

ANTARCTICA

November 2, 2009 to November 22, 2009

Guided by
George Armistead

In 2009 we visited Antarctica: the coldest, driest, highest, most southerly and 5th largest continent in the world. It is the stuff of legend, home to the last age of great explorers. It remains a frontier in many ways, but is still rich in history, and we tried to make a little of our own during our visit to the continent, the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, the South Orkneys and the South Shetlands, before finishing in the world's southern most city of Ushuaia. We encountered mostly good weather, save some blustery conditions around South Georgia, and despite some wild ice conditions in the Weddell Sea we were able to land on the continent on the west side of the Peninsula. We saw all seven expected penguin species, though a poor year for krill meant that colony numbers were down some. Still we had great encounters with all species, and also enjoyed some unusual whale and seabird encounters, all while taking in some of the world's most magnificent scenery.

We boarded our ship the Professor Multanovskiy in the heart of Patagonia at the port of Puerto Madryn. Upon boarding we tasted some of what was to come with Magellanic Penguins frolicking in the water around the ship, Southern Right Whales fluking nearby, and Rock Shags turning their heads, side-to-side, examining us with both eyes. Our first stop would be the Falklands Islands, and at sea we familiarized ourselves with what would be our most steadfast, and sea-worthy companions in the Cape Petrels, the White-chinned Petrels, and the Black-browed Albatrosses. These species were welcome and expected daily but most unexpected was a dapper little Many-colored Rush-Tyrant. This tiny flycatcher provided a splash of color against an otherwise monochromatic sea. Once at the Falklands we drank in the sights of a large Rockhopper Penguin/Black-browed Albatross colony, and also quickly snagged sightings of the islands endemics including the steamerduck, the Striated Caracara (Johnny Rook!), and the Cobb's Wren, while also enjoying nice encounters with Rufous-chested Dotterel and Canary-winged Finch among others. A stop into the town of Stanley would be our last sighting of anything resembling a real town for a couple weeks.

En route to majestic South Georgia Island we crossed the Falkland Plateau and here the tubenose show really began to blossom. Smart-looking sprites like the Blue Petrel and the Gray-backed Storm-Petrel first appeared and some dazzling aerialists like Soft-plumaged Petrel, Atlantic Petrel and Kerguelen Petrel began to trace arcs across the sky. Once at South Georgia we wallowed with enormous Elephant Seals, and marveled at the thousands of King Penguins and several nesting Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses. South Georgia is simply one of earth's greatest treasures. Between the scenery (particularly Drygalski Fjord), the Snow Petrels, and various penguin colonies it is a tough place to leave, but we still had a continent to add to our list.

Once at the South Orkneys you really started to feel like you were at Antarctica. The morning we arrived there an Antarctic Petrel or two ushered us along in grand fashion until we reached the Orcadas Station where we met several of the 15 Argentine biologists stationed there. That particular spot didn't offer much in the way of birds, but it did bring home to us what a desolate area we were venturing into, and we had to wonder about those biologists a little bit. We were the first new faces they'd seen in nearly a year. Leaving the South Orkneys we encountered some serious pack ice, to the point that we had to divert our route northwest a bit before we could find open water. In doing so we met up with some awe-inspiring bergs the waters between which harbored a great many Fin Whales. Finally after

some nimble navigating by our captain and crew we awoke one morning to behold Antarctica proper. At Neko Harbor, West Antarctica on November 18th we put foot on the continent. It felt good indeed, and we were greeted by hundreds of Gentoo Penguins and some Adelies too and an impressive set of Glaciers. That morning at Neko was unforgettable, but then we added to that experience with a cruise down the Lemaire Channel and then a landing at Peterman Island. Here we reached our southernmost point nearing 64 degrees south and the Adelie Penguins and Antarctic Shags really have the run of things.

We set sail from Antarctica headed north to the South Shetlands and landed on Deception Island. As we crossed into the bay, formed by the caldera of the active volcano, steam rose from the beaches and a Leopard Seal eyed us from a nearby ice floe. Once on the ground we found nice close Weddell Seals, and watched Cape Petrels feeding on krill boiled in the warm volcanic waters, as Antarctic Terns 'click'ed and cried overhead. Our last landing at Half Moon Island netted us close encounters with the tidy and trim Chinstrap Penguins, and then it was on to cross the fabled Drake Passage. Surprisingly the weather was perfectly (and almost disappointingly) palatable, but a magical dusk encounter with a pod of Orca made the scene serene and surreal. We finished in Ushuaia and ventured into Tierra del Fuego where a Green-backed Firecrown startled us, and sightings of treerunners, rayaditos and an Andean Condor made for a nice caper.

I'd like to thank you each for making the trip possible and also so thoroughly enjoyable. The Malbecs were nice, the Argentine steaks were memorable, and the birds and scenery were magnificent but the company was superior still! Hope to see you afield again soon. -George

List total: 98 bird taxa and 20 mammal taxa

*If marked to left of list, * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic,*

N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

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Spheniscidae

KING PENGUIN (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*)

South Georgia is the place for these birds. We saw thousands there including quite a good number of the brown "kiwi"-like juveniles. The largest colony of this species is actually found on Crozet Island, but most folks first encounter them at South Georgia or Macquarie Island.

GENTOO PENGUIN (*Pygoscelis papua*)

Between Neko Harbor and Peterman Island we had our largest numbers with several thousand birds there. This is the third largest penguin species.

ADELIE PENGUIN (*Pygoscelis adeliae*)

As we neared the South Orkneys we found our first groups of this species which is truly an Antarctic penguin. Their range is receding to the south as a result of global warming and the Gentoos quickly colonize the areas left vacant by this species.

CHINSTRAP PENGUIN (*Pygoscelis antarctica*)

Surely the smartest-looking of the penguins in this region, we found Chinstraps in good numbers at especially in the South Shetlands at Half Moon Island.

ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN (*Eudyptes chrysocome chrysocome*)

*At West Point in the company of several hundred Black-browed Albatrosses we found these small, attractive penguins breeding by the hundreds. Several of them surprised us, nearly underfoot in the tussock (*Poa*) grass.*

MACARONI PENGUIN (*Eudyptes chrysolophus*)

On South Georgia we found good numbers of these. The yellowish tufts about their head, resembling the macaroni coiffure hairstyles made famous by italians in the 1700s, lend them their name.

MAGELLANIC PENGUIN (*Spheniscus magellanicus*)

Likely due to the poor krill season, far fewer were present than expected at the Falklands (Malvinas). Just a few dozen were seen of this sort of prototypical penguin.

Podicipedidae

GREAT GREBE (*Podiceps major*)

An elegant species we found them in good numbers around Chubut and Ushuaia.

Diomedidae

SNOWY (WANDERING) ALBATROSS (*Diomedea exulans exulans*)

First found in the waters over the Falkland Plateau, we then rejoined them at the end of our voyage around Cape Horn. The birds we saw all appeared to be of this (nominate) form.

NORTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS (*Diomedea epomophora sanfordi*)

Just a couple seen on the first day at sea. These birds show much more contrast in the wing than Southern Royals and appear pretty much the same at all ages.

SOUTHERN ROYAL ALBATROSS (*Diomedea epomophora epomophora*)

Dozens seen in route to the Falklands and also nearer to Cape Horn. As with other albatrosses these birds are really denizens of subantarctic waters. Wandering, Amsterdam, and the Royal Albatrosses are grouped together as the "great albatrosses" and they are the largest flying birds on the planet with wingspans that near 11 feet.

GRAY-HEADED ALBATROSS (*Thalassarche chrysostoma*)

Harry spotted the first one as we neared the Falklands and then once we left those islands and headed to South Georgia we began to find many more of them. In the Bay of Isles we found (amid some rough weather!) several hundred of these birds near one breeding colony. This is a rather small, rakish Mollymawk, very similar in structure to (and closely related to) the next species.

BLACK-BROWED ALBATROSS (*Thalassarche melanophris melanophris*)

Surely one of the most pleasing seabirds to watch, this species was a good companion at sea for most days we were at sea. Biggest numbers were near the Falklands where 80% of the world population breeds. As we approached those islands we had a couple of day totals exceeded 4 figures. Of course at West Point we had them at broomstick length distance on terra firme!

LIGHT-MANTLED ALBATROSS (*Phoebastria palpebrata*)

Perhaps the sleekest and sexiest of seabirds, this species has to be seen to be believed. With their smooth chocolate and silver tones and their even, elongate angles it is a bird that is tough to do justice to with a photograph (though we surely tried!). South Georgia is a great spot for these and we found a couple of nice close nests to peer into and observe.

Procellariidae

ANTARCTIC (SOUTHERN) GIANT PETREL (*Macronectes giganteus*)

The ultimate "stinker". These are a little larger than their counterpart, and average paler overall and of course this species also offers the white morph, fondly known as the "white nellie". Seen everyday but one during our voyage.

HALL'S (NORTHERN) GIANT PETREL (*Macronectes halli*)

Like the species above this smaller, darker form preys on carrion, and whatever else it might take advantage of. We were careful to avoid them on the ground as they are rather expert projectile vomiters! Less common than the Southern we saw them 8/18 days.

SOUTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

This attractive tubenose may be seen nearly anywhere along the voyage as it spans many latitudes (vagrants have made it as far north as Ecuador and Brazil) in the southern ocean, but the biggest numbers were around the continent where they breed in large numbers. We neared 100 birds on a couple days around the continent.

ANTARCTIC PETREL (*Thalassoica antarctica*)

Surely one of the best birds of the trip, this species is one for real seabird enthusiasts, but it is showy enough for all to enjoy. We saw near 10 during our time around the South Orkneys, with one bird circling the boat for nearly two hours. Some trips to this part of the world may miss this species altogether so we felt fortunate to have such good experiences with them.

CAPE PETREL (*Daption capense capense*)

Our most regular and welcome companion at sea. One could not help but admire this elegantly attired species, and seeing dozens and sometimes hundreds of them cascading around the ship was a thrill indeed. Also watching them feed on 'boiled krill' at Deception Island was fun.

SNOW PETREL (*Pagodroma nivea*)

Perhaps the most emblematic tubenose to the region, this species is about as good-looking as they get in this part of the world. A few breed around South Georgia, but our best experiences came around the South Orkneys and then at sea amid the pack ice as we neared the continent. Seen six days with the best single day total being 115.

ATLANTIC PETREL (*Pterodroma incerta*)

*One of the great surprises of the trip was not just seeing this species so well but seeing 122 of them in one day. They were the only ones we saw, all over the Falkland Plateau, but they were thick that day in what may be record numbers for the region. This is one large *Pterodroma*.*

SOFT-PLUMAGED PETREL (*Pterodroma mollis*)

*Over the Falkland Plateau, en route to South Georgia we found small numbers of this dapper little *Pterodroma*. Total of 11 seen over two days.*

BLUE PETREL (*Halobaena caerulea*)

Another showy, agile, and sharply marked tubenose, we found large numbers of these around South Georgia, with a couple single day totals than ran us north of 600. Seen on 11 different days.

ANTARCTIC PRION (*Pachyptila desolata*)

Our most numerous prion. We observed them on 11 different days.

SLENDER-BILLED PRION (*Pachyptila belcheri*)

Big numbers breed at the Falklands and upon arrival there we saw BIG numbers. In one of the most amazing scenes of the journey we witnessed one of the greatest seabird spectacles one can imagine at we pulled into the west end of the Falklands and observed many thousands of these birds, probably cresting five figures.

FAIRY PRION (*Pachyptila turtur*)

Just a couple seen around South Georgia where extracting them from all the Antarctic Prions is a challenge.

WHITE-CHINNED PETREL (*Procellaria aequinoctialis*)

A consummate ship-follower we enjoyed our fair share of this rather large petrel. Seen 12 days.

KERGUELEN PETREL (*Aphrodroma brevirostris*)

*It was quite unexpected to see this unique bird so well and so often as we did. This was one of the real surprises of the trip. On many voyages to the region a few birds or none may be seen. We found them on four different days, saw dozens, and had a high of near 50 birds on the day we hit Shag Rocks. Wonderful encounters with this mysterious tubenose. For many years it was considered a *Pterodroma* petrel, but it behaves unlike any other tubenose and combines quick-flapping, with high arcs, often flapping hardest at the peak of an arc and then remaining high for many minutes. These birds look front-heavy and indeed they differ from all other petrels in skeletal structure.*

SOOTY SHEARWATER (*Puffinus griseus*)

One of the few familiar species for us, we saw lots in subantarctic waters. Seen six days of the trip with the biggest numbers (>600) around Cape Horn.

Hydrobatidae

GRAY-BACKED STORM-PETREL (*Garrodia nereis*)

One of the world's smallest tubenoses, they can be devils to get on, but we found quite a few of them, seeing them over 5 days with a one-day high of near 20 birds. They like to feed around floating kelp. This was a species, like Kerguelen Petrel, and Atlantic Petrel that we had an advantage in finding due to the dates of our trip. These birds become harder to find later in the summer.

WILSON'S STORM-PETREL (*Oceanites oceanicus*)

Most days we saw over a dozen. As we approached the Falklands totals ran into the hundreds.

BLACK-BELLIED STORM-PETREL (*Fregetta tropica*)

Seen eight days of the tour. This is one sturdy stormie!

Pelecanoididae

MAGELLANIC DIVING-PETREL (*Pelecanoides magellani*)

Most of our trip into the Beagle Channel was in darkness but we did manage to see a few of these birds as we neared the dock.

SOUTH GEORGIA DIVING-PETREL (*Pelecanoides georgicus*)

As we left South Georgia numbers of diving-petrels really began to pick up, and though identification of birds in this genus is fraught with difficulty we managed to pick out at least 3 birds at close range.

COMMON DIVING-PETREL (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*)

Lots around the Falklands and then some more around South Georgia.

Phalacrocoracidae

ROCK SHAG (*Phalacrocorax magellanicus*)

Quite a few around the Falklands.

ANTARCTIC SHAG (*Phalacrocorax bransfieldensis*)

Found around the continent with much trouble. We had our first ones in Neko Harbor.

SOUTH GEORGIA SHAG (*Phalacrocorax georgianus*)

Seen daily at South Georgia.

IMPERIAL (BLUE-EYED) SHAG (*Phalacrocorax atriceps atriceps*)

We saw both this form and the one below right at the dock in Puerto Madryn and then again in Ushuaia.

IMPERIAL (KING) SHAG (*Phalacrocorax atriceps albiventer*)

Ardeidae

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

A couple at the Falklands of the endemic form there.

Threskiornithidae

BLACK-FACED IBIS (*Theristicus melanopis*)

Nice encounters in Ushuaia.

Phoenicopteridae

CHILEAN FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus chilensis*)

Nice group by the dock at Puerto Madryn.

Anatidae

UPLAND GOOSE (*Chloephaga picta*)

Common in the Falklands.

KELP GOOSE (*Chloephaga hybrida*)

Strong sexual dimorphism in these geese and especially in this species. Common around the Falklands.

ASHY-HEADED GOOSE (*Chloephaga poliocephala*)

Nice couple of pairs in Tierra del Fuego.

RUDDY-HEADED GOOSE (*Chloephaga rubidiceps*)

This is the one species in this genus that shows no real sexual dimorphism. We had many pairs on the Falklands which is the best place to see this species, as it is in decline on the mainland.

FLIGHTLESS STEAMERDUCK (*Tachyeres pteneres*)

Several around Ushuaia.

E FALKLAND STEAMERDUCK (*Tachyeres brachypterus*)

One of the endemics to the namesake islands. We had several pairs and even families of these funny-looking wildfowl.

FLYING STEAMERDUCK (*Tachyeres patachonicus*)

Several in Tierra del Fuego National Park.

CHILOE WIGEON (*Anas sibilatrix*)

Ditto.

CRESTED DUCK (*Anas specularioides*)

Plenty around Puerto Madryn.

YELLOW-BILLED PINTAIL (*Anas georgica georgica*)

Several of the endemic South Georgia form.

Cathartidae

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)

Funny to see this species way out on the Falklands. They have much brighter red heads than those in the US, and many exhibit whitish hindcollars.

ANDEAN CONDOR (*Vultur gryphus*)

Harry spotted one soaring around up high, appropriately enough, over Condor Peak in Tierra del Fuego.

Falconidae

E STRIATED CARACARA (*Phalcoboenus australis*)

The Johnny Rook is out in force on the Falklands. No shortage of them there. A charismatic and clever species, and an endemic one to boot.

CHIMANGO CARACARA (*Milvago chimango*)

Common in Tierra del Fuego NP.

Haematopodidae

MAGELLANIC OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus leucopodus*)

Nice encounters in the Falklands.

BLACKISH OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus ater*)

Several around the Falklands.

Charadriidae

SOUTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus chilensis*)

RUFFOUS-CHESTED (DOTTEREL) PLOVER (*Charadrius modestus*)

Like the Rudd-headed Goose this species can be hard to track down on the mainland and so the Falklands become an important place to see this species. We had a nice pair near Gypsy Cove.

Scolopacidae

SOUTH AMERICAN (MAGELLANIC) SNIPE (*Gallinago paraguaiiae magellanica*)

Several seen on Carcass Island.

Chionididae

SNOWY SHEATHBILL (*Chionis alba*)

Surely the most comical species enjoyed on this trip. Seeing them wandering around on board the ship was good fun as well.

Stercorariidae

CHILEAN SKUA (*Stercorarius chilensis*)

Several as we neared Cape Horn and entered the Beagle Channel.

SOUTH POLAR SKUA (*Stercorarius maccormicki*)

On the continent this was the form most regularly encountered.

BROWN (SOUTHERN) SKUA (*Stercorarius antarctica antarctica*)

Common on South Georgia and the South Shetlands.

BROWN SKUA (*Stercorarius antarctica lonnbergi*)

Common on the Falklands.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

A single bird seen at sea one day.

Laridae

DOLPHIN GULL (*Larus scoresbii*)

A striking species, common on the Falklands and especially in Ushuaia.

KELP GULL (*Larus dominicanus*)

Also known as Dominican Gull or sometimes Black-backed Gull, this species is circumpolar in the southern hemisphere, but sightings are increasing beyond its normal range, and into the northern hemisphere.

Sternidae

SOUTH AMERICAN TERN (*Sterna hirundinacea*)

Common around the Falklands and Cape Horn, and Puerto Madryn.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*)

Unexpectedly large numbers of this champion migrant. Some days particularly amid the pack ice near the peninsula we had dozens. Seen 8 days of the tour, with a one day high of 40 birds.

ANTARCTIC TERN (*Sterna vittata*)

Plenty around South Georgia, the South Shetlands, and the Peninsula.

Columbidae

EARED DOVE (*Zenaida auriculata*)

One seen out to sea our first day out from Puerto Madryn was a surprise. They were common around the port.

Psittacidae

AUSTRAL PARAKEET (*Enicognathus ferrugineus*)

Nice group in Tierra del Fuego NP.

Trochilidae

GREEN-BACKED FIRECROWN (*Sephanoides sephaniodes*)

Quite a surprise was seeing this bird buzzing around the campground in Tierra del Fuego NP. Most unexpected!

Furnariidae

BLACKISH CINCLODES (*Cinclodes antarcticus*)

The ol' tussockbird was quite common around the Falklands and particularly at Carcass Island.

BAR-WINGED CINCLODES (*Cinclodes fuscus*)

A couple in Tierra del Fuego NP.

THORN-TAILED RAYADITO (*Aphrastura spinicauda*)

Common in Tierra del Fuego.

WHITE-THROATED TREERUNNER (*Pygarrhichas albogularis*)

Well seen in Tierra del Fuego.

Tyrannidae

WHITE-CRESTED ELAENIA (*Elaenia albiceps*)

One of the most conspicuously calling birds at Tierra del Fuego.

MANY-COLORED RUSH-TYRANT (*Tachuris rubrigastra*)

What!! Amazing was seeing this species well offshore, over a days journey out to sea en route to the Falklands. We had this little bird (called 'siete colores' in Argentina for its colorful plumage) hopping around on deck, hunting for insects.

FIRE-EYED DIUCON (*Xolmis pyrope*)

One seen nicely in Tierra del Fuego.

DARK-FACED GROUND-TYRANT (*Muscisaxicola maclovianus*)

Several seen on the Falklands.

AUSTRAL NEGRITO (*Lessonia rufa*)

A gorgeous pair in Tierra del Fuego.

Hirundinidae

CHILEAN SWALLOW (*Tachycineta meyeri*)

Common in Tierra del Fuego.

Motacillidae

CORRENDERA PIPIT (*Anthus correndera*)

Several seen at West Point in the Falklands.

SOUTH GEORGIA PIPIT (*Anthus antarcticus*)

By the skin of our teeth we got this bird. Unable to land on Prion Island due to the weather we were forced to try our luck at Cooper Bay, and luckily there was a bird there.

Troglodytidae

(SOUTHERN) HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon musculus*)

Common in Tierra del Fuego.

E COBB'S WREN (*Troglodytes cobbi*)

A charming species endemic to the Falklands.

SEDGE (GRASS) WREN (*Cistothorus platensis aequatorialis*)

Half a dozen found on Falklands with the best views coming at Carcass Island.

Turdidae

AUSTRAL THRUSH (*Turdus falcklandii*)

Common in the Falklands and Tierra del Fuego.

Passeridae

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

Fringillidae

BLACK-CHINNED SISKIN (*Carduelis barbata*)

Emberizidae

PATAGONIAN SIERRA-FINCH (*Phrygilus patagonicus*)

CANARY-WINGED FINCH (*Melanodera melanodera*)

Quite a few on the Falklands.

RUFOUS-COLLARED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia capensis*)

Icteridae

LONG-TAILED MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella loyca*)

This handsome species was well-enjoyed on the Falklands.

MAMMALS

DUSKY DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus obscurus*)

A nice pod our first day at sea.

PEALE'S DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus australis*)

A half dozen were seen as we entered the Beagle Channel.

HOURGLASS DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus cruciger*)

Several lovely encounters with this stunning cetacean.

COMMERSON'S DOLPHIN (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*)

At the Falklands we had several near shore.

LONG-FINNED PILOT WHALE (*Globicephala melas*)

A single pod of ten animals was seen at sea one morning.

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*)

Several great encounters with this majestic species. Our first were in Drygalski Fjord, and then we had several others at sea near the peninsula and then an amazing encounter with a nice pod of no less than 11 animals in the Drake Passage.

CUVIER'S BEAKED WHALE (*Ziphius cavirostris*)

A couple nice sightings as we neared the peninsula.

SOUTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALE (*Hyperoodon planifrons*)

Two animals seen one day near the South Orkneys.

ANTARCTIC MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*)

FIN WHALE (*Balaenoptera physalus*)

Big numbers seen several days with a one day high of 38 animals.

HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

One our first day at sea.

SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE (*Eubalaena australis*)

Several around Puerto Madryn.

SOUTHERN SEA LION (*Otaria byronia*)

ANTARCTIC FUR SEAL (*Arctocephalus gazella*)

Common on South Georgia, and the South Orkneys.

SOUTHERN FUR SEAL (*Arctocephalus australis*)

CRABEATER SEAL (*Lobodon carcinophagus*)

Quite a few at and near Deception Island.

LEOPARD SEAL (*Hydrurga leptonyx*)

Several seen with one close animal on an ice floe at Deception being best appreciated.

WEDDELL SEAL (*Leptonychotes weddelli*)

Most were seen near the South Shetlands.

SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEAL (*Mirounga leonina*)

Dozens on South Georgia.

I CARIBOU (*Rangifer caribou*)

About 100 seen one day at South Georgia.