

# 2016

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**NEW ZEALAND'S SUBANTARCTIC ISLANDS DECEMBER 2016**



We boarded our expedition ship 'The Spirit of Enderby' in Dunedin after meeting some of our fellow travellers and the expedition leader at our hotel the night before. Now while the name of the ship is somewhat grandiose- the reality is a little different. Truth be told it is a 35 year old Russian rustbucket- due to be scrapped in a couple of years time (and not before time). Primitive sewage systems ( you had to bin all your toilet tissue ) and no stabilisers were two of the problems. This boat rolled like the proverbial pig in s—t- even in light to moderate seas. Nights were spent grimly holding on to the mattress to stop you sliding from one end of your bunk to the other while the golden rule 'one hand for the ship one for yourself' was repeated constantly. On the previous trip where the weather was worse than on ours, there was one broken pelvis and two broken wrists. If you can't find your sea legs quickly (as many

septuagenarians can't) you were in for a difficult trip. The crew however were great- how the two chefs and our two waitresses coped- they have obviously had months of practice- i am not sure but the food and service were excellent.

However once you accepted the ship for what it was, the excitement and anticipation mounted as you realised you were on your way to some of the least visited places on the planet- more people climb Everest every year than visit Macquarie. These Islands are a rare heritage, spanning the stormy latitudes of the roaring forties and furious fifties. Our trip visited four Islands- The Snares, Auckland , Macquarie ( belongs to Australia) and then Campbell on the way back to NZ. These islands are among the world's wildest places. Some are close to pristine. The larger ones have suffered from the introduction of alien animals but, island by island, animal by animal, they are being cleared of introduced flora and fauna and restored in many cases to their original condition with only the penguin boilers and seal blubber rendering pots left to remind you of their less than salubrious past.

Today the islands are largely uninhabited (Macquarie still retains a research station) and you can only land by special permit which is still unavailable for "tourists" on Islands like the Snares. The weather is cool, wet and windy- truly oceanic which adds to the outpost nature of the islands and add to that the history of sealing, whaling, shipwrecks , ill fated enterprise, and human frailty and you have a truly unique region.

The islands lay claim to a unique assemblage of flora and fauna- the flora I know little about ( although the megaherbs were impressive) but the fauna consists mainly of the seal family, the pinnipeds, and seabirds. 40 seabirds (11% of the world's total breed on the Islands. Over 120 species have been observed at the islands or in the surrounding seas. 10 of the world's albatrosses – 40 % of the total breed in the region- 5 of them nowhere else. 21 petrels, shearwaters and prions breed here too (30% of the world's total). Add to that the penguins- Snares Crested and Royal are endemic to the region-(and Erect crested to the Bounties) while the region's cormorants - Auckland Island, Campbell Island and Macquarie Shags are found only at their island groups. Finally I musn't forget the flightless teals- both the Auckland Island and Campbell Island teals occur in very small numbers and remain on the endangered list. But more of the birds and seals later.



Our boat had 48 passengers- 40 odd Australians, a couple of Kiwis, 3 South Africans and a couple of Americans. Sadly we were not to find any soul mates. Only 3 or 4 people possessed binoculars. There was a group of 10 single women with 2 professional Australian photographers who began the trip hardly knowing one end of their camera from the other. The Australians astounded me – their ignorance about the islands they were visiting and what they were going to see was frightening. They couldn't identify a bird and struggled to tell the difference between a Sea Lion and an Elephant Seal. It appeared to be just another place to go and something to do before Christmas!! Such is life.

We left on a bright and breezy morning sailing aside the Otago Peninsular past the Northern Royal breeding colony we had visited two days previously and past another large colony of Otago Shags. The seas were light as we sailed through the lee of Stewart Island and headed southwards towards the Snares – we were kept busy with safety lectures and ship evacuation procedures.

We arrived at the Snares the following morning – landings are not permitted but our hopes of a zodiac cruise down the sheltered east coast were dashed by a heavy swell making it too dangerous to disembark. We were consoled by good views of Snares Crested penguins swimming alongside the boat but the Snares Tomtit and Fernbird which are frequently seen from the inflatables were beyond our reach.



Pelagic photography is a challenge at the best of times but on a ship rolling 10-15 degrees, with winds gusting up to 15-20 knots, 20 metres above sea level, and your tiny prion targets are flitting through the waves 30 metres away you require skill, judgement and oodles of good fortune to get a good shot. Having said that, when you have 10 days to photograph 20 odd sea birds and you are taking hundreds of shots a day, chances are you will come up with a couple of good ones.

There were hundreds of prions around the Snares although separating the Fairy from Fulmar Prions was difficult in the extreme. There were hundreds of Sooty Shearwaters as well, and one extremely unexpected Albatross. Chatham Albatross are as rare as hen's teeth round the



Snares- they tend to stay close to their breeding grounds on the Chathams but lo and behold we had a Chathams- just one fly by and it was gone but I did manage a couple of average shots.

The next morning we hoped to land on Enderby Island (our boat and the island were named after some distinguished shipping family) - off the North east corner of Auckland- the only landing site available to "tourists". The weather was promising and our 5 zodiacs headed for Sandy Bay- patrolled by the beachmasters- the endangered NZ or Hookers Sea lion. Once ashore there were great close up views of Southern and Northern Giant Petrels and Subantarctic Skuas but we finally pulled ourselves away from the beach and headed for the boardwalk – a 2 kilometre walk up to the western cliffs. We passed several Banded Dotterel and then chanced upon a Yellow-eyed Penguin nest with parent and chick not a metre from the boardwalk but at least 700 metres from the sea. We could occasionally see the white heads of Southern Royals nesting in the tussock grass but they were too far to photograph. There were plenty of pipits around the Island. The NZ Pipit has not yet been split. Neither has the NZ or Subantarctic Snipe found on Auckland – although the Campbell Snipe has been split. We didn't find the Snipe on the way up but had great views once down near the beach.

Along the tops of the cliffs Northern Giants patrolled above their nests- we found two containing large hostile chicks. A couple of Light-mantled Sooties flew by. We were to discover their nesting sites later along the cliffs. So after watching the passing parade of Auckland Shags and White-fronted Terns for half an hour we headed back to the beach, finding a couple of Auckland Tomtits along the way before making our way on to some small pools. Here we found our first Auckland flightless Teal- surrounded by Yellow-eyed penguins. Skirting the penguins we found another couple of teal feeding in the kelp on the shoreline.

And finally the excitement of the snipe – hiding in the grass not more than 20 centimetres tall. We had cracked all our targets in the space of 4 hours and headed back to the boat for an extremely late lunch. We headed down the east coast of the island in the afternoon and into Carnley harbour. The zodiac cruise the next morning was largely to visit historical sites before leaving the rugged cliffs of Bristow point behind and heading out towards the furious fifties.

We left Auckland after lunch with the prospect of an afternoon and another full day at sea before arriving at Macquarie which lies close to 55 degrees south. The afternoon's session of pelagic birding was probably the best of the entire trip. The Enderby has an open bridge policy which means you can spend as much time there as you like and of course it gives you 180 degree views of what's up front. If you spot a bird up front a calculated guess is required as to whether it will head down the port or starboard side so you can dash out the door on either side to try for a shot. Making a run for it with the boat rolling 10 degrees is taking your life in your hands but with practice you can generally get to the door without smashing your camera into it.



The Fairy and Fulmar Prions had now given way to Antarctic Prions and this was the most common bird around the boat. There were lots of Albatross- Southern Royal, Gibson's- the whiter subspecies of Antipodian ( which can difficult to separate from sub adult Snowy's), Light-mantled Sooties, and Campbell- now split from Black-browed. Several people were calling Black-browed but the vast majority were Campbell- you need them to be close to see the yellow eye but the underwing pattern is slightly heavier and with a heavier black eye mark you quickly pick up the subtleties in the jizz. Black-bellied Storm Petrels were relatively common – the only Storm Petrel I was to see on the trip but the real excitement came when we spotted a White-headed Petrel in front of the boat. This was a new bird for us but infuriatingly it just stayed ahead of the boat- this went on for 10 minutes and I was even reduced to trying a shot through the bridge windows, but eventually it came down the port side which lead to a desperate rush outside and some average photos looking directly into the sun. We had a few Mottled Petrels as well but they were never close enough for a shot.

Most of the Subantarctic Islands are of volcanic origin But Macquarie is different. All the rock on Macquarie was deep on the ocean floor 700000 years ago. Macquarie is simply the exposed tip of a chunk of oceanic crust squeezed to the surface not that long ago in geological terms. Our first days' activities were reversed because of the swells and we landed round the other side of the isthmus close to the Australian Research station which we planned to visit later in the morning. The golden wildlife rule we were given was never approach closer than 5 metres and always back off if the animal seems distressed. On Macquarie this rule just falls away . There are so many Southern elephant seals and penguins all of whom seemed to be naturally inquisitive there were many occasions when we were simply surrounded by penguins and seals. The young 'weaner' seals would actually sit on your lap if you let them.



King Penguins were the most numerous bird around the station but there were plenty of Gentoos as well, and off amongst the rocks and impossible to get close to, there were Southern Rockhoppers locally called Eastern Rockhoppers (another potential split). The Macquarie Shag (a sub species of Imperial or King Shag- and another potential split) were busy nesting and almost every bird you saw carried clumps of tussock grass in their bills.

We visited the station, had tea and biscuits- some visitors after months on the Island were obviously a welcome change. Our zodiac's guide round the beach turned out to be the station's carpenter- didn't know much about wildlife but a hell of a nice guy. We watched a weather balloon being launched and were heading back to the Zodiacs when someone spotted a Leopard seal amongst the hundreds of Elephant seals- and lots of photos later we were heading back for a late lunch.



The afternoon's activity saw us back in the inflatables heading for Lusitania bay and one of the largest King Penguin colonies in the world. There may be as many as many as 4 million penguins on Macquarie and hundreds of thousands of them form the King Penguin colony at Lusitania. Cruising just offshore (no landings allowed) we headed along 2 kilometres of beach jam packed with Penguins- ironically crammed around the penguin boilers where so many of them were to meet their end in days gone by. These boilers once consumed 4000 birds a day. Another incredible experience!

Macquarie is of course home to a fourth penguin- The Royal penguin which breeds nowhere else on earth- and the following day we headed off to Sandy Bay and an appointment with tens of thousands more penguins. This beach is yet another experience of a lifetime! Picking your way through hundreds of elephant seals and even more Royals and Kings you make your way along the beach to the stair way which leads to the Royal colony. Finally after climbing a couple of hundred metres above the beach you reach a platform overlooking the colony where tens of thousands of Royals breed. The noise, smell and constant activity of a penguin colony has to be seen to be believed. There were chicks of many different sizes and parents kept a watchful eye on them as there were literally dozens of skuas patrolling the skies overhead. One moment of inattention and your chick was gone!

Back on the beach we had another hour of interaction between us and seals and penguins. The level of activity was just frenetic – do you watch the penguins beaching through the surf or pay attention to the weaner nudging your leg behind you?

Sir Douglas Mawson said in 1919 'this little island is one of the wonder spots of the world' and today nearly a hundred years later you can't help but agree with him. We were extremely fortunate- the weather holding long enough for us to complete the full program of activities. This had only happened once in the last 15 trips.



We left Macquarie after lunch with the prospect of another day and a half deep in the Southern Ocean before reaching Campbell. The pelagic birding from here on in was really just more of the same- good though it was. The same Albatrosses, the same Prions, more Sooty Shearwaters, more Northern and Southern Giant Petrels and the odd white-chinned Petrel. It was difficult to believe that after so few days you could actually become a little blasé about the passing parade.

Campbell was an island where in the early 1900's the NZ government actually offered pastoral leases and some entrepreneurial farmer stocked the island with sheep and cattle. This lasted until 1934 but it was only in the 1970's that an attempt was made to remove all livestock, an exercise that was only completed in the nineties. The cats died out naturally thereafter and then a massive attempt was made to remove the rats and at last the island was declared predator free. The way was now open to reintroduce the Campbell Island flightless teal – possibly the rarest duck in the world with less than a hundred or so birds remaining, which had been rediscovered in 1975 on a small offshore island.

There were various options on offer to explore the Island but to see the teal a zodiac trip round the harbour was required. This was obligatory for us of course and we had great views of 4 or 5 birds. The Campbell Shag was also found in the harbour giving us great views while perching on a small rock in front of the zodiac. We landed at the top end of the harbour to visit "the loneliest tree in the world". The Antarctic Terns were nesting nearby and Campbell Pipits foraged in the kelp along the shoreline. As always it started to rain but these squalls never seemed to last long. They blew through and half an hour later the sun appeared again. On the way back to the boat we had great views of a Light-mantled Sooty on her nest while a solitary Yellow-eyed Penguin edged its way down the steep rock face.

In the afternoon we had the opportunity to take another long boardwalk walk across the Col Lyall saddle to the tussock covered hill sides where the Southern Royals breed. We actually had a dry landing for a change and set off in pursuit of the Campbell Island Snipe in an area where the vegetation looked to be too thick for the Snipe. We didn't find it and eventually left the Redpolls which were all around us to begin our climb. The board walk was narrow and a little slippery in places and Stephanie decided this was not for her, leaving me to soldier on. I wanted a picture of nesting Southern Royals. It was a long climb taking over an hour and a half, with several Australian women falling on their faces – the board walk had small steps in places which people just didn't see while they were taking in the great views or watching the many pipits accompanying us along the way. Then a moment of great excitement – there was a Campbell Snipe on the path in front of me but not for long- it was gone by the time I had slung my camera off my shoulder. I think it was as startled as I was.

We saw our first Albatross close to the top, too far to photograph and then there were more, and finally two or three that were nesting less than 3 metres from the path. It was a real privilege being so close to these magnificent seabirds who didn't seem to be the slightest bit perturbed at the



clicking of the cameras around them. Delighted we headed back to the harbour -my only regret being that the Rockhopper Penguin and Grey-headed, Campbell, and Black-browed Albatross colonies were outside the permitted areas.

So once again we had found all our targets in just one day. We were supposed to have another morning on Campbell but a serious weather front was heading our way with 40-50 knot winds and our Captain was concerned about making Invercargill on time. In heavy seas the boat slows from its usual 11-12 knots per hour to less than half of that. So in the hope of avoiding huge discomfort on the way back we left that afternoon and managed to make it to the lee of Stewart Island before the weather arrived. Gone too was a possible final zodiac attempt down the Snares.

We docked at Bluff on schedule, said our farewells, and headed for the airport to pick up our hire car. They call this trip the Galapagos of the Southern Ocean with some justification. The opportunity to get so close to so many magnificent seabirds and seals was a once in a lifetime experience and well worth the many thousands of dollars it cost to do so. But I think we will wait for them to get a new ship before trying another trip with Heritage Expeditions.

