

Antarctica, South Georgia and the Falkland Islands

Holiday Highlights

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Day 1-2 The journey there and arrival in Ushuaia

We meet up at Gatwick Airport and all agree we have been looking forward to this trip for so long it is hard to believe it is finally here! The journey ahead is a long one and the connection at Madrid is rather tight so we are somewhat concerned when we see the announcement that our first flight is delayed by nearly an hour! This will make the connection very tight indeed but, once in the air, our minds are put at rest when we are told we will be met at Madrid and led straight to the plane for Buenos Aires which will wait for us if necessary. This is exactly what happens and we are soon on our second flight of the day, this one a long one and no sooner have we had our evening meal than they turn off the lights and we try and get some sleep. At Buenos Aires there is some confusion about whether we need to pick up our bags, especially when most of our bags appear on the conveyor belt ... but not all of them! So it is a great relief when we arrive at Ushuaia to find all the bags arrive there ok.

Outside the airport we are met by a guy who takes us through the town of Ushuaia and on up the winding road to our hotel passing our first birds of the trip ... Kelp Gulls and a couple of Southern Lapwings. It is lovely to be here and look out of the huge windows at the view down over the town and into the bay with all the ships. We are all hungry so we order a snack from the bar but it is hard to concentrate on what we are eating as there are birds outside! Chimango Caracaras fly past every so often and a pair of Black-faced Ibis come wheeling up over the town as well as more Kelp Gulls.

The hotel is surrounded by Southern Beech forest and we are keen to see what birds it holds so after a short break to freshen up we meet at 5.00pm for a wander around the hotel grounds and into the trees. Below the hotel is a small area of rough ground with scrubby bushes and there are at least three Fire-eyed Diucons here. A small flock of Black-chinned Siskins are twittering in the trees nearby and we get a brief glimpse of Patagonian Sierra-Finch plus close views

of a Thorn-tailed Rayadito. There are House Sparrows around the hotel but more common are the Rufous-collared Sparrows that are feeding at the edge of the road.

We head up the road a little way and a few Chilean Swallows flit overhead, then a Turkey Vulture passes over and we get a brief glimpse of a Southern Caracara. Further up we find a delightful walk through the forest following a stream. There are some lovely plants here including masses of Greater Burnet, also known as Stick-tight, with hundreds of circular seed heads covered in prickles. In the trees there are clumps of False Mistletoe and lots of orangey looking balls called Darwin's Fungus. We find Yellow Violet, Rainberry (or Magellanic Strawberry), Prickly Heath, a small Gunnera known as Devil's Strawberry and Dog Orchid, a lovely white flower reminiscent of a Trilium. The wood itself is delightful, the trees have remarkably small leaves and it feels very natural with lots of dead wood lying beneath the trees and sunlight dappling the ground. We see Southern House Wren, get some exceptionally close views of Thorn-tailed Rayadito and find a White-crested Elaenia showing off his white crest very nicely. Soon time is running out and we head back to the hotel ready for our evening meal, though first Irene is keen to have a look from the tower above the hotel. The view is superb looking in one direction down to the harbour and either side there are spectacular snow capped mountains ... the southern end of the Andes. As we scan the harbour we suddenly realise that the ship coming into the bay is the MS Andrea! This will be our home for the next three weeks so we are more than a little interested. It looks lovely though you can't help thinking is that it doesn't look very big! There appears to be lots of deck space for watching the birds so that's good! We enjoy an excellent meal before heading to bed ready for a good nights sleep.

Day 3 Ushuaia, Tierra-del Fuego National Park and setting sail down the Beagle Channel. Some of us meet up before breakfast for a bit more birding around the hotel and are greeted by a Patagonian Sierra-Finch singing from the tree top outside. There are several Austral Thrushes including some young birds, we have another chance to see the Thorn-tailed Rayadito and then a Tufted Tit-Tyrant appears flitting around the bushes. There are other birds we saw yesterday including lots of Kelp Gulls, but a Dolphin Gull also flies over and a Southern Lapwing is further down the road sounding a bit agitated. Russell sees a couple of birds that sound like Grey-hooded Sierra-Finches.

After an excellent buffet breakfast we are met outside by Laura, (also known as Crazy Horse!) who is to be our guide for the morning, taking us into Ushuaia and the Tierra del Fuego National Park. Initially we are driven down through the town and Laura tells us a bit of the history of the place, about how it was originally a penal colony then several factories appeared. They shipped in the parts from all over the world, but put the final product together here as they could then be sold without having to pay any duty. Tourism is now the main employer, there are

new hotels springing up all the time and the population is increasing rapidly. Certainly you can tell that there are new buildings going up all round the edge of the town and we pass through a lot of this to get to the coast where we are going to do a little birding. The wind is fierce down here and we try to do as much as we can from inside the van as outside it is hard to hold the binoculars steady. This works very well and soon we are adding lots of new birds to the growing list. South American Terns are chasing a Chilean Skua which lands nearby allowing us good views of its gingery underparts. A small group of Crested Ducks are feeding where a stream enters the sea and there is a pair of Kelp Geese, the male gleaming white. A flock of Flightless Steamer-Ducks are resting on the shore, there are lots of Dolphin Gulls, a pair of Magellanic Oystercatchers, Chimango and Southern Caracaras, a Southern Giant Petrel and some distant White-rumped Sandpipers. On a lawn beside a house are a pair of Austral Negritos, the female reminiscent of a female Stonechat, but the male is wonderful ... black with a bright chestnut back.

We set off again in the direction of the Tierra del Fuego National Park stopping en route to admire another very close Southern Caracara. Laura is also very good on her plants and we stop to look at Yellow Orchid, Pale Green Orchid and more of the same species we saw yesterday including sheets of the Gunnera. There are bushes of Box-leaved Barberry, some Gentiennellas called Native Gentian only just in flower and large Cabbage Daisies beside the streams. The wind doesn't seem too bad up here and although we get the odd shower of rain the tops of the mountains come into view and they are spectacular! We scan for Condors but without any luck though there is the odd Turkey Vulture. There are lots of Austral Thrushes and we get excellent views of yet another Southern Caracara which Ian stalks to get a photo and comes back with some astonishing shots of just its head! There are more Rayaditos, a Southern House Wren, Fire-eyed Diucon and lots of Black-chinned Siskins. We find a big flock of Rufous-collared Sparrows with both Grey-hooded and Patagonian Sierra Finches amongst them, then find another Austral Negrito while Barry spots a Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant. We continue further up the valley pausing to enjoy the sight of several Chiloe Wigeon and a Yellow-billed Pintail on the river then arrive at a camp-ground which is a Magallanic Woodpecker site. Despite our best efforts they elude us though we do see a lovely pair of Austral Parakeets in compensation, lots of Patagonian Sierra-Finches and our first mammal... Rabbits!

Lunch is booked at the Lennox Hotel so we head back to town while Laura does impressions of some of the birds for us ... and some of the animals! Now we know why she is called Crazy Horse! Lunch is excellent with a view over the harbour and afterwards, while a few people have a quick look round the shops, some of us head to the shore to see what birds we can find. As we walk, a Blue-and-White Swallow flies over our heads, then in the lagoon there are several Crested Ducks, a Rock Shag, Brown-hooded Gulls, some Flying Steamer-Ducks which look much slimmer than their flightless counterparts, and

lots of South American Terns. We get a brief view of a Dark-bellied Cinclodes then run for cover as it starts to rain, stopping briefly as two South American Fur Seals leap out of the water!

It is now time to board our ship and we walk down through the rain to join the queue. Once on board we have a coffee and find our rooms, then there is a briefing by Brad, our expedition leader, who introduces his team. There are several of them - Kevin the ornithologist, Colin the Cetacean man, Juan and Dick the two Geologists, Gustavo the Marine Biologist, Damien the historian and several others who will help us board the zodiacs, work on reception or work on the bridge etc. Next we get a safety briefing and are told that at 6.30pm there will be a lifeboat drill which we must all attend. Once this is finished a few of us head outside to scan around and see what birds we can pick up before we leave. There are several King Shags, both Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatcher, lots of Skuas including some definite Chileans and also some that might be Subantarctic. There are a few Great Grebes and we get great views of Southern Giant Petrels. One poor Rock Shag gets dived on by a Chilean Skua every time it surfaces.

At about 7:30pm we finally set sail and start on our way down the Beagle Channel. There are a small number of Magellanic Penguins in the water, but by now they are serving dinner so we head inside. I find it incredibly difficult to stay indoors as there is so much to look for and Ian and I make occasional dashes outside when we spot things through the window ... seeing the first Black-browed Albatrosses, a couple of Sooty Shearwaters and hundreds of King Shags. Eventually I wonder if I am perhaps not being as sociable as I should be and come back in just in time for the kitchen staff to appear with a large birthday cake! Should have guessed someone would be plotting. It is very nicely decorated and instead of the usual little candles it has something more like a firework on top! I also get a kiss on each cheek from the Maitre-de!

Having finished the cake we go through to the library to do the checklist, then have a quick last look outside and see a very distant colony of Magellanic Penguins on the end of an island. As the light finally fades at around 10:30pm we head in and to bed, but before going to sleep we take our travel sickness tablets and put everything away off the shelves as we have been warned that during the night, as we leave the Beagle Channel, we will be heading into rough seas and once beyond Cape Horn then the forecast is for it to get even worse! We have been warned!!!

Day 4 Drakes Passage

I would guess that most people probably awake as Jane and I do in the middle of the night when we are nearly flung out of bed! The ship leans right over one way, stays there for several seconds then rocks back, creaking ominously, only to lean the other way causing anything not nailed down to slide across the room or fall over. It isn't even straightforward to stay in bed and the rest of night is pretty

much sleepless as we hang on to the side of the mattress in an attempt to stay put! Some people spend the whole of the rest of the day in their cabins while others venture up at breakfast time to attempt to eat something. The waiters are incredible, somehow managing to bring food to us as we jam ourselves into our seats. Arriving at the table they spray a little water onto the table cloth so the plate will stick but things are falling over everywhere and every few minutes there is a horrendous crash of breaking crockery coming from the galley!

The waves outside the windows are enormous and troughs scarily deep as you look down into them. We are told later that it is a force 10 to 11 storm, that the ship was listing up to 47° and the waves were 45 feet high! They certainly look it as they fill the view through the window, many hitting the front of the ship sending spray right over the top of the ship and smashing against the windows. Later people are heard to say it was worth going through as it makes you realise where you are! After all, we can certainly say we have experienced Drake's Passage in the weather it is famous for. I'm not convinced they were thinking this at the time!

Astonishingly, looking out of the windows at the incredibly forces of nature going on outside, there are birds skimming through the spray and gliding through the troughs as if to say "What's the matter? This isn't rough, this is just nice for flying in." Wandering and Black-browed Albatrosses appear occasionally looking totally in control of the elements and little Antarctic Prions whiz along the troughs between the waves. We are impressed but we are not allowed outside to look at them.

Most of the day the ship seems almost deserted and I think we are all delighted when some time during the night conditions calm enormously and we manage to get some sleep. But it has certainly been a day we will be talking about when we get home!

Day 5 Drake's Passage and approaching the Antarctic Peninsula

What a difference! We wake up to find that the weather is much calmer and although the sea is still choppy it is nothing like yesterday and we can get out on deck and check out the birds. There are several Black-browed Albatrosses in the wake of the ship, dozens of Antarctic Prions, the occasional Blue Petrel which are easy to pick out with their white-tipped tails, White-chinned Petrels and Russell picks out a young albatross which we soon realise is a Grey-headed by the all-dark bill and grey head.

Breakfast is excellent and is a buffet with cereal, lots of fruit, croissants, toast, bacon, eggs, hash browns etc. and after eating very little yesterday everyone is hungry. After breakfast it is back out on deck for a full morning's sea watching. There are Giant Petrels cruising along behind the ship including one Northern amongst mostly Southern, still quite a few Black-browed Albatrosses and now

and again a Wandering Albatross comes sweeping in behind the ship dwarfing the Black-browed and sweeping from one side of the wake to the other in huge arcs without flapping a wing. They are simply magnificent. From the bridge we discover that every so often a Blue Petrel will fly by, crossing in front of the ship before heading away so that they are rarely seen well from the back. There are also a few Wilson's Storm-Petrels and amongst them the occasional Black-bellied Storm-Petrel, identified by their white bellies! A large flock of Pintado Petrels follows the ship for some time and we also spot our first definite Subantarctic Skua and a very smart dark phase South Polar Skua right above the ship. A lovely adult Grey-headed Albatross appears, close enough to see the yellow edge round the bill, and at least two more are seen during the morning.

Later, the sun comes out and we have more and more blue sky with eventually just thin high cloud. It is very pleasant to sit on deck and enjoy the birds, watching the way they use the currents of air created by the ship to sweep back and forth, keeping pace with no effort what-so-ever.

As we get further south the Albatrosses disappear and we see more and more Pintado Petrels and Blue Petrels. There is the prize of a bottle of Champagne for the first person to spot an iceberg and for a moment we think we have won as we spot something white on the horizon, but it turns out that we are seeing the snow covered Smith Island ... we are approaching the Antarctic Peninsula! We seem to make very slow progress towards it, but gradually it gets bigger and more beautiful and then we spot a second island further left, Snow Island. As we pass between them we see a Humpback Whale blow, then another and get good views of them quite close to the ship, we even see their tails as they dive. Next we see a small group of Antarctic Fur Seals porpoising through the water at great speed. We start seeing more Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm-Petrels, some close enough to see the black line under the belly. Over the rest of the afternoon and evening we probably see something approaching 25 to 30 Humpback Whales. Though most are rather distant they are lovely to see especially when evening sun backlights their blows. As we approach the Peninsula the scenery starts to become more dramatic. We pass Trinity Island with towering mountains covered in snow and huge glaciers sweeping down to the sea and at last we spot the first iceberg as we enter the Gerlache Strait (Champagne all round when we get it!). After yesterdays fierce storm we are now making up for it with stunningly beautiful weather allowing us to see all the mountain tops. Damien, the history guide on the ship who has been leading trips down here for years, tells us he has hardly ever seen it this good as usually even if the weather is good there is cloud on all the tops. We have 70 mile visibility! Looking in one direction we can see right down the Antarctic Peninsula, then to the right of the Gerlache Strait is Brabant Island which looks spectacular, then behind us are the South Shetland Islands covered in snow. It is simply breathtaking. Further on we pass through patches of brash ice and there are many more icebergs. There are more Humpback Whales too, some distant, others much closer and

a mother and calf appear quite close to the ship and breach! We see our first Southern Fulmars and our first Chinstrap Penguins porpoising through the water at great speed, visible for just a second as they catch a breath. Some of the smaller icebergs have lots of penguins standing on them and as dusk comes it is hard to tear ourselves away to go to bed, but it is almost midnight!

Day 6 **Lemaire Channel, Yalour Island and Neko Harbour**

Each morning, just before breakfast, there is an announcement from Brad over the tannoy telling us where we are, the air and sea temperatures, other weather conditions, latitude and longitude and a reminder of what the plan is for the morning. This morning's announcement starts by telling us that the air and sea temperatures are both around zero or just below and are likely to remain all day, then he goes on to say that the weather is glorious. Those on deck are already well aware of all this!

Outside it is breathtakingly beautiful and the weather is stunning! We are surrounded by huge mountain peaks that look thousands of feet high, there are glaciers, snow, brash ice and icebergs, and it is all bathed in beautiful sunshine. We are slowly sailing down the Lemaire Channel and then through the Penola Strait and I don't think I have ever seen anywhere so beautiful! At the bottom end of the Penola Strait it opens out and there are scattered islands, but we are aiming for a small group of low lying islands called the Yalour Islands where there is a large Adelie Penguin rookery. There are South Polar Skuas flying by, small groups of Antarctic Terns and some Kelp Gulls, then, while we are having breakfast, we pass a group of three Crabeater Seals hauled out on a big lump of ice. We pass lots of extraordinary shaped icebergs smoothed by the water into amazing shapes, then drop the anchor just off some small islands with no snow on them but instead a pinkish hue to the rocks caused by penguin droppings!

This is our first Zodiac landing and we are all very excited! Remembering to 'turn our tag' to the 'off-ship' side we dip our feet in disinfectant so as not to introduce anything unwanted to the island and wait our turn to go down the ramp and board the zodiac. This proves pretty straight forward and soon we are whisked across to the landing site. Just up from our landing spot there is a Weddell Seal asleep and apparently completely unfazed by our presence. It is very well camouflaged with lovely markings and has a very sleepy expression. Above us is the Adelie Penguin colony and we decide that it is probably easiest if we all take it at our own pace, stopping to look at what we want and take our photos rather than sticking together as a group, and this seems particularly sensible for the keen photographers. There are hundreds of birds with small nesting groups on every high point of the island. It is hard to know where to start but soon we settle down and find that it is often best to just sit and watch one group and see what they are doing. There is so much activity going on with birds rushing in from the sea, others displaying by pointing their heads straight up and calling, some are feeding chicks or preening their partner, and we watch as South Polar Skuas patrol

overhead sometimes swooping low over the penguins causing all the bills to point upwards with much calling. One Skua takes a real dislike to a Southern Giant Petrel and dive bombs it repeatedly. There seems to be a steady flow of penguins in and out of the sea and they seem incredibly keen to get wherever they are going ... running at a crazy pace through the snow. And they are so cute!! They really are just delightful little things. Further out on a couple of small islets are a few Antarctic Shags, Kelp Gulls and Antarctic Terns. The backdrop for all this activity is the most incredibly scenery you could wish to see! The mountains and glaciers and icebergs seem to hit you all over again with their beauty every time you look up ... no wonder Jackie chose it at the end of the trip as her favourite place.

We have a couple of hours ashore but all too soon it is over and we head back to the ship, where after a couple of minutes we spot two Humpback Whales some distance away, then we turn north and head back up the Lemaire Channel. It seems weird to think we have been as far south as we will be going already! There is a little fog beginning to form and we worry that the scenery is going to disappear. We see more Humpback Whales and a pair of Antarctic Minke Whales, larger than the ones we see off Britain and now considered a separate species. There are dozens of Wilson's Storm-Petrels dancing across the water and we keep an eye on the pieces of ice we are passing as occasionally they have seals hauled out. We pass at least three Leopard Seals which lift their large heads to look at us as we pass, about half a dozen or so Crabeater Seals, which look very pale, and every now and then there is an iceberg covered in penguins! One mountain that we pass has a line of penguins climbing up the side making a dirty line in the snow and when we look through the binoculars we see they are heading for a colony several hundred feet up the mountain silhouetted against the sky.

Some of the icebergs are wonderful, all kinds of shapes and sizes and many a deep blue colour, especially where they have cracks or hollows. It is hard not to recognize shapes in them and we wonder if we should begin a new list ... birds and animals we have seen made of ice! There are ducks and swans, a dog and even a camel! We leave the Lemaire Channel into the Gerlache Strait which is much wider and there are even bigger and more astonishing icebergs here. The fog disperses and the tops of the mountains come back into view. The air is cold but sitting on the deck, out of the breeze, chatting in the sunshine, it is surprisingly warm. We are still enjoying the icebergs when suddenly there is a white bird skimming round the side of one. It disappears briefly behind the berg then re-appears on the other side ... a Snow Petrel! There is great excitement as everyone tries to get on it, but we all manage to see it in the end and we are delighted, this is a big target bird for many of us and such an enigmatic species, described by someone (I can't remember who) as the angels of the Antarctic. Ian suggests this would be a good time to get that bottle of Champagne so after a brief conversation with the bar man it is soon organized and there we

are enjoying a glass of Champagne in the sun with big happy smiles on our faces ... it's a great life! Over the next hour or so Barry and Russell each spot another Snow Petrel, and they are delightful to watch as they skim round first one iceberg then across to the next, gleaming white in the sun.

The rest of the journey to our next landing is very pleasant. Irene spots another Humpback Whale and we start to feel we are getting the hang of the skuas ... the slimmer, lighter weight birds being South Polars while the more motley, heavy chested and larger billed birds we think are Subantarctic (also known as Brown) Skuas. Then as we approach our next landing we turn a corner into Andvord Bay and suddenly we are in the wind and wow is it cold! We rapidly move from our cosy spot to find somewhere more sheltered as the wind is absolutely bitter! There are a few Pintado Petrels around as we approach Neko Harbour at the far end of the bay.

Soon we are getting geared up for our next landing and already we are more aware of what we need. Soon we are on the zodiacs heading for a simple beach landing amongst a large Gentoo Penguin colony. There are lots on the beach itself and swimming around in the shallow water around the zodiacs, then a constant stream of them walking up through the snow to the colony on the rocks higher up. They are very handsome birds with a white patch above the eye and orangey red on their bills. Again it is just lovely to just stand and watch their antics in the colony as they display to one another or feed their chicks. Often both birds in a pair will raise their heads skywards making a loud braying sound, their chests heaving with the effort. Some of the chicks are surprisingly small while others seem much bigger and when a parent arrives back they follow it as the parent leads them on a long run as if making sure they have earned it! There is something comical about the way they walk around with their wings sticking out behind them. Antarctic Terns, South Polar Skuas and Kelp Gulls are also here.

Suddenly there is a loud crashing noise and we look up to see a large piece of ice crashing into the water from the edge of the Glacier that is at the head of the bay! It seems to fall almost in slow motion splashing into the sea causing a wave to surge a little way up the beach below us. The water is full of brash ice and it suddenly becomes obvious where all this comes from as the ice breaks up into small pieces.

Some people have walked higher up the slope following Damien and to get back down they slide down a steep slope at great speed and their laughter can be heard from some distance away. It looks like fun so Jane and I decide to have a go and it is pretty exhilarating zipping down the shoot that has been created.

Time again is running out and soon we are back on board the Andrea where we have a very relaxed evening meal at which neither Ian or I dash outside at all!

Day 7 Danco Island and Enterprise Bay

The day dawns with more glorious sunshine, but it is much windier than yesterday as we head towards our anchoring spot just off Danco Island. Before we stop we pass two Humpback Whales and an Antarctic Minke Whale ... a great start! The island has a large Gentoo Penguin colony and there are lots of them on the beach as we land, plus a Snowy Sheathbill perching on a concrete block. We walk up the slope where there is lots of activity to watch as the penguins go through their daily routine, displaying when partners return from the sea, feeding young and walking down to the beach to head out to feed. They are just delightful and it is hard not to put thoughts in their heads as they are pestered by chicks, fight with a neighbour, steal stones from each others nests or walk through the snow with their wings held out behind them, sometimes stopping to peer at the ground ahead and decide on the best route. The colony continues to quite a height above the sea and there is a terrific view from here of the wonderful scenery all around. We also see our first pale phase South Polar Skua with a lovely pale underside and an almost white nape! Down below us in the bay are two Humpback Whales and at least four Antarctic Minke Whales which are pretty close to the ship and would be giving great views to anyone on deck.

Once again time runs out all too quickly, but on the way back to the ship Kevin takes the zodiac off after the Minke Whales. Obviously we can't go whizzing straight up to them, but he places the zodiac in the general area where they have been surfacing, waits to see where they come up and as a result we get some very good views of the back and fins as they surface. They are however moving around pretty quickly and next time they surface they are somewhat further away so instead we have a look at some superb icebergs including one with a big blue cave in the front. Several penguins are trying to get up onto an iceberg and keep leaping out of the water, almost getting a grip before sliding back in and there is a big cheer when eventually one makes it. Once back on the Andrea we turn north once more heading for Enterprise Bay and it isn't long before over the tannoy comes the message ... "Ladies and Gentlemen, its lunchtime ... enjoy your lunch." The Maitre-de says it in the same sing-song way every day and soon we are all saying it!

Over lunchtime the wind starts to really pick up and we start to feel slightly concerned that our afternoon zodiac ride in Enterprise Bay may be out of the question. Soon there are 'white horses' on all the waves and it is hard to find anywhere sheltered on the deck, however as we turn into the bay we soon realise that it is extremely sheltered due to the high mountains surrounding it. We are all well pleased when the announcement comes that the zodiacs will be launched and we manage to organise that we are all together on Kevin's zodiac.

Once settled in the zodiac we head straight over to some rocks where there are three Chinstrap Penguins standing close to the waters edge. We get pretty close and they don't take any notice of us at all, but just stand looking round. They are

great looking birds and our first close views of this species. The main reason for visiting Enterprise Bay is for the history. There are several relics from the whaling days here including the wreck of a large ship, a broken up rowing boat with lots of barrels still intact nearby and a couple of other rowing boats that were apparently used as part of the whaling operations. It is all very interesting but we are very distracted by the birds ... especially when we get a flock of Antarctic Terns flying around just above our heads. They are coming very close, perhaps to investigate or maybe to try and drive us off as we are fairly close to the rocks where they are presumably nesting. Then suddenly a South Polar Skua appears and comes in low over our heads too. This is a much bigger threat and we all duck as it sweeps overhead and it must be said - Jackie's face is a picture! It comes in a couple more times before we move a bit further away. At one point a couple of people want a close photo of the barrels and wrecked rowing boat so Kevin takes us close to the rocks where we notice there are lots of red limpets and some sea urchins. Apparently the limpets are the main food of the Kelp Gulls and indeed a pair has some well grown chicks on the rocks nearby. We get our best views so far of Antarctic Shag before heading over to the wrecked ship which used to be used for transporting the whale products. There are terns perched inside it and they may even be nesting. The slopes behind are a work of art with beautiful arches and sweeping edges of snow and ice making cornices that look like they will collapse at any minute. The sun catches the edges and makes them blue or gleaming white and the cameras are very busy trying to capture it all. It is all very beautiful and we are just delighted to see it all before heading back to the ship for a nice cup of tea or coffee.

We head out the back of the ship and drink our coffee while watching Wilson's Storm-Petrels. They seem to be using the ship as a windbreak and keep coming back in to the same area and numbers gradually build up until at one point there must be thirty or more all zipping around or doing that wonderful thing storm-petrels do, standing almost motionless on the water with their wings raised above their backs just holding steady. They are a real pleasure to watch and again the cameras are clicking away. Ian and Barry get some lovely shots with every detail visible, even the yellow webs between the toes on one shot! Eventually we lift the anchor and as we head on our way it is time for our evening meal. As we are eating there is suddenly a bit of a commotion on the other side of the dining room so I head over to see what is going on. Out of the window there is a breaching Humpback Whale! We all dash across and look out of the windows as it leaps several more times ... fantastic! After the meal and the checklist it is still daylight so some of us go outside for a last look round and are surprised by how much the birds have changed. There are now lots of Southern Fulmars and even the occasional Black-browed Albatross with still plenty of Wilson's Storm-Petrels and even after all that we still manage to head to bed a little earlier than previous nights.

Day 8 Gerlache Strait and Halfmoon Island

Today we wake up to the news that the weather has deteriorated a little and the wind strengthened so that the planned landing at Hannah Point has to be cancelled as the zodiacs would not be able to cope with the strong winds. We are a bit disappointed, but as we continue north up the Gerlache Strait we soon cheer up as the scenery is again overwhelmingly spectacular and we just relax into scanning for birds and enjoying the scenery and the icebergs. The birding is quite quiet and we don't see anything different as we head from Gerlache Strait into the Bransfield Strait and then enter the McFarland Strait just north of Livingston Island – one of the South Shetland Islands. Things improve dramatically as we travel and we arrive at Halfmoon Island in glorious weather.

Halfmoon Island has a large Chinstrap Penguin colony and from our landing on the beach we walk up the slope and down over a ridge to see the main colony. There are Antarctic Shags on the rocks as we land, a few Kelp Gulls and several Snowy Sheathbills fly over heading towards the penguin colony. There is a colony of Antarctic Terns on the rocks higher up and they get very upset at the skuas that pass over every few minutes. These seem to be huge, bulky birds and we identify them as Subantarctic (also known as Brown) Skuas.

We walk up a slope following the path through rather rough stony ground and marvel at the way the Chinstrap Penguins just quietly hop their way through the rocks, up a very steep slope, gradually making their way to the colonies above. There are also occasional Wilson's Storm-Petrels flying round the rocky slope apparently looking for their nest holes which seems surprising in broad daylight as these birds normally only come ashore at night. We head over to a colony of Chinstraps where there has been a Macaroni Penguin hanging around all year. There is no sign of it today, but the Chinstraps are wonderful and very active. Their chicks are very well grown and seem to be very hungry, but many of the adults seem more intent on stealing stones from each others nests. There is also a lot of displaying going on and they seem to trigger each other off so that once one starts calling they all start. They throw back their heads, puff out their chests and flap their wings while making an amazingly loud call and with them all calling together it is deafening! Just as suddenly they all stop and it goes quiet again for a few minutes before the next round.

On the far side of the island there are three Antarctic Fur Seals which are extremely well camouflaged amongst the rocks. One is a biggish male with a mane of thick fur round his neck. On another beach is a Weddell Seal looking as sleepy as the last one we saw. The view across to Livingston Island is wonderful with an enormous glacier coming down to the shore below a range of towering snowy peaks. Through the binoculars you can see the glacier is full of huge crevasses and the scale of it is quite unbelievable.

It is all fantastic and, even though we have three hours on the island, time runs out all too quickly and we get back on the zodiacs and head back to the ship. We continue on our way north, heading up the Bransfield Strait passing the various islands of the South Shetlands as we go, and it comes as a bit of a shock to realise we are leaving the Antarctic Peninsula behind already! There seem to be more birds around now with Southern Giant Petrels following the ship including a beautiful white one. These are sometimes known as 'White Nellies'. We see a few Black-browed Albatrosses, Southern Fulmars, Wilson's Storm-Petrels and lots of Black-bellied Storm-Petrels. There are a couple of lovely looking pale South Polar Skuas and before we head inside for the evening meal we see a couple of distant Humpback Whales.

The evening meal is a bit special tonight, the Captain's Invitation Dinner, and Barry receives an invitation to the captains table! Even more amazingly he turns it down! Does anyone ever do that? It is a seven course meal and Barry says he doesn't want to make polite conversation with the captain when he could be having a laugh with us, plus he has something to celebrate ... he has just heard today that he is a Grandad! Celebrations are indeed in order and although we are too late to sort out a cake for him they bring instead a huge knickerbocker-glory type of ice cream. It is huge, but Barry tucks in with gusto and manages to finish the lot ... we are well impressed.

Day 9 Elephant Island and into the Weddell Sea

On 14 April 1915, 28 men led by Sir Ernest Shackleton rowed along the side of Elephant Island in three small lifeboats. They were trying to find somewhere to land after four days of the most horrendous conditions at sea. Several had severe frost bite in their hands and feet after surviving storms at sea, having been sitting with their feet in freezing water for almost the entire time. They were unbearably thirsty after two days with no water, were exhausted and desperate when at first light they realised they had succeeded ... they had reached Elephant Island. Their first landing site was a tiny bit of shingle beach which would not keep them out of the waves in a storm so three days later they moved to another tiny beach on the side of a spit of land sticking out into the sea, joining the main island to a pointed bit of rock called Gnomon Island. Here they made their camp and it was here that Shackleton left 22 of them when he set off for South Georgia with five of his comrades to get help. The remaining men spent the next five months here living under the upturned lifeboats through the most awful winter conditions.

It is a humbling feeling looking out from the side of our ship this morning at that spit of land and trying to picture the scene. The beach has gone but there is still land joining the main island to Gnomon Island, though it is now only large boulders and bare rock. Over the tannoy Brad points out the pillar that roughly marks the spot where they set up their 'camp'. On the pillar is a bust of Captain Pardo, the captain of the Yelcho, the ship that finally rescued the 22 men, surrounded

by Antarctic Fur Seals and Chinstrap Penguins. To the right of the spit of land is the glacier where they tried to dig a cave to shelter in, which proved fruitless as water just dripped all over them constantly. It is impossible to imagine in the lovely weather here today what it must have been like in the depth of an Antarctic winter for those men, the cold, the dark and the perpetual gales. It is incredible that they all survived.

We head out in the zodiacs this morning for a closer look at this historic site, and even when close, it is still quite unbelievable, though the Fur Seals and Chinstraps seem very happy there. There are also hundreds of penguins in the water and they seem rather interested in our zodiacs. We soon gather what seems to be a little fan club of Chinstraps Penguins following us round, porpoising or swimming along-side the zodiac then surfacing and looking at us excitedly. It is lovely to be able to see them under the water swimming alongside us, they are so wonderfully quick and fluid. The surrounding area has steep rock coming straight out of the sea, but there are flat areas high above the water here and there and islands with flat tops, each of which seems to have a penguin colony. Each colony is noticeable by the pinkish hue from their droppings on the rocks and at one point Kevin turns off the engine so we can listen to the cacophony of noise they are making. Other birds around the area include Southern Giant Petrels, Pintado Petrels, a scattering of Wilson's Storm-Petrels, Subantarctic Skuas and quite a few Snowy Sheathbills amongst the penguin colonies. A pure white Southern Giant Petrel flies past looking remarkably beautiful for a bird of this species! Barry notices that the Pintado Petrels are landing on the cliff faces high above the bay and through the binoculars we can see that they are nesting here rather in the manner of Fulmars at home, scattered all over the cliff-face.

The island itself is spectacular with tall mountains covered in snow and large glaciers sweeping down to the sea. At one time there is a band of cloud across the middle of the island so that you can only see the bases of the mountains, then the peaks poking up above the cloud making them look even higher! There is suddenly a loud noise and a large piece of the glacier falls away into the sea with a splash. It leaves an astonishing deep blue scar in the front of the glacier where it came away and results in lots of brash ice for us to drive through in our zodiac.

We finish looking round the bay and head out a little way to investigate some icebergs a little offshore. They are like works of art they are so beautiful. Not just amazingly smooth shapes but high pointed tops and overhangs that lead into underwater shelves. They are white with a hint of pink in places and deep electric blue in others, especially where there are cracks and hollows. They almost look like they are lit up from inside. Chinstrap Penguins are standing on some or lying down on the flatter areas and as we watch, some leap out of the water and try to get a toe hold on the steep ice. They slide straight back into the water but soon try again here or a little further along and eventually they manage to get a grip and scurry up the slippery slope to a cheer from everyone.

Back on board the ship we soon hear the announcement, "Ladies and Gentlemen, its lunchtime, enjoy your lunch," and while we eat the ship sets sail for the South Orkney Islands. Brad tells us that many trips don't get to go there as there is often too much ice in the area so we are lucky to be able to include it in our itinerary. Soon we are back on deck or attending one of the lectures in the Kittiwake Lounge, but even those inside are called out onto the deck to see the amazing sight of two enormous tabular icebergs really up close and personal! We pass between them, the nearest one, on our left, is 1.3 miles long and the one on our right, 1.6 miles long! But it is the height of them that is also impressive and astonishingly hard to judge. We estimate that must be at least 150 to 200 feet high! To be honest words fail to describe the sheer size and beauty of these astonishing blocks of ice and then it occurs to us that there is probably three times as much if not more under the water!!! They are completely flat topped and vertical sided as if they have been cut out from a block with a chisel. Adding to the scene are hundreds of Pintado Petrels and Southern Fulmars, but even they are put in the shade when a Snow Petrel comes sweeping across in front of one of the bergs. The side of the berg is in the shade and a deep blue-grey but the Snow Petrel is just far enough out from the side to catch the sun and gleams against this darker background. It is a sight I shall never forget.

The show continues for the rest of the day with tabular icebergs of all sizes in every direction, some huge and very block shaped, others appear to have tilted over, creating a sloping top, some are tall and narrow. There are lots of bits of ice in the sea and more irregular shaped bergs too and at one point Russell scans round and says that there are roughly a hundred icebergs in view. It really is an astonishing scene and one I don't think any of us were really expecting. Birds continue with lots of Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels and Irene is really starting to get the hang of them now. We see a few South Polar Skuas, wonderful flocks of Pintado Petrels sweeping past the back of the ship and a couple of distant Humpback Whales. Suddenly I spot a very odd looking whale. It is a pale tan colour with a paler head and a reasonably large fin and can only be a Southern Bottlenose Whale! We watch it surface about six times before it disappears, a great find. And still the icebergs continue. It is really hard to stop yourself taking photographs ... but how many pictures of icebergs do you need! (Yes - but look at that one!!!) Some icebergs have penguins on which look tiny. Some icebergs have presumably weathered to unusual shapes under the water then turned upside down so that they look like crowns or spiky bushes. Others have intense bands of colour in them either blue or green or turquoise. Some are beautifully smooth while others have numerous facets as if they have been cut out with a large blade. It is certainly a sight that will stay with us forever and when we go inside for our evening meal there is one truly enormous tabular berg passing the window which we are later told is seven miles long! It takes us nearly half an hour to get past it!

At the end of the meal the kitchen staff appear with a cake for Barry! They have now had time to decorate one and there on the front it says "Congratulations Grandpa." It's delicious and we all enjoy a piece. Then our waiter, a guy named Romeo, comes over to our table. He is a real character and encouraged by Barry, he surprises us all by bursting into song! He has an amazingly strong voice for a small frame and really throws himself into it such that everyone in the room stops talking to listen. In the background the kitchen staff drop something with a loud clang and one of the other waiters comes out with a cloth and pretends to mop his brow as he sings, squeezing out lots of water, but he won't be put off and keeps going right to the end of his song. It's all very entertaining and at the end he gets a big round of applause and promptly sings another. He says he will sing for us again tomorrow.

Day 10 South Orkney Islands, Orcadas Base and the Southern Ocean

Early in the morning the sea is quiet and the South Orkney Islands are in sight ahead of us looking mountainous and snowy. There are plenty of Storm-Petrels of both species passing by, a few Southern Fulmars, Pintado Petrels, Southern Giant Petrels, including a beautiful 'White Nellie', and the occasional Black-browed Albatross. Now and again we spot something porpoising through the water and get all excited thinking it is a dolphin, but we keep forgetting about the Antarctic Fur Seals, then suddenly they stop and stick their heads out of the water and we realise what we are looking at. There are still plenty of impressive icebergs around and some have a little gathering of Chinstrap Penguins on them. Three Snow Petrels appear at the back of the ship briefly then glide away behind us. As we get nearer the islands we see some particularly impressive tabular icebergs then suddenly a Killer Whale fin appears, a huge triangular fin of a male, apparently on its own. We see an Antarctic Prion then another Snow Petrel flies right over the top of the ship right above our heads, our best view so far, pure white against a deep blue sky ... stunning. On one iceberg there seems to be a single immature Adelie Penguin amongst the Chinstraps.

We are now passing the first of the South Orkney Islands, the largest of which is Coronation Island, with Signy Island in front of it, and we start seeing many more birds, especially Pintado Petrels. Also more Snow Petrels start to appear. From reading tour reports from previous trips I was hopeful of seeing one or two Snow Petrels on this trip so it is a real surprise to start seeing them in small flocks! First a flock of six, then two more, then another eight then another flock of eight right behind the ship, another three and so on until by the end of the morning we have seen over 50! They look wonderful skimming around the icebergs especially when they appear above a tall iceberg against the blue sky. We also start seeing Humpback Whales again, starting with three distant animals then another three and a single one much nearer. This last one is waving his flippers in the air! And still the Snow Petrels keep coming! As we approach Laurie Island, where we shall be making our landing, the scenery just gets better and better both looking towards the islands and away from them at the astonishing array of icebergs ... big

ones, little ones, pointy ones, flat ones, they are just everywhere and around them are little white dots of Snow Petrels and Pintado Petrels searching for whatever they can find to eat around the bases. The blue sky shows them off to their best and the scene is simply spectacular.

We anchor in a bay on Laurie Island and take the zodiacs ashore to visit the Orcadas Base, an Argentinean base that has been here for many years, previously run by the British. We are met by a very young looking guy who tells us he is second in command at the base even though he looks like he hasn't long been out of school! He tells us a bit about the base and that they are mainly studying magnetology, meteorology, seismology and the wildlife, especially the fur seals which have recently started a new colony here, and there certainly seems to be plenty of them! There is also a museum here with some rooms kept as they would have been years ago when some of the first teams were based here. Jane is very pleased to discover that the base was set up by a man called Bruce. There were a series of Scottish country dances written to commemorate Bruce's expedition to Antarctica including a dance called 'The Piper and the Penguin' that she particularly likes, so it is nice to make a connection and we get to see the ruins of his old stone built house. We visit the accommodation of the men living at the base where there is coffee and a few things for sale.

Behind the base there are a huge number of Antarctic Fur Seals resting on the shingle, there are a few Chinstrap and Gentoo Penguins and on the cliffs high above us are nesting Pintado Petrels and a single Snow Petrel flies in and disappears in to a hole in the boulder scree. There are also lots of shags flying around which look very like the Antarctic Shags we have been seeing, though according to our book they are South Georgia Shags here. We later find that the book contradicts itself and for a while we are left confused as they certainly do look very alike and the only difference that is noticeable is a more even division of the black and white on the neck and a smaller looking bill. It is only after referring to more books that we discover that there are definitely only South Georgia Shags here, but we aren't too worried as there will be plenty of them in the days to come.

Back on the ship we have lunch and are soon on our way again passing the tip of the South Orkneys and heading out into open water on our way to South Georgia. There are icebergs everywhere and hundreds of porpoising penguins and a single Leopard Seal hauled out on the ice. I look over the side of the ship and immediately see three Humpback Whales right beside the ship! They are really close so everyone gets wonderful views as the ship does a circle so we can see them again. There are two large ones and a calf and we watch them for a good ten minutes or more as they surface and dive lifting their tails high out of the water. It is interesting to learn about the underside of the tail. Kevin tells us how, when he did some work with humpbacks some time ago, they used to categorise the whales by the colour of the underside of the tail, all white being a one, through

to all black being a five. We have a one and a three here, one being completely white beneath the tail while the other has a broad black border leaving just a small amount of white in the middle of each half.

There are birds everywhere with flocks of Pintado Petrels, Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels, White-chinned Petrels and yet more Snow Petrels, again in small flocks of up to ten at a time! Again they are skimming round the icebergs and while watching one group a big piece of ice falls off one of the icebergs with a crash creating a sheet of brash ice in the water beside the berg. Someone comments that you certainly know you in Antarctica when there are several Southern Giant Petrels sitting on the water in the foreground, a flock of Wilson's Storm Petrels feeding in the brash ice behind them and in the background are penguins standing on the edge of an iceberg! What a scene. Some of the icebergs have huge cracks in them and one has big arches like tunnels going into the base. Pintado Petrels are now passing in flocks of fifty or more and we start seeing Black-browed Albatrosses then suddenly I pick up a whale blow in a V shape and when the animal arches its back there is no fin so it has to be a Southern Right Whale. It is just a shame it is so distant.

We settle into an afternoon of sea watching with birds constantly passing the ship and crossing our path. There are more Black-browed Albatrosses, more petrels three distant Humpback Whales then our first Light-mantled Sooty Albatross comes gliding along down the side of the ship and away behind us. What a wonderful looking bird it is with subtle shades of brown and grey as the dark face merges into the pale mantle and the dark extremely narrow wings. This is another bird that some were desperately keen to see and it is certainly no disappointment. Then a few minutes later a small whale surfaces in front of the ship. I realise immediately that it must be a beaked whale and get everyone onto it before racing to the front of the ship beside the bridge to try and see its nose as that is where all the key identification features are to be found. Almost immediately it surfaces again with a long, narrow nose coming out of the water first! It is a Gray's Beaked Whale!!! This is a tremendous find as not only are beaked whales rarely seen but many sightings remain unidentified so it is really good to get a positive identification on this one which is one of the species only found in these cold Antarctic waters. The rest of the afternoon is spent enjoying the icebergs, penguins, albatrosses and other birds and even though there is no longer any land in sight we are still seeing dozens of Antarctic Fur Seals porpoising through the water. Eventually the call comes to go in for our evening meal but even that doesn't stop Barry who spots a Grey-headed Albatross and two more Light-mantled Sooty Albatross through the window! We are also entertained by Romeo singing another two songs for us, a Hawaiian number all about bubbles in your wine and shells on the beach, then Delilah ... almost as well as Tom Jones!

Day 11 Scotia Sea en route for South Georgia

The day dawns with pleasant weather and a slightly choppy sea, with the charts up on the bridge telling us we are now over around 3,000 feet of water as we cross the Scotia Sea. There are plenty of birds following the ship, mostly Antarctic Prions but also plenty of Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm-Petrels, Southern Giant Petrels and small numbers of both White-chinned and Blue Petrels. There are surprising numbers of Antarctic Fur Seals porpoising through the water and we get a brief view of a Humpback Whale.

After breakfast there are even more of the prions and they are constant companions, skimming along beside and behind the ship. At around 8.30am we go over a ridge onto a shallower area of sea and this coincides with a cluster of whale sightings. The first three Humpbacks are rather distant but the next three pass quite close to the ship allowing us good views as they lift their tails. We see one whale we fail to identify and a distant Southern Right Whale that is bashing its large triangular flipper onto the water creating a big splash.

The rest of the day is spent either on deck or watching the lectures in the Kittiwake lounge. There is a continuous presence of Antarctic Prions and Southern Giant Petrels and regular sightings of White-chinned Petrels, Wilson's Storm-Petrels and Antarctic Fur Seals. Later in the day we start to see more albatrosses including Black-browed but also Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, sometimes very close and becoming the most common species for a little while. Diving-Petrels start to appear too and towards the end of the day Common Diving-Petrels are seen regularly crossing the front of the ship and there are at least two that we feel confident are South Georgia Diving-Petrels with more contrasting plumage and more obvious white 'braces' down their backs.

In the afternoon we see another Humpback Whale and are surprised to suddenly see a Snow Petrel fly past and two Macaroni Penguins sitting on the sea! You never quite know what is coming next. The weather becomes a bit dull as the afternoon wears on so most people go down to listen to the lectures. At around 5.30pm a Wandering Albatross appears behind the ship and stays with us for several minutes allowing us to really enjoy the way it sweeps in big arcs above the wake. Two more Humpback Whales appear, this time much closer, and one has a completely black underside to the tail so it's a type five!

After the evening meal we are once more serenaded by the waiter, Romeo, as he is asked to sing Delilah again. Then in true Tom Jones style some of the ladies in the audience start throwing underwear! One item is a particularly large bra that sits nicely on his head like a hat yet undeterred he keeps going to the end to great applause.

Day 12 South Georgia – Molke Bay and Gold Harbour

We wake to find ourselves in Royal Bay, South Georgia and at first glance the weather looks perfect, with a calm sea and blue sky, however Brad makes it pretty clear in his 'good morning' announcement that it is not that clear cut. There are large areas of snow and ice high in the mountains and, during the night, the air close to the ground gets colder and colder, and often ends up as a large pool of cold dense air. This can then spill over the side of the mountain where gravity takes over. This cold wind races down the mountainside to the valley below as a cold katabatic wind and can make life in a small zodiac very unpleasant! After breakfast we take the ship over the other side of Royal Bay to where we are thinking of making a landing and sure enough there is a tremendous wind pounding off the glacier into the bay putting white crests on all the waves and making a landing here impossible. Looking ashore at the mass of King Penguins we can't help feeling disappointed but soon thoughts turn to our new destination on the other side of the bay at Moltke Harbour where the conditions are much calmer as we are not below a large glacier.

We are soon in the zodiacs and heading ashore where there are several small groups of King Penguins waiting to greet us. They are superb looking birds even if they are in mid moult and stand around huddled together in groups of 20-30. There are quite a few Elephant Seals, mainly females, which are lying around either in singles or in a big group lying almost on top of each other in a wallow as if they have all been tipped out of the back of a lorry! They are amazingly smelly! They are shedding their skin and keep making farting noises, but despite all that they are actually more attractive animals than I was expecting. They have rather large doe eyes and look at you as you pass before going back to sleep. Some are enormous and may be young males.

Another thing that strikes you immediately is the contrast in the vegetation here compared to where we have been. We saw no plants other than mosses and lichens on the Antarctic Peninsula and South Orkneys despite our searching for them (actually Barry found a little bit of Antarctic Hair-Grass), yet here there is masses of Tussock Grass and other plants right up the slopes and it almost comes as a shock to see it! In the Tussock Grass just behind the beach there are Elephant Seals scattered and also Antarctic Fur Seals and we are told that the males can be quite aggressive so we treat them with caution and steer clear. There are lots of pups on the beach however and they chase around, racing after each other and fighting, piling into the sea and back out like otters. They are remarkably mobile given the shape of their legs and are great fun to watch causing much hilarity.

As we walk along the shore a small flock of four South Georgia Pintails takes flight, landing a little further down the beach. Considered a race of Yellow-billed Pintail by most taxonomists they are now considered a separate species by some as they are smaller and more compact than their South American cousins and a shade

darker. Also of interest is the fact that they are the only species of duck in the world that regularly eats carrion! Further down the beach we get good views of them feeding at the edge of the sea. We also get very good views of South Georgia Shag and can see the subtle plumage difference and smaller bill. There are Subantarctic Skuas, Kelp Gulls and several Antarctic Terns and a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross glides round the headland. There are also a few Reindeer on this headland, a rather unfortunate introduction that are apparently causing some damage to the vegetation. As well as the groups of King Penguins there are a few Gentoo and Chinstrap Penguins on the beach.

There is great atmosphere to the place, with the huge glacier at the head of the bay and towering snow capped mountains above the beach, and although the katabatic winds may be a nuisance they are all part of what the place is like and it is great to experience the sudden icy blasts coming down from the slopes above, sometimes even with a spot of rain or snow. It's also interesting to see how the sea just offshore from the glacier is a rather dense pale blue quite unlike the open water, and this is created by the fine silt deposited by the glacier altering the way the light can pass through the water. We are on South Georgia!

Finally time runs out and we head back towards the ship, some of us 'guided' back to the ship by a South Georgia Pintail that flies just in front of the zodiac all the way back! Once everyone is back on the ship, and Brad has done his obligatory call for anyone who has not 'turned their tag' to signify they are on board, we set off again back out of the bay heading round Cape Charlotte and down the coast towards Gold Harbour where we are landing this afternoon. As we leave the bay we pass lots of Macaroni Penguins swimming and porpoising through the waters and can easily see their large red bills and yellow head plumes. There are lots of Black-browed Albatrosses, White-chinned Petrels, Pintado Petrels, Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses and Wilson's Storm-Petrels but as we come out of the bay we are straight into strong winds whipping the tops off the waves and sending most people inside to escape the cold.

We head in for lunch and as we eat the weather gradually improves so we are astonished when we come back outside to find almost no wind, blue sky from horizon to horizon and glorious sunshine! You'd think we were in the Mediterranean! So we arrive in Gold Harbour in perfect conditions and are delighted as we come ashore at one end of a huge King Penguin colony in such lovely weather. This proves a completely different experience of King Penguins to what we had this morning. They are so active and doing so many interesting things we are spellbound! Many birds are calling making a loud braying sound as they point their heads skywards, others walking around being followed by their ridiculous looking fluffy chicks. The chicks themselves were thought by early explorers to be a different species and named Woolly Penguin and they are just hilarious to look at. Some seem keen to be adults and are trying to enter the water making themselves soaking wet so all the fluff sticks together, others

have largely moulted into their adult plumage but still have funny tufts of fluff on their heads or in strands down their sides or backs. Many are in pairs and performing a very stately walk together which is a part of their courtship, but it is a real swagger and so exaggerated it look wonderfully comical. Further back there are some with eggs. They incubate the eggs on top of their feet and tucked under a flap of skin at the base of their belly. The whole scene is just wonderful and the penguins so endearing, we are astonished how quickly our time is up and three hours have gone in a flash.

Although completely absorbed by the penguins we also notice a few other birds here including quite a few Snowy Sheathbills and Subantarctic Skuas always on the lookout for food, several Giant Petrels offshore, a few South Georgia Pintails at the edge of the sea and, cruising round the headland to our left, up to ten Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, occasionally in pairs doing just a little of that wonderful display where they fly in synchrony together, turning in perfect unison. In amongst the King Penguins are some Gentoos and we also find our biggest Elephant Seal so far, a young male with the beginnings of a bulbous nose. He is noticeably bigger than the females all around him. The Antarctic Fur Seals here are quite cheeky and even the small pups come running up at you growling - though if you stand your ground or growl back they rush off looking suddenly a lot less fierce. The adults are a bit more worrying though and we treat them with considerably more respect, especially when we see their teeth! The whole experience is magical and we leave the beach grinning from ear to ear.

Back on board the ship everyone is talking about the King Penguins and their antics and how many photos we must have taken then we eat our evening meal after which Brad announces on the tannoy that Comet McNaught is showing very well from the back of the ship. We head outside and there it is clearly visible over the mountains, a pale vertical streak in the night sky, amazingly clear and almost as good as Hale Bop some years ago. What a bonus to finish the day with!

Day 13 Grytviken and St Andrew's Bay

It is another beautiful day with clear blue skies and sunshine as we drop anchor in the bay just off the old whaling station of Grytviken. This is more of a historical landing to visit the only whaling station where they are doing up the old building and preserving the machinery so that it becomes effectively a large outdoor museum. Before we go ashore two girls come aboard and tell us firstly about the South Georgia Heritage Trust which is an organisation committed to looking after the island, its heritage and its wildlife. They are helping with the work of the museum and maintenance of the building whilst also getting involved in projects aimed to remove rats from as much of the island as possible, to help the South Georgia Pipit and Pintail, both of which suffer from the rats eating their eggs. The second girl tells us about the work of British Antarctic Survey, particularly

in relation to the management of fisheries in the region. Teams of scientists working on all kinds of projects here and at bases all over the Antarctic region and studies related to climate change are of particular importance at the moment.

We go ashore and first we walk up to the cemetery where we gather at the grave of Sir Ernest Shackleton. After the ordeal of surviving for one and a half years and saving all his men in the failed transcontinental crossing of Antarctica, he soon felt restless again after returning to Britain and after a few years of giving lectures and writing the book, 'South,' in 1922 he came back to South Georgia from where he intended to begin a circumnavigation of Antarctica in an expedition called 'The Quest'. He was already unwell and before even getting to South Georgia he suffered a minor heart attack - followed on South Georgia by a second more major one which killed him. They set off with his body back towards England, however his wife, Emily, sent a message saying, "His spirit has no place in England ... if he had a home on earth, it must be among the mystic crags and glaciers of the island in the Southern Ocean which had meant so much to him". So he was returned to South Georgia and it is quite humbling to be here and think for a few moments about this amazing character and what he did during his life. Everyone is given a tot of rum, Shackleton's favourite drink, and Damien makes a toast to 'The Boss', as he was known, and after drinking most of it we tip a small amount on the grave for him to enjoy. He must have been pretty tipsy by the time we were finished!

From here people chose from various options including a visit to the excellent museum, looking round the old whaling station or walking over the headland to the site of a helicopter crash during the Falklands war. There is plenty to see but the whaling station is perhaps the most haunting. There are large tanks where they used to store the whale oil and the wreck of a whaling ship with the harpoon gun at the prow. The use of other machinery scattered around is explained on information boards but the sheer number of whales that were killed here is appalling! In some years as many as 40,000 whales were killed in South Georgia and Blue Whales were brought to just 1% of their previous population. They have clearly not recovered much from this enormous destruction as there are still remarkably few around the area while according to the records from this whaling station they had no need to even go outside the bay for the first two years!

There are a few plants of interest on the nearby grassy slopes including Field Chickweed, Greater Burnet (or Stick-tight), Water Blinks, sheets of Brown Rush and a small amount of Adder's tongue Fern. On the shore we walk past a wallow of Elephant Seals and another young male that seems enormous plus there are lots of Antarctic fur Seals, a few small groups of King Penguins, a few South Georgia Pintails, Antarctic Terns, South Georgia Shags and some enormous looking Subantarctic Skuas. The museum is very interesting with all kinds of displays including a good display of the underwater creatures such as the fish, sea urchins and shellfish and another case with the various birds found

locally. It is quite useful to see what the South Georgia Diving-Petrel looks like and the Pipit, and there is a beautiful Grey-headed Albatross and an enormous Wandering Albatross above your head as you walk in. Most people post a few post cards at the post office ... goodness knows how long they will take to arrive ... and all too soon it is time to head back to the ship once more.

As we cruise out of the bay there is an Arctic Tern behind the ship for a few moments, it is in winter plumage unlike the local Antarctic Terns and has a black bill and white forehead. Then as soon as we are in more open water we are immediately into birds in good numbers. There are hundreds of petrels ... White-chinned, Pintados, Southern Giant, Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm-Petrels, loads of both Macaroni and Gentoo Penguins, Light-mantled Sooty and Black-browed Albatrosses, South Polar Skua and Antarctic Prions. There seem to be birds everywhere.

We arrive at St Andrews Bay and ahead of the ship is the most wonderful scene. High up are the snow capped and jagged peaks of the mountains of the interior of South Georgia and sweeping down from them are three huge glaciers, dirty with ground up rock and full of crevasses, that curve down the valleys to join forces before arriving above the long beach ahead of us. On the beach is the most astonishing mass of penguins forming a band of black and white speckles right across the length of the beach below the glacier. It is an amazing view and we are all excited about the landing but there is quite a swell and although the first zodiacs get away quickly the swell seems to be getting worse and soon it is impossible to get another zodiac safely in beside the ship. We try swapping sides and everyone troops round the other side of the ship where we manage to fill another zodiac, but again it becomes too dangerous and again we try swapping to the other side. It is a bit nerve-wracking wondering if they are going to cancel the whole thing with those still on the ship not getting ashore but they keep trying and after swapping sides for about the fifth time we are all finally on our way and delighted to be heading ashore to this famous site.

We are greeted ashore, almost literally, by dozens of King Penguins all around the zodiac and astonished by how tame they seem to be at this site. Some walk right up to you as you stand on the beach and look up at you as if expecting you to tell them something. Others bowl up out of the surf and walk up the beach within a foot or two of you as if you aren't there. We walk slowly down the beach enjoying the sights and sounds and dare I say smells until there is a bit of a rise in the land at the back of the beach and we walk up to the top to survey the scene. What is before us must be one of the top natural history sights in the world ... a King Penguin of 150,000 pairs is spread out below, a sight that is simply overwhelming in its enormity. Penguins become tiny dots in the distance at the far end of the colony which spreads from way to our left in a wide band below us where they are packed so close that you cannot see the ground right out into the distance and right round to our right up the slopes of the hills. It is a truly

staggering spectacle and words fail me to describe the scene and the sheer scale of what we are witnessing. Then there the individual penguins, all busy doing what they need to do whether they are courting males wooing females or fighting other males ... bashing them in a frenzy of flipper flaps, or young ones in their fluffy 'biggles' suits flapping their wings frantically, building up the muscles they will need when they have to 'fly' through the water later in life, or adults standing patiently as they wait for their egg to hatch. There are often groups of three penguins where we presume a female is being followed by two males and all three walk in line before suddenly the one in the middle turns and jabs at the one following and then suddenly they are flapping flippers at each other and jabbing to try and put off the other suitor. If you just sit down quietly then birds will walk right up to have a look at you, weighing you up, perhaps inspecting your rucksack, then they lose interest and just settle down and stand a couple of feet away as if you are just part of the flock so that soon you are just in amongst a whole group of them. There are penguins everywhere and the ground is covered in their feathers as many are moulting and the accumulation of feathers is blowing all over the beach in drifts. There is even a brown 'slick' of feathers out on the sea. Over the colony fly Snowy Sheathbills and Subantarctic Skuas on the constant watch for something to eat. Standing trying to take it all in must be one of the most astonishing experiences a naturalist could ever wish for and if there are seven natural history wonders of the world I have no doubt this would be high on the list. It is hard to put down the camera but taking some time to just sit and stare is the best thing to do and time certainly passes far too quickly here. Despite having three hours (two for those who struggled to get ashore) the time has gone way too quickly and we walk back to the zodiacs trying to squeeze every last moment out of the visit we can. There are penguins swimming in the surf just off the shore and as the waves come in you can see them under the water through the waves. Even standing waiting to get in the zodiac a King Penguin comes running up to me looking all expectant ... all I can think of is to hold out my hand and it grabs my finger! What is going on inside its mind?

Back on board everyone has stories to tell about their penguin encounters and their feeling about these amazing birds and at the daily summary of the day I surprise Brad by asking for the microphone to thank the zodiac drivers for getting us ashore despite the conditions ... it has been the experience of a lifetime.

Day 14 Hercules Bay and Fortuna Bay to Stromness

Russell gets up earlier than anyone else today and is out on deck well before breakfast, which pays off as he sees a Killer Whale! A great start to the day for him as we head along the coast towards Hercules Bay. There are loads of birds around too and these include all four species of Albatross seen to date with a few Wandering Albatross including a very white adult, a real beauty. There are the usual petrels and amongst the Southern Giant Petrels we find a few Northern. In Hercules Bay itself there are hundreds of Macaroni Penguins on the water and lots of Fur Seals. Scanning from the ship we can see Macaroni penguins

nesting in the Tussock Grass all around the bay and on the beach below a waterfall a small bunch of moulting King Penguins.

We are offered the choice of a zodiac ride or a landing at a Macaroni Penguin colony and most chose the latter though you get great views of the Macaronis either way. First we gather at the bottom of the slope and Russell brilliantly spots a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross fly into its nest. It is lovely to see it there and also watch others just cruising by and banking round before coming back. The penguin nesting colony is amongst the Tussock Grass and it is possible to walk up and look into the colony from just a few feet away. It gives the colony a very different feeling to any of the others we have visited. The penguins don't seem the tiniest bit interested in us and just carry on with what they are doing whether feeding large young ones or displaying to each other. The display is a loud affair with their wings held open and their heads rocking from side to side behind them. The weather is again beautiful and they look super with their yellow head plumes catching the sun.

Higher up the slope there is a nesting pair of Subantarctic Skuas with well grown chicks and at the top of the rise a couple of pairs of Southern Giant Petrels. Gustavo finds a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross on its nest which is a beautiful sight giving us the opportunity to enjoy the subtle shades of brown and grey which merge imperceptibly. We take far too many photos! Someone suddenly shouts, "Whale!" and there, out at sea, is a breaching Humpback Whale crashing into the water with a big splash. We see it surface a few more times and try to guide Colin's zodiac to it but it disappears before they can get there.

Back on board the ship we hear how those on the zodiac have been right up close to penguins on the rocks and in the water. There are still lots of penguins and fur seals porpoising and coming up close to the ship and the weather is absolutely glorious. The sun is bright and with the clear water we can even see the penguins and seals swimming under the water. The seals are incredibly fluid as they twist and turn in pursuit of one another. Then we make our way out of the bay and are back into a variety of seabirds following the ship as we cruise round to Fortuna Bay. At the back of the ship I would go so far as to say it is hot! Fortuna Bay is wide with a scattering of King Penguins all the way along and hundreds of Antarctic Fur Seals. There are a few Reindeer behind the beach and on the slopes above.

When Shackleton, with Worsley and Crean, crossed South Georgia in May 1915 they came down from the inhospitable mountain peaks and passes into Fortuna Bay thinking they were approaching Stromness Bay where lay the whaling station they hoped to reach for help. It was when they realised they were following the edge of a glacier down into the bay that it suddenly hit them that this couldn't be Stromness Bay and that they would have to climb back out of this bay and over into the next. This afternoon some of us head ashore on the zodiacs to follow the

route they took back up out of Fortuna Bay and over the ridge into Stromness Bay where the steep drop takes you down to a flat walk along the edge of a stream to the whaling station. In the meantime anyone not doing the walk spends the afternoon visiting the penguin colony and also a sealers cave before the ship leaves the bay and moves round into Stromness Bay where they will pick up the walkers.

The weather is perfect for a walk with bright sunshine and a light breeze and about 40 people take part, following the slope up towards a pass over the ridge. After walking up a grassy slope we soon find the vegetation peters out and as we gain height the terrain turns instead to barren shattered rock with hardly a single plant growing anywhere. It looks incredibly inhospitable to life yet as the ground levels off after quite a steep climb there is a small pool with a pair of Antarctic Terns flying round calling, so perhaps they have young here. The only other birds we see as we walk are South Polar Skuas. We stop to try and work out what route Shackleton must have taken to get to Fortuna Bay and it is quite astonishing that he managed it looking at the surrounding mountains and glaciers. The path climbs higher but eventually levels off and we come to a point where we can look down into Stromness Bay. We all pose for a group picture but I can't help thinking what this view must have meant to those three men, at last in sight of their goal after going through so much. All the rock is bare still but in winter, when Shackleton did this, it was covered in snow which meant that the drop down into the valley that we walked would have been impossible. It is steep enough trying to do it in scree and several people find it quite hard work, in icy conditions it would be hopeless. Instead they came down the edge of a stream but when this became a waterfall they no choice but to use the rope and lower them selves through the water to the bottom. Once we reached the bottom of the slope we walked round for a look at the waterfall and I have to say, I wouldn't like to do it even today!

The last part of the walk along the shingle of the river proves to have a few interesting plants with small patches of Antarctic Buttercup and some cushions of a plant with tiny white flowers that may be Antarctic Pearlwort, as well as more Greater Burnet, a little Magellanic Clubmoss and sheets of the Brown Rush. Then at the far end we arrive at the beach which is teeming with Antarctic Fur Seals. Some Reindeer try to walk through the seal colony and it is rather amusing to watch them run from one Fur seal into the next, each one rushing at them and making them change direction. There are dozens of pups chasing and playing including one leucistic one, a creamy white colour but still with black eyes and flippers. There is a Gentoo Penguin colony above the beach on some high ground and they look great walking through the heathy looking vegetation on their way to the colony. The whaling station is in bad repair and some of the buildings have completely collapsed but Damien points out the building which was Thoralf Sorlle,

the factory manager's house, where Shackleton's walk ended. From here they could get the help they so desperately wanted to save the rest of the men who were still on Elephant Island.

Back on the ship we are told that since the weather is so good we are going to have a barbeque on the deck, which is lovely. The food is great and we are all enjoying ourselves when Kevin comes to tell me that they are going to release the Blue Petrel. This bird was found earlier in the day by one of the crew under the ladders on the deck and so it was put in a box to be released at night when there would be fewer possible predators around. He says not to spread the news beyond our group so I rush round and find everyone I can in the few moments available and we head to the front of the ship where they take it out of its box and sit it on the side of the ship. It doesn't seem to get the message and flies the wrong way crashing back onto the deck! The only thing is to launch it, so with our hearts in our throats we watch as Kevin throws the bird up into the air and are delighted to see it wing away out into the bay, gaining speed all the time as it flies off into the sunset.

Day 15 Bay of Isles, Salisbury Plain and Prion Island

Some of us are on deck very early where we find constant light drizzle and very calm conditions, so calm that the numerous Light-mantled Sooty and Black-browed Albatrosses are all sitting on the water with not enough breeze to give them any lift. There seem to be penguins everywhere! Rafts of hundreds are sitting on the water or porpoising at speed past the ship, the majority are Gentoos and Macaronis but also a few King Penguins. There are also hundreds of Antarctic Fur Seals and it seems that where ever you look there are things leaping out of the water. There are lots of Giant Petrels too and close inspection reveals that both species are present, with by far the most Northernns we have seen so far, especially as we enter the Bay of Isles. This is a beautiful place. There are scattered small islands all around us and the misty conditions make the scene all the more atmospheric. We see the fin of a Dwarf Minke Whale near the shore. It only surfaces a couple of times before we lose it but it is clear that the animal is very small and this is the only species of Minke Whale here as the Antarctic species is found further south at this time if year. Some of the islands have Wandering Albatrosses nesting on them and in the calm conditions it is possible to set up the scope and have a look at them as we pass.

After breakfast we head ashore at Salisbury Plain where there is another fantastic King Penguin colony, the second largest in the world after St Andrew's Bay. There is a long beach and the penguins are all along it but the densest part of the colony is towards the left hand end and we work our way over to enjoy, for the last time, these wonderful birds. Many have eggs but, as at previous colonies, there are all kinds of behaviour to watch and if anything there seem to be even more courting couples and groups flapping each other with their flippers than at previous sites. My personal favourite young bird is one who comes running over to see

us flapping its wings and calling frantically as if desperate to tell us something. Once it has arrived beside us it calms down and soon just stands quietly next to us but the moment we walk away it comes running after us again flapping its flippers excitedly and craning its neck to see our faces, calming down only when we stop and stand still. This bird stays with us for about 20 minutes and we feel quite sad to leave it behind when we have to return to the zodiacs. The light drizzle makes for a different atmosphere and at times you can even see the birds breath, especially when they are doing their loud braying call. The Elephant Seals that are lying at the back of the beach are positively steaming! Time flies by as it always does when you are ashore but no-one wants to leave and we have to be encouraged onto the zodiacs by Brad and his team.

Back on the ship we move slowly through the bay where there is a lovely serene atmosphere, passing lots of Giant Petrels sitting on the water and Wilson's Storm-Petrels feeding near the ship. They seem to stand on the water with their wings raised and hardly flapping, using the smallest currents of air to keep themselves in place, it is just delightful to watch.

We head over to Prion Island having lunch on the way and soon we are anchored off the island which is shrouded in fog. We are rather privileged to be able to land here as they are now restricting the number of tours that can land in a season and we are pleased the conditions are calm so we will be able to land, but the fog is worrying and we wonder if we will be able to see anything when we get there! However we shouldn't have worried as no sooner do we start launching the zodiacs than the fog starts to lift. As we head out we pass a few little seaweed covered rocks and are well pleased when three South Georgia Pipits fly up from the rocks and over the zodiac.

We are greeted ashore by dozens of Antarctic Fur Seal pups who seem in a playful mood, then we gather on the shore before Kevin leads us up to the viewing area where the Wandering Albatross nests are found. We pass growling Fur Seals and another South Georgia Pipit lands on the path a little way ahead allowing us better views of this, the only passerine on the island. It is very streaky even for a pipit! At the top of the path the ground levels off and scattered in front of us across the top of the island in the Tussock Grass are nesting Wandering Albatrosses. We are really impressed by the sheer size of them ... they are huge!!! They make the Giant Petrels nesting nearby look surprisingly small. Through binoculars you can see every feather and detail and their peaceful looking faces make them look so gentle despite their dimensions. As we stand there enjoying them a breeze starts to pick up and almost immediately birds start opening their wings as if to test if it is strong enough to give them the lift they need to get airborne. As it gets stronger they start walking through the Tussock Grass with a very strange gait, their heads sticking out in front and swinging from side to side, and once at a high point they open their wings and launch themselves into the air. It is a magnificent sight as they sweep out over the ocean and across in front

of us on their enormous wings. With a span of approaching 12 feet they have the longest wings of any bird in the world! Some walk down to a patch of short grass they can use as a runway and run down that to get the speed they need to lift off. We then have the treat of numerous Albatrosses cruising round above our heads and round the headland at eye-level like gliders ... they are fantastic.

We are already running out of time and people are starting to head back down when suddenly someone says, "Look behind you". There is an Albatross walking through the grass straight towards us! Kevin suggests we move everything to one side as it may be trying to get to the high point where we are standing to use it a launch-pad. We do this and the Albatross walks right up beside us, gives us a look as if to say, "thank you" has a quick preen then takes a couple of paces off the high point, raises its wings and is away! We can't believe our luck as, at its closest, it is less than ten feet away! We walk back down to the beach feeling elated, it is just a shame that some of the group had already gone back down before the bird appeared.

Back on the beach we enjoy watching the albatrosses circling overhead and the fur seal pups chasing one another around the beach as we wait for a zodiac to come and take us on our tour round the island. We are well pleased to get Kevin as our zodiac driver and are soon getting excellent views of the birds to be seen here including a lovely Antarctic Tern that seems to be checking us out. We may be stirring things up with the propeller as it seems very keen to hang around the back of the zodiac allowing us astonishing close up views ... it looks as if it's going to land on Kevin's head! We also get amazing views of Wilson's Storm-Petrels all around us and in one bay find two leucistic fur seal pups with pale creamy fur. We head round to have a look at a cave where we find another South Georgia Pipit feeding amongst the seaweed. There is a colony of South Georgia Shags with well grown young and a mixed flock of Arctic and Antarctic Terns settled on the rocks.

Back aboard the ship we are soon on our way, leaving the Bay of Isles and heading round the north side of South Georgia. No sooner are we out into more open sea than we are into huge numbers of sea birds. There are Black-browed Albatrosses everywhere and scanning to the horizon there must be hundreds of them. We see several Light-mantled Sooties and a few Grey-headed Albatross and occasionally we are followed for while by a Wandering Albatross, which just dwarfs everything else. Both species of Giant Petrel are following the ship and there are literally hundreds of Antarctic Prions. There are more diving-petrels than we've seen before and sometimes small groups will contain birds that look rather plain which we assume are Common Diving-Petrels and others with a more contrasting appearance, including a whiter underwing, which we guess may be South Georgia Diving-Petrels, but they really are horribly similar. There are White-chinned Petrels but Irene still can't make out the white chin and I confess to her that neither can I. Things quieten down a little after a while,

but frustratingly only Russell and I are on deck when a Grey-backed Storm-Petrel appears flying along beside the ship. At around 6.45pm we run into a bank of thick fog which in some ways is frustrating but at least we can enjoy our evening meal without Ian and I feeling the urge to jump up every few minutes to see what's outside!

Day 16 **Shag Rocks and the Scotia Sea en route for the Falklands**

During the day's summary at the end of yesterday Kevin mentioned that we will be passing Shag Rocks early in the morning and some of us are up good and early to make sure we see them (too early... its still dark!) This is known to be a good area for birds and cetaceans so we don't want to miss it but nothing has prepared us for the spectacle that awaits us as it gets light. There are literally thousands of Black-browed Albatrosses! It is incredible to witness such a density of birds with albatrosses in every direction right out to the horizon. There are about two or three hundred in the wake of the ship along with lots of Giant Petrels, a couple of Grey-headed Albatrosses and every now and again a Wandering Albatross. They are all wonderful to watch as they sweep across the wake then up into the air in big arcs, over and back across, some flying faster than the ship and coming alongside at eye level or just below us and the photographers snap away like mad! The Wandering Albatrosses look so much more majestic than the rest with their bulk and incredibly long bowed wings, but the Black-browed are lovely and it is great to see them in such numbers. The numbers seem to be increasing as we travel and at around 6.00am we reach a patch of sea where birds seem to be feeding in a dense pack. There are hundreds of birds sitting on the sea and many hundreds more wheeling around the area. Scanning to the horizon in every direction you can see several thousand birds are visible at this point but it is impossible to put a number on it. The vast majority are Black-browed Albatrosses but there are all sorts of other birds here too with other albatrosses and giant petrels being the most obvious but also hundreds of White-chinned Petrels and probably thousands of Antarctic Prions. Once we pass through this dense feeding flock the numbers immediately reduce so now we are only being followed by perhaps 40 or so Black-browed Albatrosses and a dozen or so Giant Petrels. We guess we may have seen as many as ten thousand albatrosses this morning but who knows.

We pass Shags Rocks which are a small cluster of tiny, rather pointed islands with South Georgia Shags nesting on them and continue on with our smaller following of albatrosses and petrels, also seeing smaller petrels such as Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm-Petrels, a few Common Diving-Petrels plus some Pintados. At around 8.00am we see our first Soft-plumaged Petrel and as the morning progresses we see quite a few more of these. They are wonderful fliers sweeping down at great speed to almost touch the sea then up high again in great swinging arcs almost turning upside down before sweeping back down towards the sea again. A single Blue Petrel flies past, then, at around 9.00am, Sue, a passenger on the ship who has been doing some lovely sketches throughout the holiday,

spots a small group of two or three Hourglass Dolphins just behind the ship. They surface just two or three times very quickly but the rather large black fin and glimpse of the pattern on their sides is enough to be sure of their identification. There is a single Wandering Albatross that follows the ship for hours. After the early start it is hard to keep awake and eventually only Ian and I are left on deck, dozing in the chairs. I wake up and open my eyes to see another group of five Hourglass Dolphins right beside the ship! They race away surfacing at speed another three or four times creating quite a splash but don't hang around for long and moments later we wonder if we dreamt it.

After lunch there seems to be even fewer birds around though Soft-plumaged Petrels continue to appear at regular intervals and we are surprised to see a couple of King Penguins and a group of Macaronis. Over the next hour or so there are a few whale blows with perhaps a dozen or so animals involved, but they are all rather distant and seem to be Humpbacks even though only five animals are actually seen. It then becomes very quiet for the rest of the afternoon, the only highlight being Kevin appearing on the deck with a box containing an Antarctic Prion. It is lovely to see it in the hand, and the bill is amazing, but it is keen to be away and flies off vigorously. Most people spend the afternoon resting or listening to the various lectures and as the day continues we start running into more fog so little else is seen.

Day 17 **Southern Atlantic Ocean between South Georgia and the Falklands**

The day starts quietly with patches of fog and steady rain. There are very few birds around, just the occasional Soft-plumaged Petrel, one or two Southern Giant Petrel, small numbers of White-chinned Petrels and a single Great Shearwater but little else, so again people take time out to rest or listen to the lectures. Later in the morning the fog has dispersed and the number of Soft-plumaged Petrels is up to an estimated 25-30 an hour and we see three more Great Shearwaters, a couple of Northern Giant Petrels amongst the few Southern and the occasional Wandering Albatross, but there isn't much else before we break for lunch. Just before lunch I find a small all dark petrel but it is too far away to be sure what it is!

In the afternoon the wind has really picked up and there are more Soft-plumaged Petrels and great excitement when an all dark petrel of similar size and structure appears behind the ship. Presumably it is the same as the one I found before lunch but much closer and Barry brilliantly grabs a couple of photos while we try to pick out any plumage features we can. We study the books and the photos on the back of his camera and after initially thinking we have a Kerguelen Petrel realise it is in fact a dark phase Soft-plumaged Petrel, not a new species but extremely interesting to see none the less and quite scarce. In total we see about four of them over the day. Almost immediately this bird is followed by a rather bluer looking prion with a thick black band on the tail which we identify as a Fairy Prion.

At around 2.00pm we are well pleased when a Northern Royal Albatross appears right beside the ship! It is surprisingly distinctive with all dark wings and a pure white tail and we are surprised when a Southern Royal Albatross appears moments later and both can be seen together in the wake of the ship. This is much more like a young Wandering but while having mainly dark wings they have a white leading edge and the tail is has no black in it. As the afternoon continues we see a couple of Wandering plus a few Black-browed Albatrosses and a single Grey Petrel appears. Ian gets great photos of another Southern Royal Albatross and the last bird of the day is a large heavy skua skimming the water that is presumably the Falklands race of Subantarctic Skua.

Day 18 The Falkland Islands - Stanley, Gypsy Cove and Pembroke Point

Some of us get up at 5.00am to scan for dolphins as we come into the harbour at Stanley, hoping they would bow ride the ship, but instead we have to put up with hundreds of Black-browed Albatrosses and literally thousands of Sooty Shearwaters! It is very windy but the sun is shining and it is a lovely day. It feels really mild after the cold winds of the Antarctic. There are a couple of fishing boats following us in and we see lots of birds as we approach the harbour including Kelp and Dolphin Gulls, Magellanic Penguins, White-chinned Petrels, South American Terns, Falklands Subantarctic Skuas and a Turkey Vulture. The island looks rather flat and covered in grass, dare I say a bit dull after South Georgia, but there are some lovely looking beaches and rocky promontories along the coast.

We anchor in the bay just off Port Stanley and go ashore in the zodiacs. It feels weird to be in so much civilisation! Houses, shops, pubs and cafes ... there are even trees! Although the houses are not quite the British style it is a bit of Britain in the middle of nowhere with the old red British telephone boxes and post boxes and even a London double decker bus! We have a look round the visitor centre and I manage to organise a taxi that can take six of us birding for the morning while Janet and Jackie head for the shops. Our driver is called Peter and he says he knows nothing about birds but we cheerfully tell him as long as he can take us to them we can work out what they are. He then goes on to demonstrate a surprisingly good knowledge of exactly where to see a whole range of the islands birds and within minutes we are watching nice flocks of Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese on the outskirts of town. He seems to have a different local name for many of the species we see and calls these Brent Geese! As we head out towards Gypsy cove the wind is incredibly strong and it is hard to even open the van door when we make a stop at a muddy bit of coast where we see Magellanic Oystercatcher and a small flock of Two-banded Plovers. There is a rather surreal moment when Irene looks in the scope to see the plovers and says she can't see them, "All I can see is a hare!" she says. I have a quick look and yes ... there is indeed a Brown Hare at the edge of the mud making me wonder how I spotted the well camouflaged plovers and missed the hare! We continue on our way

making our next stop when we spot a raptor dropping into a quarry. Peter drives us pretty close to it and it is a superb immature Variable Hawk, known as Red-backed Hawk on the Falklands. It is calling continuously and we are delighted when a very smart adult male with a grey back and white tail with black tip comes in and drops off some food. Further on we get good views of a Falklands Subantarctic Skua which is bullying a Rock Shag, landing on it every time it surfaces. We see a female Falklands Steamer-Duck with ducklings and get brief views of a Correndora Pipit and Black-throated (Canary-winged) Finch.

We arrive at Gypsy Cove where the wind is howling as we make our way round the headland towards the beach. The vegetation looks interesting, like stunted heathland, the main plant being locally known as Diddle-dee. There are dense cushions of a plant that is incredibly firm to touch called Balsam Bog, a bush with fluffy flowers called Christmas Bush and two kinds of ferns, Small Fern and Fuegian Tall Fern which is looking rather worse for wear. On the headland we are surprised that despite the wind we get good views of Long-tailed Meadowlark, Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant, Austral Thrush and Black-chinned Siskin. There are a few Magellanic Penguins resting at the entrance to their burrows amongst the dunes and there are more in a small flock on the beach with a couple of King Penguins amongst them. Next we get fantastic views of a group of five very active Peale's Dolphins. They are just off the shore and chase each other around, sometimes jumping partway out of the water allowing us to see their distinctive dark heads. A pair of Falklands Steamer-Ducks swims past and we have a look at a small Rock Shag colony and a pair of Blackish Oystercatchers before heading back to the van. From here we head a little way down the road and are amazed when Peter turns off onto an incredibly rough track to take us towards some small pools. We make a stop to check some ducks on one of the pools which turn out to be Speckled Teal and as we watch a small flock of Ruddy-headed Geese fly in. There is a bird calling in the rough grassland as we drive further on and we stop to see if we can see it. After a few moments we find it on top of a hummock, a beautiful Rufous-chested Dotterel, a great find! Ian and Barry creep up on it and get some great photos. We are running out of time as we said we would meet the ladies at 12.30pm so we start on our way back stopping briefly for a Sedge (Falklands Grass) Wren and again for some Crested Ducks on the mud. As we enter the town there is a superb male Long-tailed Meadowlark dust-bathing at the edge of the road.

Back in town we go for a fish and chips lunch in one of the cafes then have some free time to look round the shops or visit the museum or go birding along the shore. There are several Kelp Geese, a colony of Rock Shags nesting on a wrecked ship and some very close views of Falklands Steamer-Ducks. Gradually people make their way back to the Andrea but some lucky ones have bow-riding Commerson's Dolphins around the zodiac on the way back ... fantastic!

Day 19 West Point and New Island

There is an exciting start to the day with six Commerson's Dolphins bow-riding the ship! There is a mother and calf but they soon disappear leaving the other four with us for some time as we head towards our first landing at West Point. They are such delightful animals, small and very distinctive with all dark heads but lots of white on their bodies. The weather isn't very nice being overcast with rain and wind, but we make our landing and start on the walk over the island. As we walk the weather just gets worse and as we reach the top of the hill we have fierce winds in our faces making the rain sting. Not to be put off we continue on down into the more sheltered valley where there is a mixed colony of Rockhopper Penguins and Black-browed Albatrosses. They are nesting in amongst Tussock Grass but the path goes along the edge of the colony and we get excellent views of them as they go about building their nests, feeding their young or just looking miserable in the rain! The albatrosses either have quite well grown young that are very funny looking and covered in grey fluffy down, or some seem to be building new nests, standing on top of these strange towers of mud and reaching down to pick up mud and pat it into place with the sides of their bills. Everything is very muddy, including the birds, and the yellow plumes on the Rockhoppers are plastered to the sides of their heads. Gradually the weather improves and the rain stops and we enjoy watching a group of Rockhoppers on the cliff walking down a well worn path to a ledge where they jump off or get washed into the crashing waves. Every now and then a Striated Caracara flies across above the colony looking rather dark and scruffy though we do find one very smart individual at the edge of the colony beside the path which causes a traffic jam as we don't want to scare it off.

Once we have seen everything here we walk across to the house of a couple called Rod and Lily Napier who live on the island. They have prepared a lovely spread of cakes and biscuits for us, with tea in china cups, all of which is delicious and we warm ourselves up while feeding bits of cake to a very tame Striated Caracara that all but comes into the house through the back door! There are lots of Black-chinned Siskins and Austral Thrushes in the garden and we see Peale's Dolphins in the bay below the house. Indeed Janet and Russell are lucky enough to have them accompany their zodiac back to the ship! As we set sail we pass a slope of Tussock Grass on the other side of the bay and in it there are South American Sea Lions, females that look gingery coloured all over.

We come out of the bay and immediately into rough seas as we plough into a force seven to eight gale! We are still getting a little shelter from some islands offshore but it is exciting to see the waves crashing over the front of the ship! The waves are all white crested and blowing into lines of foam but the birds just seem to love it and the Black-browed Albatrosses look fantastic as they use the wind and cruise along with the ship. There are also lots of Prions flying alongside the ship and after careful study we identify them as Slender-billed Prions as they have very narrow tail bands and different head markings to the Antarctic

Prions. There may even be a mix of the two! There are lots of Sooty Shearwaters and the occasional White-chinned Petrel.

As we approach New Island we pass very close to a small island completely covered in Tussock Grass and Irene points out a Kelp Goose on the shore. As I look through the binoculars three little black birds fly past it ... Tussock Birds! That is the local name for Blackish Cinclodes and though easier to see on the Falklands than anywhere else in the world it is only found on rat free islands, where it is very common. New Island is situated such that our anchor point is beautifully sheltered from the strong winds and soon we are on the zodiacs and heading ashore. We are met by Ian Strange and another couple who live there. We have a look round their homemade visitor centre and admire their paintings before taking the walk across the island. On the far side is a wonderful bird colony with Rockhopper Penguins, King Shags and Black-browed Albatrosses all mixed together. The sun is shining but the wind is absolutely howling in off the sea and up the slope making it hugely entertaining to watch how the birds cope with the wind. The Albatrosses tuck their wings in close to their bodies in a W while the shags end up a very strange shape as they contort themselves to make their landings, feet out to the sides as breaks, wings almost twisted in on themselves. The sea is crashing against the rocks way down below and Jane spots a South American Fur Seal in the white water! There are also Rockhopper Penguins bobbing around trying to get ashore. It appears suicidal but obviously they are somehow managing it as a steady stream of them are hopping up the slope to the colony. The whole scene is spectacular and so different to the visit this morning to the rain soaked colony in the Tussock Grass. We watch young Rockhoppers chasing their parents to be fed, baby albatrosses waiting patiently for the return of their parents, a very brave Rockhopper who repeatedly chases away any skua that lands anywhere near it and albatrosses creeping clumsily to the edge of the cliff then tipping over the edge to catch the wind in their wings and sail up high above us in seconds. It is a wonderful final landing and we head back to the ship with a mixture of elation and sadness that the holiday is coming to an end.

Back on the zodiacs we pass the Kelp Geese on the shore and some people see a Black-crowned Night-Heron. Back aboard the ship we scan around and find lots of South American Terns, Kelp Gulls, a lovely flock of Magellanic Penguins in the bay, a couple of Striated Caracaras over the Tussock Grass island as well as a couple more Sea Lions. Then the warning comes over the tannoy that we might wish to top up our travel sickness medication and make sure anything in our cabins that could move is secured ... we are in for a rough ride!

We are soon out of the shelter of the island and into the open sea leaving the Falklands behind as we head back towards Ushuaia. The wind is a force eight and we are heading pretty much straight into it so the ship is soon rocking steeply up and down crashing through the waves which at times spray right over the top

of the ship, but the Albatrosses love it and so do the Sooty Shearwaters which are in huge numbers!

Day 20 At Sea en route to Ushuaia

Somehow most of us manage to get some sleep during the night despite the bed rocking back and forth. It seems easier to cope with than the side to side rocking we had on the Drake's Passage but it is still pretty tiring and most of us feel we could do with a little more sleep by breakfast time. It is still very rough with a force six to seven wind having dropped from a force eight to nine during the night.

It seems very quiet with few people on the deck and not many birds passing either, just the occasional Black-browed Albatross, Giant Petrel or Sooty Shearwater and a few Antarctic Prions accompanying the ship. Once in a while a Wandering Albatross appears and later in the day at least three Southern Royal Albatrosses and a probable Northern. On the whole people spend much of the day resting or watching the lectures

It is quite a relief when later in the day the weather really starts to calm down and as we get nearer the coast of South America we get a bit more shelter and the sea becomes considerably calmer so that by late afternoon when we meet in the Kittiwake lounge for a summary of the trip by the crew we are all feeling much happier.

The summary is very good and there are some interesting things said by the various members of Brads team. They also pass the microphone round the passengers who are welcome to say a bit if they feel they want to and I am delighted when one lady thanks our 'Birders Group' as we have become known, for being so approachable and helping them identify the birds they were seeing from the ship. Next they put on the CD of photos that has been collected during the voyage and which is for sale in aid of the Save the Albatross campaign. It is a great selection and we are pleased to see a few from our group in there.

After an excellent evening meal with songs from the kitchen staff afterwards, we present Romeo with a present ... a large King Penguin hat which he seems delighted with and promptly wears while he sings us a final song, then we head through to the library where Jane and I are presented with lovely book of penguin photos with a very touching comment written inside the cover and signed by everyone. We do the checklist one last time and go round the group to find out what people have chosen as their 'Species of the trip,' 'Place of the trip,' and 'Magic Moment'. It is all thoroughly enjoyable reminiscing about the incredible places we have been and what we have seen over the past three weeks and it is ridiculously hard to choose a single species or place but it is good fun and soon we have a remarkably varied list. Despite there being a relatively small number of species, between the eight of us we choose six! Wandering and Light-mantled

Sooty Albatross get a mention as do Adelie and King Penguin but Snow Petrel and the delightful Antarctic Fur Seals both get two votes each! Of the places we visited Yalour Island right at the beginning of the holiday gets a vote as do Prion Island, Point Wilde and St Andrews Bay but the astonishing Weddell Sea with its masses of Tabular Icebergs gets more votes than anywhere else. Magic Moments are always very personal and there were some lovely moments mentioned here, from the thousands of albatrosses around the ship as we leave South Georgia, to going under the edge of an iceberg in a zodiac, to watching penguins trying to get onto the icebergs and the wonderful Wandering Albatross on Prion Island, but the most votes go to the visit to the astounding King Penguin colony at St Andrews Bay. One thing we all agree on however is that it has been the most incredible trip ever! A real trip of a lifetime.

Day 21 Ushuaia and off home

It seems amazingly calm when we wake up and we assume that we are already docked but up on deck we soon realise that we haven't quite arrived. We dock as we are eating breakfast and saying our goodbyes to everyone. Lots of people seem to want to say thank you to us for helping them with the birds and some say they may even buy some binoculars! We are then met off the ship and taken to an office where we can leave our bags. We still have about four hours before we have to go to the airport so while some people choose to look round the shops some of us head along the shoreline out of town and do some birding.

We set off and immediately make a new friend who joins us on our walk, a rather woolly looking black dog that Jane nick-names Pero. He's a nightmare! He keeps wandering into the road in front of cars and we feel sure we are going to be spending the morning trying to find a vet but all efforts to chase him away prove fruitless so we just have to get used to it. Actually it's quite a nice dog! There are lots of Kelp Gulls and Dolphin Gulls on the shoreline plus a few Rock Shags and both Flightless and Flying Steamer Ducks (they must have been, they were flying!) On the rocks are both Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers and we find Southern Lapwings on a bit of rough ground as well as Rufous-collared Sparrows, Long-tailed Meadowlarks and an Austral Thrush. Both Southern and Chimango Caracaras fly over and high over the mountains there are circling Turkey Vultures but we can't turn them into Condors! Beside some large gas tanks they have mown the grass and this seems to have attracted numerous birds including three superb looking Black-faced Ibis, several female Austral Negritos, a couple of Dark-faced Ground-Tyrants and two new birds, Bar-winged Cinclodes and American Kestrel which promptly scares everything else off! Pero is amazingly patient as we watch all these birds and just waits until we set off again.

We decide to take a side road through the houses to try and get to the woodland up above the town and soon find we are attracting a whole bunch of dogs! Every house seems to have one and at one point we are surrounded by a whole pack of them all barking at each other, only Pero seems quiet and sticks close to us

as we walk through them and up the slope into some scrubby habitat at the woodland edge and we find we are beginning to quite like him after all. At least he doesn't bark all the time! In the bushes we find lots of White-crested Elaenias, Austral Thrushes and Black-chinned Siskins and a couple of lovely Thorn-tailed Rayaditos. Soon we appear at the side of another road that leads back into town and scanning the trees we find two White-throated Caracaras. A pair of Grey-hooded Sierra-Finches feed at the side of the road and as we walk back into town a Fire-eyed Diucon flies from wire to wire ahead of us. It has been a very enjoyable morning's birding but finally our time runs out and we head back for our lift to the airport and our journey home.

My thanks to everyone for being such good company and helping make it the most wonderful trip I have ever led.

Birds

Great Grebe
Wandering Albatross
Northern Royal Albatross
Southern Royal Albatross
Black-browed Albatross
Grey-headed Albatross
Light-mantled Sooty Albatross
Northern Giant Petrel
Southern Giant Petrel
Southern Fulmar
Pintado Petrel (Cape Petrel)
Snow Petrel
Soft-plumaged Petrel
Blue Petrel
Antarctic Prion
Fairy Prion
Slender-billed Prion
Grey Petrel
White-chinned Petrel
Great Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Wilson's Storm-Petrel
Black-bellied Storm-Petrel
Gray-backed Storm-Petrel
Common Diving-Petrel
Magellanic Diving-Petrel
South Georgian Diving-Petrel
King Penguin
Gentoo Penguin
Adelie Penguin
Chinstrap Penguin
Rockhopper Penguin
Macaroni Penguin
Magellanic Penguin
Rock Shag
King Shag (Imperial Shag)
Antarctic Shag (Blue-eyed Shag)
South Georgian Shag
Black-crowned Night-Heron
Black-faced Ibis
Ruddy-headed Goose

Upland Goose
Kelp Goose
Crested Duck
Flightless Steamer-Duck
Falkland (Flightless) Steamer-Duck
Flying Steamer-Duck
Speckled Teal
Yellow-billed Pintail
South Georgia Pintail
Chiloe Wigeon
Turkey Vulture
Variable Hawk (Red-backed Hawk)
Striated Caracara
Southern (Crested) Caracara
Chimango Caracara
White-throated Caracara
American Kestrel
Two-banded Plover
Rufous-chested Dotterel
Southern Lapwing
Blackish Oystercatcher
Magellanic Oystercatcher
White-rumped Sandpiper
Snowy Sheathbill
South Polar Skua
Subantarctic Skua (Brown Skua)
Subantarctic Skua (Falkland Skua)
Chilean Skua
Dolphin Gull
Kelp Gull
Brown-hooded Gull
South American Tern
Antarctic Tern
Arctic Tern
Austral Parakeet
Blackish Cinclodes
Dark-bellied Cinclodes
Bar-winged Cinclodes
Thorn-tailed Rayadito
Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant
Austral Negrito
Tufted Tit-Tyrant

Fire-eyed Duicons
White-crested Elaenia
Chilean Swallow
Blue-and-White Swallow
Sedge Wren (Falkland Grass Wren)
Southern House Wren
Austral Thrush
Correndera Pipit
South Georgia Pipit
Patagonian Sierra-Finch
Grey-hooded Sierra-Finch
Canary-winged Finch
(Black-throated Finch)
Rufous-collared Sparrow
Long-tailed Meadowlark
Black-chinned Siskin
House Sparrow

TOTAL SPECIES: 99

Marine Mammals

Antarctic Fur Seal
South American Fur Seal
South American Sea Lion
Weddell Seal
Crabeater Seal
Leopard Seal
Southern Elephant Seal
Commerson's Dolphin
Peale's Dolphin
Hourglass Dolphin
Killer Whale
Southern Bottlenose Whale
Gray's Beaked Whale
Southern Right Whale
Antarctic Minke Whale
Dwarf Minke Whale
Humpback Whale

Other Mammals

Rabbit
Brown Hare

Plants

Southern Beech	Nothofagus sp.
False Mistletoe	Mizodendrum punctulatum
Prickly Heath	Pernettya mucronata
Diddle-dee (Red Crowberry)	Empetrum rubrum
Christmas Bush	Baccharis magellanica
Box-leaved Barberry	Berberis buxifolia
Antarctic Buttercup	Ranunculus bitematus
Antarctic Eyebright	Euphrasia antarctica
Devil's Strawberry	Gunnera magellanica
Field Chickweed	Cerastium arvense
Antarctic Pearlwort	Colobanthus quitensis
Yellow Violet	Viola maculata
Native Gentian	Gentianella magellanica
Magellanic Strawberry	Rubus geoides
Greater Burnet (Stick-tight)	Acaena magellanica
Balsam Bog	Bolax gummifera
Cabbage Daisy	Senecio accanthifolius
Fashine	Chilliotrichium diffusum
Yellow Orchid	Gavilea lutea
Pale-green Orchid	Gavilea australis
Dog Orchid	Codonorchis lessonii
Tussock Grass	Poa flabellate
Antarctic Hairgrass	Deschampsia antarctica
Brown Rush	Rostkovia magellanica
Native Rush	Juncus scheuzeroides
Magellanic Clubmoss	Lycopodium magellanicum
Adder's tongue Fern	Ophioglossum crotalophoroides
Antarctic Sheildfern	Polystichum mohrioides
Small Fern	Blechnum penna-marina
Fuegian Tall Fern	Blechnum magellanicum
Darwin's Fungus	Cyttaria darwinii