, there are a lot of birds on and around Bird Island, ranging from tiny South Georgia pipits (the world's most southerly songbirds), to the enormous wandering albatrosses with their wingspan of over 3 metres. During the summer the ridges, hills and meadows are alive with their evocative and powerful displays, from the returning breeders in October and November to the young, previously unpaired birds in February and March. As well as the flying varieties, flightless birds also abound. Bird Island is home to a vast 80,000 strong Macaroni Penguin colony, known locally as *Big Mac*, which lies just across an inlet from the smaller *Little Mac*. These charismatic, if a little angry at times(!), birds can be heard like the droning of a distant bee swarm from a long way away, and the smell takes some getting used to. Around eight thousand gentoo penguins also call our island home and unlike the fickle macaronis, some hang around all year, including right through the winter. Their main colonies on Johnson Beach and Square Pond are a sight and smell to behold, but

the fluffy grey and white chicks will melt even the coldest of hearts!

The summer months see an explosion of breeding all over the island with black-browed, grey-headed and light-mantled sooty albatrosses livening up the steeper slopes in their colonies. The sound of the party-horn-like black-brow calls as they come in to land and annoy a neighbour will stay with you forever, whilst the evocative and haunting calls of the displaying sooties as they call to their mates is an otherworldly sound. The flatter areas of the island are colonised by both northern and southern giant petrels (arguably the most charismatic birds you will ever meet!) and brown skuas abound around the whole island, alerting you to their nest sites by high-pitched screeching and the occasional dive-bomb.

The stars of the show for a few months in the summer are the fur seals. It is incredible how much the wildlife can dictate life on Bird Island; not just in terms of the fieldwork, but also with regard to just getting around the island, even working around base. Antarctic fur seals were almost hunted to extinction up until the early 20th century when there were probably only a few hundred left, but since then have undergone a population explosion on an incredible scale. There are perhaps around three million Antarctic fur seals nowadays, and 95% of the world's population breeds on South Georgia. Bird Island was one of their remaining strongholds around seventy years ago, so we live right at the headquarters of the world's population of Antarctic fur seals. The beach in front of base begins to fill up in early-November, with territory-holding males weighing up to 200kg fighting for the prime spots on the beach. From mid-November to late-December the females arrive to give birth to little black pups. The beaches are packed with seals and are almost completely impassable throughout the peak of the breeding season. With so much life around the two things that strike the visitor most are the noise and the smell – the pungent pong of territory-holding bull fur seals is unique and indescribable, and the sound of female seals calling to their pups at 2am will be a fond memory of your summers here, honestly! The fur seals get a bad reputation from short-term BI visitors, as the males can be fiercely aggressive and defensive of their territories and their ladies, but they are amazing animals that command respect. Most people who spend any time on the island, really grow to love the fur seals after a while – especially the gorgeous little black pups in the summer time! Most of the fur seals have departed by the beginning of April, meaning that the island becomes much quieter in winter. From March to November (although more so during the winter months of June to September) you will have the chance to see one of Antarctica's most ferocious predators, the leopard seal, which hauls out on the beaches and pieces of ice in the bays during winter. The leps are drawn to Bird Island because of the presence of penguins and young fur seals that form the biggest part of their winter diet!



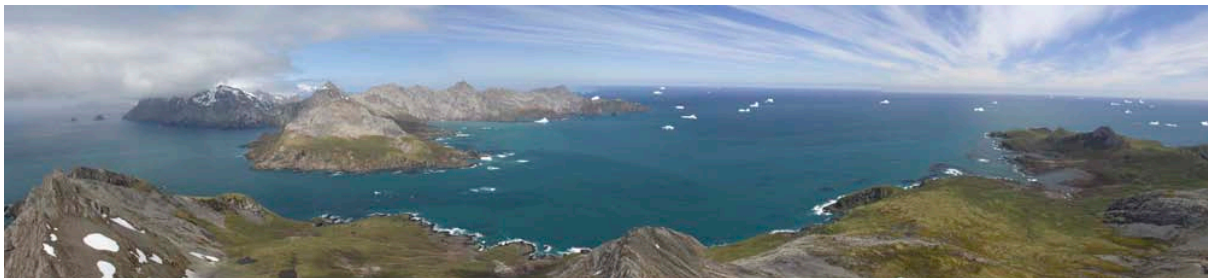
The Research Station

The main building of the base on Bird Island (known as Prince House, after Pete Prince) is fairly new – it was completed in 2005. The base accommodates ten at capacity, with two extra temporary berths for use for short periods. We have a palatial kitchen (the stove is gas-fired) with all mod cons and a comfortable lounge/dining area with a large collection of books and films to unwind to. A large open plan office occupies one end of the base and while desk space during winter is not a problem, you will have to be prepared to play musical chairs over summer when we are at bursting capacity. If you have a laptop it is worth bringing this as it can be used to access the network and internet, either plugged in or wirelessly in most of the rooms on base, including bedrooms. Then there are the other rooms that you would expect to find in any house back home: two bathrooms and showers, a laundry and porch. We also have a large and efficient drying room/changing area, a water tank room for our water storage and treatment, and a boiler room, containing the boilers that deal with our heating. We have a solar water heating system on the roof, which supplies most of our hot water during the long, balmy days of summer (hmm...). At one end of the building we have a dual-purpose animal handling/wet laboratory facility plus a dry/chemicals laboratory, which are well supplied and more than adequate for our needs. There are also two dry food stores which contain our summer and winter food supplies and the freezers with meat, vegetables and other frozen food. Sadly we've had to say goodbye to one

of Bird Island's most enduring features - the famous Bird Island toilet, a.k.a. the Jetty Bog. Reputedly David Attenborough's favourite toilet in the world, the Bog was removed during the recent jetty rebuild and logistical difficulties meant that it could not be re-installed in its old location. However, the Jetty Bog has been saved for posterity and is now sitting at one end of Prince House while we decide what to do with it.

Our second major building (Beck House) consists of five rooms; the refuse-compactor room for waste management, cargo packing and storage; the travel store for field equipment and emergency supplies; an extensive workshop; a technical/materials store; and finally a biological supplies store for science equipment. There is a small outdoor food store known as The Dorchester, and the final building houses the generators and the fire suppression pumps and is situated well away from the main base building. Our water supply is mostly from rainwater which runs off the roof of the base. During times of lean rainfall, especially during winter, we get water from the streams. In winter months we sometimes have to break through the ice to get to the water underneath. The water then goes through a series of filters and ultra-violet treatment so you can rest assured that it is free of fragments of dead seal!

We do not have a doctor on base, although the ship's doctor will normally be available for medical consultation during visits by the BAS ships. It is likely that you will undergo some advanced first aid training before coming south, and we have extensive medical supplies on base to deal with most medical situations. It is worth bearing in mind that tussac grass is a flowering plant that does produce pollen, which can badly people with hay fever. Although the season is short it is definitely worth bringing supplies of your preferred antihistamine or other treatments if you are susceptible to pollen allergy.



Communications and IT

Although remote in a geographical sense, contact with the outside world from BI is very good and has come on in leaps and bounds since the introduction of the new satellite communications system. Each permanent assistant has their own workstation with full access to the internet and the BI network server. Each bedroom is also fitted with network and internet access ports, so a laptop is definitely advisable and great for unwinding with a DVD in the evening and organising your personal music and photos. We also have a wireless system so it may be useful if your laptop has wireless network access.

The bandwidth available through the satellite internet connection is fairly small. During the summer when up to twelve people can be using the 'net at a time this can be fairly limiting so accessing complex websites (webcams, news sites, facebook) or downloading non work-related items can be problematic and should be left to quiet times. In the winter this is less of a problem. Large files such as video and large images may be sent between BI and Cambridge via datascheds that are programmed regularly.

Bring plenty of blank CDs and DVDs for backing up your photographs and for music. An external hard drive with plenty of memory space (2 terabytes is not excessive) is definitely a worthwhile purchase.

The main office space has a telephone; there is a phone in the lounge and one in the lab and Base Commanders/Comms office. All of these have UK Cambridge phone numbers and can be called from the UK for the price of a landline-to-landline call in the UK. This is great if you want to speak with

people in the UK, you simply ask them to call you. However, to make an outgoing non-work related call you must set up an account with a phone card company. BAS recommends the BT Odyssey card, but cheaper deals are available (e.g. Post Office phonecards). This will be explained to you at conference in Cambridge before you travel south where all the details will be provided. You can use your BT Odyssey card to call home for around 14p per minute (UK or similar rate for other international numbers) and this will be billed to your bank account or debit/credit card. Other phone cards can be purchased on line when you are here for cheaper calls too, although the BT card is a good idea. Incoming calls can be received at no extra cost. MSN messenger and other chat programs work well from Bird Island and are an easy way to keep in regular contact with the UK.

Post can be received and sent, although ships arrive only a handful times in summer, and generally not at all in the winter, so do not expect to receive post between April and October. Make sure your family and friends write frequently to the Falkland Islands address anyway, as there is nothing worse than opening the mail sack and not getting anything, especially if the others get loads of parcels and photos from home. By the same token you can send out letters, parcels, DVDs packed with video clips and photos, and other goodies so your family and friends can keep up-to-date with your life on Bird Island.



Recreation

People at home often ask us whether we get bored here, with just the four of us, during the winter. We undisputedly agree that boredom is *never* an issue. There are always things to do on Bird Island, including lots for the long winter evenings. Perhaps you would like to enjoy a relaxing board game, cards or darts (Bird Island ~~has~~ used to have a famously strong darts team!).

For the DIY enthusiast there's plenty of scope for "project" making in the workshop. Picture-frames are a nice thing to make for folk back home or for birthday presents for the others on base, and we have plenty of nice woods and materials sent in to do this. If there is anything you particularly enjoy or want to try e.g. learning a language or instrument, drawing, making models, etc. then bring down the relevant bits and bobs. It is a good idea to check with us what we have here, or with an ex-Islander in Cambridge.

If you are wintering, you will be here for our Midwinter's week holiday. This is our chance for a week of celebrations, games and relaxing and is a refreshing break from our usual day to day work. In the weeks running up to Midwinter, it is customary to make a midwinter present for another member of the base, to be presented on Midwinter's Day. We make just one present each (the names are pulled out of a hat at the start of winter to decide who is making for who) so all efforts can be concentrated into producing one nice present. It is worth thinking of ideas in advance, so you can bring down any special equipment/ materials/ fixings you might like to use. Presents this winter ranged from a painting, framed seal pictures and map, knife set and case to set of cards and shot glass. Previous years gifts have ranged included carved wooden wildlife, jewellery, furniture, clocks, games, models, home-made books, pictures and all manner of other interesting and original ideas.

We have a huge video and DVD collection which would be impossible to get through in any amount of time spent down here. Bring a few favourites and some new releases with you but check with current winterers before you buy as we often have numerous copies of the same film. Also check with other newcomers to make sure you are not purchasing the same films to bring down. Comedy, drama and nature programmes are always popular, again please contact us for a list of what we already have before buying anything new.

Everybody takes it in turns to cook. With cooking duties comes the chance to choose the nature of the noise pollution on the stereo, so bring plenty of CDs, MP3s or whatever your format of choice - with which to entertain your fellow base members. The bio lab is also equipped with a stereo so you can

sing along out of tune whilst sorting vomit and poo. As with videos, you will soon tire of even your most treasured pop, so make sure you stock up well and persuade a few friends to keep you in touch with 'the scene'. The base has an incredible selection of music on its jukebox server, and you might discover new genres, artists or composers that you had never considered before.

We have a good selection of literature (including lots of electronic books), which even the most avid reader could not exhaust, so do not feel you need to bring 2 years supply of reading material! The choice is pretty varied ranging through general interest, paperback novels, science, and polar history, but bringing your favourite authors or new releases would increase your choice. BAS supply a range of magazines from New Scientist and National Geographic through to FHM, Cosmopolitan and Q but the paperboy only delivers once a year, so don't expect to keep up with the current fashions! We tend to dish the magazines out month-by-month, so that you get them a year late, i.e. last years subscriptions will be delivered in November, so the first magazines to be made available will be November's issues from the year before!

If you play a musical instrument then bring it down. Playing a few tunes is a great way to relax, as well as entertain / annoy the other base members. There is an acoustic guitar belonging to the base and there is a good quality electric piano. Bring down accessories such as spare strings, plectrums and capos. Percussion instruments are always welcome.

If you are lucky enough to be wintering, then there is a chance that you will go skiing or snowboarding. Bird Island is not renowned for its ski slopes, as rocks, tussac lumps and albatross nests pose interesting obstacles. However, we sometimes get good powder conditions during July, August and September and much fun can be had either on skis, boards or toboggans. We have a couple of new short SnowBlade-type skis, about 1 meter in length with detachable climbing-skis for helping you get uphill, as well some older alpine touring skis. If you already have your own gear it is worth bring it down but don't spend lots of money on really expensive new kit, as the terrain doesn't warrant it and it is likely that you may wreck your shiny gear on rocks whilst avoiding the albatross chicks! Helmets and wrist guards are available on station. If you're a complete novice it might be worth taking a few lessons from a qualified instructor before getting here, as BI is not the ideal place to learn; being able to turn and dodge is a very handy skill! We have some good instructional videos on base, but nothing prepares you more than a bit of the real thing. Also bear in mind the lack of ski lifts mean a 45 minute battle uphill through the snow to your starting point for 3 minutes of downhill fun! Plastic sledges are also loads of fun, or you could try building your own! There is also potential for ice skating on the ponds.

Photographs of friends, family and pets are often overlooked in people's packing frenzy, but they make excellent wall decorations. If you have any slides or digital photos of interest e.g. other bases, adventures or holidays you have been on or simply growing-up pictures, then these always provide an evening's entertainment and a welcome change from seals and albatrosses.

The beach in front of the base, when clear of fur seals in the winter, is a good size for kites and ball sports (BAS provides footballs, rugby and tennis balls, a cricket bat), whilst we have rowing, cycling and running machines indoors – outdoor running is unfortunately more-or-less limited to laps of the beach. We have an outdoor hot tub which gets filled periodically, and is a nice way to relax in the evening, so it is worth bringing a swimming costume – despite the lack of swimming facilities. Quite often we have parties that may or may not involve fancy dress. If you have space it is worth throwing in a few items. We have a dressing up box but fresh looks are always approved of.



Photography

Many Bird Islanders are keen photographers, with digital SLR's. It's good to have enough memory with you when you are out and about, so we would suggest investing in at least 4GB of memory card storage (it is amazing how quickly you can fill one of these up during even a relatively short walk around the island). It is a good idea to bring at least two or three memory cards, in case one develops a problem and so that you have a spare if you fill one up. 16GB cards are probably useful if you plan to shoot a lot of video. Blank DVDs or external hard drive are very useful for backing-up. Also, bring at least one spare battery. There are card readers on base but not enough for one each. The base has a digital compact camera, a digital SLR with several lenses, a 35mm film SLR and a digital video camera, and they are all available for personal use. There are several camera nerds on the island this winter, so if you are planning to buy any equipment and want any advice on what works well here then please feel free to ask us.

Unfortunately we no longer have the chemicals required for processing film, although there is some darkroom equipment available on the island. We do have an excellent colour printer that is suitable for printing photos, and plenty of A4 photo paper. The printer can print to A3 size, but we do not currently have any A3 paper, so if you think you might want a giant picture of an albatross for your bedroom wall then you might want to bring some A3 photo paper with you.

The wildlife is usually very approachable so a zoom of more than 300mm is not normally required to get those close-up shots but ideal for capturing whale sightings. A compact pocket-sized point-and-shoot digital camera is a good thing to bring as you don't always want to lug your SLR around everywhere with you, and it can act as a backup in the event one gets damaged. It is a good idea to choose one that can record decent quality video to capture the comical antics of the wildlife that so often is lost in photographs. Do get a good quality camera case for your cameras, as it can be a wet and muddy place at times. Many compact cameras now advertise themselves as waterproof / splashproof, which can be really useful. Spare or rechargeable batteries for your camera are a good idea and there are plenty of chargers on base.

The base has standard 240V UK electrics. We are currently running on 24 hour power but this may change in future, with the generators being turned off overnight and vital systems such as comms being powered by a UPS system.

If you have decent binoculars, bring your own. There are pairs for fieldwork use but they are not brilliant. There is a decent spotting scope on base.



Clothing

BAS will provide almost everything you need to clothe yourself for the great outdoors, but you will want to include your own indoor clothing. The base is well heated throughout the year, so shorts and t-shirts are not such a daft idea as they initially sound. Comfortable casual clothing (Tracksuit trousers etc) is great for everyday use, and a pair of slippers, or indoor-only shoes is a must. Most people go for flip-flops or sandals. You will be fitted for your outdoor clothes at BAS so will be able to see what you are getting in your kitbag and decide from there if you need any extras. One failure here seems to be the provision of a good outdoor hat, so you may want to invest in one of these. With the albatross and penguin work you will often be walking, usually at quite a pace, for a long time carrying a heavy pack. Throughout the summer, with a waterproof coat and waterproof sallopettes things can get pretty sweaty so field assistants usually wear shorts or just a base-layer under their waterproof kit. A good selection of durable shorts is therefore advisable. We can wash clothes any time and there is a separate washing machine for heavily soiled outdoor gear. Saturday dinner and special occasions tend to be a bit more formal, so bring something vaguely respectable for these nights.

There is a good range of spare field equipment and clothing but not much at the small end of the size range. If below the size of average male it's worth investing in a few more sets of thermals and especially gloves.

To maintain the body beautiful we have *most* basic toiletries that you will need (soap, shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash etc), but NOT deodorant, shower gel or conditioner, and only basic Bic razors. The shampoo provided is not top quality, so you might want to bring a few bottles of your favourite brand as well. Sanitary towels and tampons are provided for the winterers, but summer-only visitors are required to bring their own. Liquid shave gel is provided and there is a very limited supply of shaving foam, so again it might be worth bringing your own. However, many men opt for the 'bearded' look during their stay on Bird Island anyway. You might want to consider two-and-a-half years worth of underwear too, as this is often overlooked! Thick walking socks are provided but you will go through a few pairs.

There are always budding barbers and hairdressers on Bird Island and although their skills may not be up to standard of the salons you choose to visit at home it is a lot cheaper...! There are hair clippers on base, and most of the boys tend to just keep their hair short, or use the isolation as the perfect excuse to grow it long!

Food

The quantity and variety of food on Bird Island is inconceivable, until you see our freezers and dry food stores. We have everything that could be required, from sausages to soy sauce, beef to bacon, chocolate to cheese, and Bovril to Brussels sprouts! We eat very well, particularly in the early summer when the new arrivals tend to overestimate quantities when cooking dinner (far preferable to underestimating them!). Lunches tend to be help-yourself affairs, often with bread, cheese and leftovers from the previous night's feast, but it is not uncommon for someone to rustle up a pot of soup or bacon sandwiches, which is lovely to return to after a morning on the seal study beach or in a penguin colony. Whilst BAS provides an excellent variety and quality of foodstuffs, particularly for meat-eaters, you may find that if you enjoy special delicacies they will be in short supply or lacking entirely. Keep in mind that fresh food is limited to the frequency of ship visits, although things that keep well (potatoes, carrots and onions) often last from one ship call to the next, and for the majority of the winter. We suggest tucking away a few special items in your personal box for enjoyment and celebratory events (ie. fill it with sweets). Remember that your box has to traverse the tropics so they must be items that keep well, and also bear in mind that the BAS ships will not transport bottles of liquid in your personal box. We have plenty of recipe books here but if you have a favourite style of cooking then it might be worth bringing a specialist recipe book with you. Many recipes are of course available online. We are very fond of cakes for tea breaks so if you have any special cake recipes they are always gratefully received. As has been mentioned before, cooking is done on a rota system, and the cook of the day is responsible for making bread. Bread making is something of a dark art, but you will quickly get the hang of it, and we have a variety of flours and different nuts and seeds to make different sorts of bread.

If you have any questions don't hesitate to drop us a line (e-mail addresses are below) and we will try our best for answers. Bird Island is a brilliant place, lots of fun, lots of wildlife and we're all absolutely sure you will love your time here. We look forward to meeting you soon!



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