

Australasian Antarctic Expedition 2013-14 Leg one.

Dear Friends and family,

We arrived in Bluff this morning the conclusion of the sub-Antarctic leg of our expedition. My apologies for the total lack of correspondence during the time at sea, there are several valid reasons for this but I hope you have been following the Spirit of Mawson website where there should be daily updates.

The last 12 days have been magic, though frantically busy. While at sea I do two 10 minute bird counts during as many daylight hours as possible. One looking forward and one of birds following the ship. Thus I spend much of my day on the bridge bird counting. We have seen about 8 species of albatross, three species of penguins, lots of petrels Antarctic terns, skuas, sea lions, fur seals and elephant seals, the seals on land.

First stop was the Auckland Islands where I spent six weeks in 1972-73. On the islands I have been censusing terns, shags and penguins (although the penguin counts have not worked out so far). I also visit as many of the small islands as possible to determine which birds are nesting there and to estimate their numbers. At the Auckland Islands we had success, visiting one small island for which there is no record of any previous visit and certainly no record of birds found there, where we discovered white-headed petrels, sooty shearwaters and Antarctic prions. On another small island where sea lions once bred we found an absence of sea lions but various petrels now nest where sea lions once bred. Bad news for sea lions, good news for the petrels.

Next stop was Campbell Island for two days. Day one I was on the ship doing continuous bird counts while the various marine biologists and oceanographers did their thing. We will collaborate to see how marine biological parameters match the physical features and the bird distributions within Perseverance Harbour. Next day most of us went ashore on what was really a tourist excursion walking over to the wild western coast across the amazing megaherb fields with albatrosses scattered among the plants. Only the large yellow-flowered *Bulbinella* and the peculiar mauve flowered *Anisoteme* were in flower, in a month's time the other large herbs will flower. The weather was not conducive to prolonged sitting about admiring the views, it was foggy, cold with showers and a gale force wind whipping past.

That afternoon we went to Northeast Harbour where much to my delight we came across a pair of Campbell Island teal. This little flightless duck was once thought extinct, rediscovered on tiny Dent Island (just off Campbell) in the 1980's, some taken into captivity where they bred well, a wild population established on Codfish Island (off Stewart Island) and then after rats were eradicated 10 years ago the teal released on Campbell where their ancestors became extinct after rats arrived 200 years ago.

We saved the best for last; yesterday a small party landed on the Snares Islands where my career began 44 years ago when this then young enthusiastic naïve undergraduate spent three months working for John Warham. I last saw the Snares in 1973 so it was nice to be back. After a few hours ashore two of us took advantage of the very rare opportunity of having a zodiac available at the same time as there were flat calm conditions on the south side of the island to do a survey of sea

birds and seals along that rarely visited coast. We discovered three colonies of Cape Petrels, a wonderful bonus for the last day.

So what has life been like on the ship. This is a mixed group, about 12 science leaders (I am one), 5 paying passengers, two school teachers who got their trip by their students winning the doodle for google competition, a doctor, with PhD students filling the empty cabins. Then there's the crew, the chefs and coordinator are employed by Heritage Expeditions, the ship crew and the ship are Russian. Despite the varied group, we all got on really well, it was a hard working but fun loving group. It has been one of the most enjoyable expeditions I have been on.

OK, that's a quick run down of leg one. We depart for Macquarie Island and Antarctica tomorrow afternoon. I am off to Invercargill to find an internet café to send this. Do pass this letter on to others who may be interested.

XXX

Kerry-Jayne