

Antarctica trip report

(written by Penny but with important additions from Peter where there were insufficient references to interesting things like buses and trains)

Warning – this may contain more information about birds than you wish to know

Why Antarctica? Peter turned 50 in July 2008 and prefers cold places to hot places for holidays. I had been able to choose a holiday destination for my 50th (Costa Rica i.e. somewhere pleasantly warm and dry as we went in the dry season); just after he had agreed to my suggestion for my 50th a newsletter arrived from Naturetrek mentioning the trip chartering the whole ship and visiting not only Antarctica but also the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, which he also wanted to see. As for me, I am happy with any environment that has lots of wildlife and scenery and, if I am at sea as well, even better! So it was an easy decision to make

Patagonia

We booked this trip about 18 months before it was due to leave. My office is often closed between Christmas and New Year and, as we had heard worrying reports about arriving in Ushuaia without our luggage, we decided we would like to get there a few days early. Then we thought, why not see a bit more of Patagonia (although I have to admit neither of us realised at that time how big Patagonia was) and so, having read Lonely Planet and spoken to a couple of birder friends, we decided to extend our trip by spending three days in El Calafate and three days in Ushuaia beforehand. Through contacts we hired a guide from a company based in South America that specialises in birding tours to visit the Perito Mereno Glacier in the Glacier National Park and then El Chalten which is a village in the foothills of the Andes. What we had not realised was the stunning scenery we would pass through on our drive between the two places (or how far apart they actually are). We were very lucky with our guide Martina McNamara who has very good birding skills but realised that we were not only there for the birds.

On arriving at our first hotel the first things we saw were Austral Negrito and Cinereous Harrier. However we were tired as well after travelling for 24 hours so a meal and bed were the order of the day with an early morning start to follow.

The scenic route to the Glacier about 40 miles away gave us brilliant views of Black-faced Ibis (definitely one of the land birds of the trip) but also showed us the erratic boulders lying all over the place. We had a wonderful time at the Glacier with the sun shining and there (thankfully) we were relatively protected from the wind. We had expected wind in the Southern Ocean but had not realised just how much wind we would get inland. Geography lessons were coming back thick and fast with glaciation (including erratics – boulders left by glaciers) and katabatic winds. The wind off the glacier was a katabatic wind (ie a wind strengthened by the force of gravity) of almost gale force even at El Calafate and this meant that our glimpse of the Magellanic Plover (one of the wish list birds) was very fleeting due to the sand being blown into our faces. Thankfully by the small lakes nearby there was a bit more shelter so we could look at the wildfowl being added to my list!

The following day we drove to El Chalten about 150 miles away on the other side of the large lake formed by the glacier meltwater. On the way again a stop at the local lakes but, this time, the Magellanic Plover had gone. Although we were able to get closer to the Chilean Flamingoes it was still impossible getting an in-focus

photograph due to the wind. We tried to entice an Austral Rail out: no success there but great views of Red-Gartered Coot and Speckled Teal and a fleeting glimpse of the Spectacled Tyrant which I was going to see in all its glory when I had a chance to bird in Buenos Aires on the way home.

Anyway once we hit the road we were looking for Guanaco, Lesser Rhea and Andean Condor (only seen fleetingly the previous day). We managed to see all three but none of the photographs really do our sightings justice. We arrived in El Chalten with enough time to try to find the Magellanic Woodpecker plus other special birds found in the area. That evening we were successful with the Woodpecker. I know only a female but she is beautiful and anywhere else she would be regarded as the star of the show. Also, after many attempts to entice out the Magellanic Tapulco, suddenly there it was directly in front of us looking like a very dark grey, almost black, wren. After that the Thorn-tailed Rayadito appeared together with Southern House Wren and we then ended up at another excellent restaurant for an early (for Argentina) meal and another relatively early night whilst we were still catching up on our sleep.

The following day we had to be back at El Calafate at lunchtime in order to catch our flight to Ushuaia. We persuaded Martina to call in at a local bakers for our breakfast where we brought some lovely croissants which we took to a waterfall to eat (see photos on the website). On the way we had brilliant views of an Austral Pygmy Owl. It had the remains of a bird in its feet, on our way to the waterfall and, on the way back, another bird was in its claws. Unfortunately the photography did not match the views we had but it was a wonderful experience. Martina also found us the Huet-Huet that morning so we had a great time in El Chalten.

After a number of flight time changes our flight was finally due to go at 2 pm. We got there on time but, surprise, surprise the flight was delayed (apparently this is the norm in Argentina with Aerolineas Argentinas). Still it gave me a chance to start sorting out the bird photographs I had taken and, in particular, the Condors we had seen on our drive to the airport. They had been landing by the road, but had then been disturbed by the traffic but this still meant they were taking off within 200 feet of us. Spectacular views but not easy to photograph due to the constant high wind.

We arrived in Ushuaia on New Year's Eve after the short flight and found that the restaurant in our hotel was closed for the celebrations. We walked around the town and the two highlights for me were seeing a Giant Petrel soaring over the harbour (little did I know at that time how many we would see) but also seeing the brilliantly coloured Dolphin Gull. We then discovered all the other restaurants (dozens of them) were either closed or fully booked and we were wondering what we were going to have that day other than yet another ham and cheese roll (it does seem to be on the menu for every picnic that you have!). However Peter had success with a restaurant out of town but the earliest table he could get was 9.30 and it was only 7.30 then. I suggested we bought a bottle of wine to help while away the time. Peter agreed without mentioning that the fixed price menu for the meal included alcohol! We got a taxi to the restaurant and found it had a brilliant view over the sea with Kelp Gulls and Giant Petrels soaring past the window. The food was excellent but the alcohol was also flowing so we drank lots of water and had finished our food by 11.45 so decided to walk the two miles back to Ushuaia in order to start the sobering-up process. However, the staff had other ideas and insisted we must stay until midnight and gave us a bottle of excellent Argentine sparkling wine for the midnight celebrations. It was fun seeing how the Argentines and other nationalities in the restaurant celebrated but

we were allowed to go at about 12.30 and had a walk back accompanied by some of the many feral dogs that roam the streets.

Our guide Esteban was collecting us at 8.30 the following morning so a quick breakfast when the restaurant opened at 7.30 and then off to the National Park for a lovely day out. It was not very warm but it stayed dry and we had good views of many birds although, unfortunately, not the Magellanic Woodpecker. However we did get to see the Great Grebe and got good views of one sitting on its nest plus two of the three species of Steamer Duck we were going to see being the Flying Steamer Duck and Flightless Steamer Duck. I had two other bird species on my wishlist being the Tufted Tit-Tyrant and Austral Parakeet and we managed to see both. The other species I wanted to see was the White-throated Caracara. Peter got dropped off at the hotel on the way as he did not want to visit yet another rubbish tip. I got really good views of this bird plus a great photograph of the Chimango Caracara which we had been seeing (and hearing) all day.

(I have been rightly chided for failing to mention the steam railway that runs in the National Park. Photographs of it are on the website and Esteban stopped there so that Peter could have a look. We were astonished to find that one of the engine drivers who was posing for the photographs being taken by the Japanese tourists was from England. He comes to help out on the railway for three months each summer (and seems to spend the rest of his time on a Welsh narrow gauge railway). Trains are run mainly for the cruise ships, who can disgorge hundreds of passengers in Ushuaia when they are in port for a day – and there is not a lot to do in Ushuaia if you are the sort of person who travels on a huge cruise ship. The railway was originally built to carry wood from the National Park to the prison for which Ushuaia was originally founded.)

My mother arrived from England that evening but later than scheduled which meant that we could not go out to find a restaurant until 8.30 pm. By then they all seemed to be full or (yet again) not open. We finally found a table at one of the smart hotels near the waterfront and had really good views of a Black-chested Buzzard Eagle being mobbed by gulls before going in there. However we did not finish the meal until nearly 11 pm so yet another late night with an early morning start as we wanted to walk up a hill outside Ushuaia below a chairlift before it started operating for the general public at 9.30 am.

The reason for the early start was to try to see the birds before they were disturbed by all the walkers who would be coming up. The walk only takes about 10 minutes longer than the chairlift, so I would strongly recommend it. Once up the top you have a choice of paths and we walked towards the Glacier up there. My mother decided not to go all the way which was very wise as the cloud came in and Peter and I got quite wet. There were no views from the top but at least we were getting some exercise as that had been quite lacking up until then and we had not even got onto the ship where we would be getting even less. Just as we got back to the chairlift station, from which you had fantastic views over the town, airport and Beagle Channel we saw an aeroplane come in to land. This was the plane carrying our travelling companions on the ship including good friends we had made on the Spitsbergen cruise Liz and Sarah.

On meeting my mother at the chairlift station she asked "what is the small bird with a black and yellow throat". Typically a non-birder had seen something I had missed namely a Yellow-bridled Finch. Nothing for it I would have to go back up there again the following day. We met our friend Liz at the hotel at 1 pm together with some of the others on our trip and went off for lunch intending then to go on a 6 hour boat trip Estefan had reserved for us visiting various islands in

the Beagle Channel. We rushed through our lunch only to find out that the wind was too strong and that all the boat trips were cancelled. Peter and Liz and her travelling companion Val decided to go on a shorter three hour boat trip the following morning but I decided that seeing this finch was more important. Peter had bought a picnic for us to eat on the afternoon/evening boat trip so he and I went out for an evening walk and ate our picnic watching the gulls, ducks and shags and shivering only slightly. A raptor flew past very quickly but it was too fast for us to identify but it may well have been something I had not seen before. I will never know. (Peter is of course sanguine about not being able to identify it.)

The next morning I was off at 8 am to go to the chairlift walk again. The start of the trip was bad enough as the taxi driver drove up with his cup of tea in one hand. The road to the chairlift goes up all the way and has numerous bends so it really was hair-raising. Still I got there safely and had a good walk up. However, when I got to the top, I found that it was still blowing really strongly and, on a couple of occasions I nearly got blown over. I managed to see and photograph my finch but decided the wind was just too strong to try walking around the side of the hill in the open in order to find the White-bellied Seed-Snipe. So I climbed up to a waterfall called the Cascade. The advantage to this was that the route was through the southern beech trees and quite sheltered. However, it was challenging as the route provided ropes in various places as the path was so steep! No birds were to be seen they were no doubt sheltering from the very strong winds. I had thought the chairlift would not be working but it was but it still did not look much fun so I decided to walk down rather than take the lift. I discovered that had been a really good decision as I got lovely views of a White-throated Treerunner which was feeding on a tree about 10 feet away from me. At the bottom of the lift I decided to walk back to the town as I had read there were various paths cutting out some of the bends on the road. In fact I discovered a wonderful path which was only about half the length of the road trip. On finding this path, I went on a short diversion and found an open area in the sun and had my picnic listening to Black-faced Ibis calling and hoping for the woodpecker to appear. The path went through the southern beechwoods and was next to a beautiful river for most of the trip. Still no Woodpeckers but lots of other birds and flowers and the sun was shining. This path took about an hour and then there was just time to walk the rest of the way on the road down to the town, meet Peter, Liz and Val (by chance) in the ice-cream shop opposite the hotel and enjoy my second huge ice-cream from there (even larger than the first – see photograph) and then join the rest of the party in the hotel for the short bus ride to the ship.

Ushuaia to the Falklands

The ship's layout was different to the two others we have been on but we quickly adjusted to it. The highlight of the first evening was seeing some Magellanic Penguins swimming in the water. Peter had already seen some having managed to go on his boat trip that morning but I was really excited. We went to bed as darkness was falling as we were leaving the Beagle Channel. We had had all our briefings and done our mandatory lifeboat drill and been given a very nice meal. We toasted the trip with sparkling wine provided by the ship so our decision to have only one glass of wine to cut the risk of seasickness did not work as we had not catered for the ship giving us some wine in addition to what we had purchased.

The following morning there were loads of birds around and I saw my first Black-browed Albatross. Unfortunately the ship was rolling quite a lot and for the first time ever I was affected and unable to stay on deck for the whole of the day. I

also did not feel up to trying to identify the birds which was such a shame as it would have been the perfect day for improving my sea-bird identification skills. A day without food no doubt helped and then a good night's sleep and then land the following day (the Falkland Islands) speeded my recovery. I think also the fact that Peter had managed to see a Wandering Albatross whilst I was in the cabin encouraged me to get better. Peter was also affected by the motion but was also a lot better by the next day and the patch and subsequent supply of seasickness tablets supplied by the ship's doctor (also called Peter to confuse things) helped keep the seasickness at bay for the rest of the trip which was great.

Unfortunately our first foray ashore, onto an outlying island called West Point, was in the rain which then turned to very heavy hail. We all got very wet and cold and, for some people, their cameras stopped working (in some cases, for good). However the mile or so walk in the hail had been well worth it as we ended up at a Black-browed Albatross colony. We were within 10 feet of these magnificent birds and their colony was shared with Rockhopper Penguins. Their young chicks were shivering and we soon joined in. My hands were really cold and it was so difficult taking my gloves on and off to take photographs (trying to keep the camera dry) that the photographs of this colony really do not do justice to what we saw and were experiencing. Just having these birds with 8 foot wingspans flying close above your head was fabulous. Our first close view of penguins was also wonderful.

On the walk back across the island the rain stopped so we could start drying out. The sun eventually came out to give us a beautiful late morning and afternoon. We were told we were being offered a cup of tea after our walk and but not been told about the most fantastic display of cakes provided with this liquid refreshment by the owner of the only house on the island. I could not resist the wonderful chocolate cake. I could not linger for too long inside as the sun was streaming in through the windows and I just had to go out to photograph the Striated Caracaras which were all around the house. I fortunately also found Falkland Steamer Ducks with chicks and a Crested Duck family with the sweetest ducklings and was able to photograph these too. Back to the ship for lunch (which we really did not need) we then moved on to Carcass Island (named after a ship) for the Magellanic Penguin colony. The sun was still shining and the sea was turquoise and watching the penguins swimming in through that coloured sea was just brilliant. We then walked along the coast to be picked up further along. We were joined by Commentories Dolphins swimming in the surf and had brilliant views of Long-tailed Meadowlark and Darkish Cinclodes (aka the Tussock bird). More Penguins and Caracaras all along the walk to yet another display of biscuits and cakes accompanied by tea. What a day!

The following day we landed at Stanley and were taken off birding in a coach in the morning. There were quite a few species on the Falklands I still had not seen but, apart from the Cobb's Wren and White-rumped Sandpiper, the coach trip was not very forthcoming. I asked the person who accompanied us on that trip (Arthur who is based in the Falklands) if there was anywhere where I might find one of the two Grebes I wanted to see. He offered to drive me to a possible lake but said I would need to walk back (about 6 miles). I was happy with this as we had the afternoon free while the ship refuelled, and so got to see the White Crested Grebe I had really wanted to see. Due to the walk back I had not taken my telescope which meant I did not get a good enough photograph to put on the website but what I did get is enough to remind me of what I saw. The two bonuses of this trip for me were that I saw a chick (with its humbug-striped head) and also four Silver Teal with their multicoloured bills. The walk back was accompanied by a number of heavy rain showers but I managed to get a good number of photographs of the Cobb's Wren and was also honoured when two

Gentoo Penguins were quite happy fishing in the shallows by me and they gave me some great photographs. I was beginning to get quite cold and tired about a mile outside the town when a police car pulled up. The policewoman, Trudy, kindly offered me a trip back to the town and amazingly enough I discovered her brother was the postman on Carcass Island and I had met him the previous day. It's a small world! Fortunately Peter (although walking past at the time having been on an expedition to buy a more waterproof jacket than his current one after the hailstorm on the previous day) did not see me getting out of the police car so I did not get any ribbing about my trip back. Time for a hot chocolate and then a bit more birding after a 30 minute long very heavy rain shower before the ship came back from refuelling and we could start our long journey to South Georgia.

Falklands to South Georgia

We then had two days at sea and, luckily, by now, the seas had calmed which meant that I had a choice of places to stand and watch the sea and birds. The top deck gave you the best all-round view but the bow and stern were the best for photographing the birds. Trying to photograph the Prions proved a real challenge as they never fly in a straight line but I was pleased with a couple of the photographs and this allowed me to confirm I was looking at Antarctic Prions. By now we had been joined by a number of Wandering Albatross of varying ages so trying to get a photograph which would show their sheer size was really challenging and I do not think any of mine really do them justice. We still had good numbers of the Black-browed Albatross around and I photographed another one only to discover that I had been looking at a Grey-headed Albatross. This bird has wonderful yellow markings around the bill. The real excitement for me was seeing a Sooty Albatross. There was a long discussion (after looking at the photographs) about what it was with all but one person taking the view it was a Sooty. The other option was a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross. However, on blowing up the photograph (the joys of digital photography), I could see the yellow line that the Sooty has on the bill in order to confirm the identification. The Sooty was outside its expected area but not that far out but I had not expected to see one so this sighting was a real bonus. These species of Albatross are a really beautiful shape with a pointed tail and I had known that it was one of the two species by its shape as soon as I saw the bird which was so exciting.

By this time I had settled into my routine of getting up at 5 am. This would mean I would have about an hour to an hour and a half on the bridge with no one else there but for the Russian crew. It was always a very peaceful time and there were some highlights to getting up there so early. Usually it was Romanov (the second mate) telling me what I had missed from five minutes earlier! On this particular morning (the day we were due at South Georgia) I could see the main island. I also assumed I was seeing a few islands to the north of it. I should have looked at the chart. When Peter came up he mentioned that one of the islands looked like it was covered in guano. We then realised it was not an island it was an iceberg that was as big as an island!

South Georgia

What can I say about South Georgia?. The scenery is breathtaking and the number of birds that were flying around as we approached the Island was amazing. Fortunately it was not windy so I was able to stand in the bow and watch all the birds flying around the bow. There were Penguins and Diving-Petrels in the water and Albatross flying everywhere as well. We anchored at Elsehul and went on a Zodiac cruise and there had our first close-up view of Antarctic Fur Seals. We had seen good numbers in the voyage to South Georgia including some asleep in the water which looked weird as they sleep on their

backs holding their flippers up in a loop but on the Zodiac cruise we saw them not only in the water just by the boat but also on the shore, on the rocks and sleeping on grass tussocks. Not only did we have the fur seals but also South Georgia Shags, Snowy Sheathbills, Brown Skuas, Light-mantled Sooty Albatross and Grey-headed Albatross. The highlight of the trip for me was going close to some Macaroni Penguins which were on the rocks and then, over their heads, flew two Light-mantled Sooty Albatross doing their courtship display which means the two of them fly together turning at the same times in sweeping arcs. It was magical. Unfortunately we were in the Zodiac being driven by the Russian driver we had named Ivan the Terrible due to his manner of driving which is going as fast as possible and who cares if anyone gets wet. Therefore, although we had left the ship last, we were also the first Zodiac back and missed out on good views of porpoising penguins. Having said that we had had a brilliant morning.

However, the afternoon was going to be even better. We went to Salisbury Plain. This has the second largest King Penguin colony on South Georgia and it was just staggering. We landed on the shore to be greeted by the Antarctic Fur Seals. Liz was very good at persuading them to leave us alone (you could tell she had been a head teacher) by banging together two small stones and we were able to walk through the Seals to get to the main Penguin Colony. On the way we passed not only the fur seals and lots of King Penguins but also Brown Skuas. I then sat down and watched and waited. The King Penguins are not shy and we were seeing not only both adults but also relatively mature brown chicks and chicks which had started to moult. One adult pair I watched started holding flippers (I just got the camera to them as they let go) but then their relationship went further and I think an egg might get laid soon. Soon after that I was approached by three moulting chicks. One of them, I mistakenly thought, would have to walk some distance to get to me as there was a step of about five inches to go up. However he/she was not to be deterred. The bill came in very useful. The bill was pushed into the ground and the chick then levered itself up using its bill. It was wonderful. Liz and Peter were both sitting quite close to me and Peter managed to get a video of the chicks coming up to me and then Liz.

Apart from the penguins the next best thing was the weather. The sea had been calm and the sun was shining and there was not much wind. We were told usually, when Salisbury Plain is visited, it is blowing a gale and pouring with rain. We could not believe our luck. We all took so many photographs. You will be pleased to hear that only about 10% of them are on the website!

The following day we were offered a choice. I do not like choices on holiday as I always make the wrong one. One was a walk over a small mountain following the steps of Shackleton. I liked the idea of a walk to stretch my legs but we were told we would not see any wildlife and those who stayed on the ship would meet the walkers and would therefore see the wildlife on the beach at Stromness where the walk ended. The other option was staying on the ship and seeing the South Georgia scenery and also, possibly some whales. Most of the time we were moving between places in South Georgia it was night-time (although not really dark) or we were having meals so I plumped for staying on the ship. It was a lovely day and the scenery was very good but no whales. Having said that we did have porpoising seals beside the ship as we came into Stromness. The beach at Stromness was covered with Antarctic Fur Seals which meant it was impossible to stay five metres away from them. The best sight there was the paddling pool just inside the beach which was full of young fur seals learning to swim. We were directed to a waterfall where we were supposed to find nesting Gentoo Penguins and nesting Antarctic Terns but were directed the wrong way. This was the waterfall Shackleton had climbed down (frozen at the time) in 1916 on his trek across South Georgia. While we were enjoying the views a Brown Skua came to

inspect first Peter, then Jonathan and then Soo (who had stupidly been paddling and had bare feet. Obviously this was tempting to a hungry Skua but it was not threatening in any way). Back to the ship trying to avoid the Antarctic Terns which were protecting their nests by dive-bombing us and then off to Grytviken. This is where an old whaling station is and we had to go through South Georgia immigration there. After being given permission to go ashore we first went to the cemetery where Shackleton is buried. As is customary, we drank a toast to him in rum brought from the ship. I wanted to go off exploring so soon set off up the steep hill where I found a large lake and some Antarctic Terns and wonderful scenery but not much else. Peter went off exploring the old whaling station and his photographs are in a separate section on the website. I spent a short time in the museum looking at the stuffed birds. It allowed me to realise just how big a Wandering Albatross is and, also, how small the Antarctic Prions are. Unfortunately it then started to rain which was a shame as that evening the ship had laid on a barbecue for us on the rear deck. Fortunately the rear deck was covered but, if you stood at the edge, the rain got blown onto you. The music did not seem appropriate in such a peaceful place and so Peter and I were off to bed soon after the meal so that we could avoid the dancing in which quite a few of our party, and the Russian crew, were going to participate.

The following day I was up early in order to enjoy the views as we left Grytviken as we went back up the coast but it was blowing quite hard soon after we had left the anchorage. We were supposed to be going to the island where the Wandering Albatross nest but, with the wind picking up, this proved impossible (as did all the alternatives). This had been our only chance of going to that island as you have to be booked into going there on a particular day, so we were all disappointed at this. The ship therefore turned around and we went along east along the north coast of the island in the direction of the Drygalski Fjord. Soon we were told to leave the top deck as the wind was still getting up and I have to admit it was very difficult getting off the deck as soon as I left the protection of the front shield which directs the wind above your head. We were then told that we had to stay inside the ship. As we went up the Fjord the wind kept increasing and it was quite cloudy which meant the views were not very good. I was just saying to Sarah, as we got to the head of the Fjord, "at least we were not in the open sea" when Rolfe, our trip expedition leader, announced over the tannoy that he had just measured the windspeed and that it was Force 11 and that, as there was nothing else possible to do in South Georgia, we would now start making our way to the Antarctic Peninsula – across the open sea! The few photographs that we have taken at this time just do not do the weather justice. After turning south to the Antarctic Peninsula the seas started getting much bigger and the waves were splashing over the bow and frequently spraying the bridge which is about forty feet above the sea level. One of my abiding memories of this trip is about how the Antarctic Prions and Storm-Petrels (27 and 17 cms long respectively) were flying as normal seemingly unaffected by the wind or the waves. We were all holding on for dear life whilst standing in the bridge and wondering how many of us were going to make breakfast the next day.

The trip to the South Orkneys

By the following morning the wind had dropped. There was still quite a swell so the ship was rolling a bit but Peter's seasickness tablets were working and I had said to John Carruthers, one of our Naturetrek leaders, that we were prepared to give a talk about our Kamchatka trip. We had the slideshow we had prepared for Surrey Bird Club with us and Peter loves talking about our holidays so I knew he would love presenting it. The talk was very popular and it helped break up the day. We were at sea all day and there were not very many birds around. We had also had a presentation from the five trip leaders covering what we had seen

in South Georgia and had been asked to produce some of our photographs for this so that helped take up some of the time as well. These were not the only talks: on every full day at sea we always had at least two lectures and sometimes more. I have to say I did not attend very many of them as I would have the bridge to myself during these lectures as they were attending by almost everybody else (including Peter). However I hear that all of the lectures were very good and relevant to the trip. The lectures took place in the dining room which was big enough (just) for everyone to sit down at once, and there were three screens around the room so everyone had a good view of the slides.

The next day we hoped to get to the South Orkneys by late afternoon. This was when we started seeing even more large icebergs. Most of them had clearly come off the ice-shelf as they had flat tops (called "tabular" icebergs) and were very long and rectangular. We sailed along one and measured that it was 2.5 nautical miles long. As well as the icebergs we had shedloads of birds, including a large flock of Shags which were obviously feeding at the base of one of the bergs (don't ask me if they were South Georgia Shags or Antarctic Shags – you can apparently tell by the amount of white on the neck but these were all too far away) and a large flock of Cape Petrels which kept flying in the wake of the ship, then up to the stern and then off again. Once again my photographs of these do not do reflect the wonderful experience of being surrounded by so many birds and the majestic icebergs.

After this we landed at the Argentine base of Orcadas on the South Orkneys. We were told we were going to be shown around the base. Sarah and I were allowed to stay outside on the beach and had the pleasure of photographing Chinstrap Penguins. There was one Adelie Penguin there too. I just sat down on the pebbles for an hour and a half and had the privilege of being within 20 then 15 then 10 and then five feet of the Penguins as they gradually came closer to me. I also had a young Antarctic Fur Seal about 30 feet away eyeing me up but, thankfully, he decided not to come any closer. He moved and upset the Penguins and they had to move which meant being able to watch their way of walking. Some were moving pebbles (they use these for their nests) and others were preening and going in and out of the sea. Storm-Petrels were flying past over the beach so were obviously nesting somewhere in the rocks behind.

The others eventually came out from visiting the base (which they said was very dull, especially as their guide had spoken no English) and disturbed my peace but it had been a magical afternoon there on my own with the Penguins.

By the next morning we had left all the bergs behind and had another full day at sea (meaning that between South Georgia and Antarctica we had 3½ days at sea punctuated only by the two hour landing at Orcadas base). There were a few birds around and we started getting regular sightings of Blue Petrel. However we hardly ever saw an albatross now and, if we did, it was Black-browed.

The Antarctic Peninsula

The following morning we arrived at Hope Bay on the Antarctic Peninsula itself hoping to land (quite a few people had been to all the other five (or six) continents, and wanted to claim this one as well). The sun had come out and there was not much wind which meant that we could stand on the front deck as we came up to the anchorage. It was the nicest weather we had had since that first afternoon on the Falklands. The sea was quite clear which meant that we could see the penguins swimming underwater. It was fabulous. We were not allowed to land in Hope Bay by the Argentines at their base there so we made our way down the eastern side of the Antarctic Peninsula. We made our first landing

at View Point and I finally had a chance to stretch my legs so I climbed a small hill together with the others. Just as we got to the top it started to snow. What incredible weather - sun at lunch time and snow late afternoon. We then moved from our anchorage during supper and they announced we were going to do another landing. Quite a few decided they would stay on board, including Peter, but, as everyone knows, I never try to miss anything so off I went. It was still snowing and the first proposal, for when they got ashore, was to do the Scottish dancing that had been practised during the trip. Barbara, one of those on the cruise, is very keen on this form of dancing and it has apparently been done on every continent save Antarctica so she wanted it done there as well. Well it was done in the beach, in the snow being watched by an Antarctic Fur Seal and a group of Adelie Penguins who were trying to go to sleep. As can be imagined I did not participate but took some photographs for posterity! We then did a walk around the island and admired the almost lunar type landscape. Some South Polar Skuas and Antarctic Terns took exception to us walking there but it was a wonderful walk even if it did snow the whole time. The trip was topped off by seeing Crabeater seals in the water by the Zodiac on the way back to the ship. A late bed and therefore a late rise in the morning which was a great mistake.

When I woke in the morning we were surrounded by ice which had been blown into the bay into which we had motored overnight. The ship was covered in snow and walking on the deck was very slippery especially in wellington boots. The photographs again do not do it justice but, before breakfast, we started motoring back out into the main sea through all the ice and small icebergs, many of which had Crabeater seals lying on them. A few bergs had some Penguins on them but it was later in the day that we would see all the penguins!

After breakfast we had got to Devil Island where we took a long Zodiac cruise before landing. Rolfe had set the challenge of taking a photograph of a porpoising Penguin out of the air in the middle of the photograph **and** in front of an iceberg. Impossible but fun in the challenge. When we landed on Devil Island it took about 30 minutes to get off the beach and about 50 feet up the hill because there were so many Adelie Penguins around. Some of the party stayed on the beach and some just went up the hill in order to photograph the Penguins. Peter and I went up the steep hill and got to 600 feet where we had some good views (before the cloud came further down) over the sea on both sides. It was pretty quiet up there but you could still hear the generators in the ship in the background. Peter and I therefore walked over to the other side of the island where we were on our own save for a visiting South Polar Skua and the sound of the air coming out of the melting pieces of ice in the bay nearby (which is a wonderful gentle cracking and bubbling sound a bit like a stream flowing over rocks). Time went too quickly and we went back to the ship via the Penguin colony where many more photographs were taken. Penguins are just too photogenic and seem to be doing something different all of the time! Peter and I each feel that we take the best photographs so deciding which ones can go onto the website is quite challenging.

On the trip to our afternoon spot we went through a narrow channel which had a number of icebergs in it. There must have been lots of fish there because we saw, literally, thousands of Penguins porpoising in the water. There were seals there as well and both could be seen easily from the bow where, as usual I was stationed.

Later that day we landed at Brown Bluff, again on the Antarctic Peninsula itself, where we had not only Adelie Penguins with chicks but also Gentoo Penguins with chicks. The Gentoo chicks were at or almost at the moulting stage and chasing the parent for food. It was so funny as most Gentoos seemed to have two chicks.

All around we could see one parent being chased by two chicks, one chick would fall over, then the other chick and then the parent. Apparently it is all to get the chicks fit for life in that cold cold sea. The beach itself was covered, at the high tide mark, with small (4-5 feet high) icebergs and the penguins were coming ashore sometimes between the bergs and sometimes over them. This was also the first time that I noticed the penguins actually eating the ice. Presumably the way that they get fresh water? (Peter says "yes and they have a special way of making sure it does not cool their body temperature" according to one of our leaders Ditte).

We were next to an ice-cap and the sun was not shining and we were getting quite cold due to the katabatic wind coming off that cap but it was a magical place and Peter and I did not want to leave. We were on the penultimate Zodiac back to the ship.

The next day we were off to the other side of the Antarctic Peninsula i.e. the west side. This side is more likely to be affected by swell and we were so lucky to be able to do so many landings. We were told the forecast was for gale force winds and so the pre-breakfast Zodiac cruise was cancelled. The sea was quite rough during the night but, when I got up at 5 am, I could not believe it when I looked out of the porthole. The sun was shining, the sea was calm and the scenery was stunning. However it had been cold over night and the open deck just behind the bridge was very slippery as it was covered in ice. Up on the bridge Romanov informed me I had just missed seeing a whale but, within the next hour, I had two really close sightings of humpback whale and one further sighting. There were also loads of Southern Fulmar around so there was obviously a lot of food around that area. Gradually others on the cruise also arrived on the bridge to enjoy the fantastic scenery. I just hoped the weather would last for a few hours. Little did I know that we were going to have the best weather of the trip with sun and calm seas all day.

We dropped anchor just after breakfast and landed on a small island at Mikkelsen Harbour which had a Gentoo Penguin colony. The water was relatively shallow and clear so that we could see the penguins swimming under water. I explored the island but Peter was happy to sit where we had landed and watch the Penguins' activities. He was also trying to get a photograph of a Penguin in the act of diving into the water – look at the website to see if you think he succeeded or not). The Penguins get quite grubby ashore (penguin poo is pink and sticks to your boots so washing your boots regularly proved to be quite time consuming) and so, as soon as the Penguins get back into the sea, they do not go off fishing but first have a bath and preen their feathers. It is wonderful to watch. Rolfe and another expedition leader decided on a bathe in the sea but we did not join in! You think I am mad but that was something I did not even consider. The colours at that time were brilliant with the blue sky and blue sea, small icebergs and glaciers. Peter, the doctor, lent me his Polaroid filter which allowed me to get some lovely photographs of the scenery. Something to add to my birthday present list (which is conveniently just coming up!)

However the day just got better. Before lunch, we came across two relatively close Humpback Whales and had good views of them. After lunch the whales passed just in front of the bow and you could make out the white fins underwater as they dived.

We then went in to a bay with a glacier (Ciebra Bay) where we took another long Zodiac cruise in the sunshine amongst the icebergs and floes. On some of the floes Leopard Seals (up to nine feet long) were lying and we managed to get really close to them. In fact so close that Val and I asked if we could change

sides to the other side of the Zodiac. However the seals just seemed happy to stay asleep and were obviously not hungry. I suppose, like us, they were enjoying the sunshine which has not been around too often.

We got back to the ship to be greeted by hot chocolate laced with rum. The rum was being added by the ship's doctor Peter. He said it was for medicinal purposes. It was one of the few times I had got back to the ship feeling warm so it was not really needed but it was a nice touch from the ship.

We then left Cievra Bay in order to make our last short trip south. I stayed on the bridge until called down for supper and, even then, there were sightings of blows from Humpback Whales so, after supper, I went back onto the bridge. There were even more whales around and two passed close by the ship again. I did not know whether to look ahead or astern when one whale, to the side, started slapping its tail hard down on the water. Then a whale in front did a breach. We then had a group of whales coming towards the ship and I was lucky enough to be standing just where they came up. We realised they were bubble feeding as there were bubbles all around. Bubble feeding is when the whales blow bubbles around some food in order to make the food collect in the centre of the bubbles then a whale will come to the surface with its mouth open and take a large quantity of the food in one big gulp. One whale realised the ship was there and therefore dived down rather than feeding but another one came up and I have a great set of photographs showing its head and it gradually sinking back down again. What an experience.

Finally we got to Wilhelmina Bay which was to be our further point south on the trip and where we were to turn north again. This turned out to be the bay where the ship Ushuaia went aground only a few months ago (no-one was hurt but the ship will not be usable again for months). Again the scenery there was stunning and the sunset was fabulous. At the end of the bay at about 10.30 pm we reached our most southerly point on the trip (and probably for my life) so Soo, Jonathan, Robert, Peter and I celebrated with a liqueur each on the top deck. The evening was finished with a Humpback Whale blowing in front of the end of the sunset and a Leopard Seal lying on an icefloe next to the ship. It was a late bedtime that night (about 11.45) but it was worth it. At that time there was still light in the sky with the sun having set in the south-west. We were still having difficulty in remembering that at noon the sun was in the north and not the south! If we had had time to go another two degrees south, we would (if the ice had permitted it) have crossed the Antarctic Circle and enjoyed permanent daylight. But it was time now to make for home.

The South Shetland Islands

Romanov had told me about the great sunrise I had missed that morning so I decided I must get up for our final Antarctic Peninsula sunrise. I set the alarm for 3 am and looked out of the porthole. A little sky but mostly cloud but I decided I had better get up. Peter said he would not bother and so the sunrise was just seen by Karen and me. Karen was often up on the bridge early with me but would then go back to bed. The photograph of sunrise does not show much but an hour later it was the most amazing light so worth staying up for.

Unfortunately the cloud then really came down so we did not have good views of our penultimate island, Deception Island, which is a caldera (the crater left after a volcano has collapsed) which has been flooded by the sea. The narrow entrance is spectacular but this is where we started meeting up with other cruise ships. Two other ships were in the Caldera and one was where we had wanted to anchor. However we managed to anchor elsewhere and had a great walk on

another lunar type volcanic landscape. It was cold, wet and windy but at least it was another stretch of the legs. Having said that some of our party rebelled when shown the hill they were expected to climb. They returned the way they had come but we had a good walk and some spectacular, if limited, views of the scenery from the top.

Our last landing was on Half Moon Island which, like Deception Island, is in the South Shetlands. This was in order to go to a Chinstrap Penguin colony which had some chicks. It was staggering to see the climbs the penguins had to make to get to the top of colony but it snowed on us again and so Peter and I decided to sit on the beach and watch the Penguins coming ashore. Yet again we were visited by Penguins and we are hoping that Maarten, one of the expedition leaders, will send us the photograph he took of Peter and me looking at the Chinstrap who was looking at us. We must have been staring at each other for about five minutes!

Drake Passage

Supper was early that night so that we would finish it before we hit the start of the swell you get in the Drake Passage on our way back to Ushuaia. We knew as soon as we had hit it but it was not all that windy and we had got our sealegs by then so we were relatively confident of not feeling ill.

The last full day at sea was my mother's birthday. I wanted it to be relatively calm so that I could continue practising my bird recognition skills (as the Naturetrek tour brochure said we could do). My mother thought it was wonderful that we had strong winds and large waves. As far as I was concerned there were two problems. First it was blowing a gale and there was a large swell. The inclinometer was working well but we were swinging regularly to 25 degrees for most of the morning. However at one stage it got really bad and we think we got up to 35 degrees of swing. Soo's attempts to photograph the inclinometer failed as she was not standing there when we had the biggest rolls (and would probably have fallen over if she had let go to take the photo anyway). The second problem was that there were no birds around. Still by lunchtime the swell had gone down as we were now in the lee of South America and some birds did start appearing. By the evening we were anchored in the Beagle Channel for our last meal with my mother being embarrassed (although she had known to expect it) by the production of her birthday cake with the large candle she had to blow out. We had to finish too many left-over bottles of wine on our last night and I definitely went to bed swaying in my head. I am not sure if it was the alcohol, the effect of the swell or a combination of the two. Yet again the ship had provided us all with a glass of sparkling wine in order to celebrate the end of the trip and this had not been taken into account when calculating how much wine we had to drink! All I know is that, as I sit typing this in Chobham on Sunday afternoon, having left the ship on Wednesday morning, I am still swaying and I have not had any alcohol today. It must be from reliving the memories of such a great trip.

The Beagle Channel and Ushuaia again

Anyway the last morning I was up for the sunrise. Thankfully being so much further north the sunrise was not until 5.30. It was blowing a gale again and very cold on deck but Karen and I took some photographs and I stayed out hoping to see some dolphins but I was not successful.

We then said our goodbyes to the ship's expedition leaders and Peter went off to visit the museum and check us onto our flight at an Internet café and I went up the mountain below the cable car again. I was off in search of the Seed-Snipe

yet again and failed to see it yet again. However the weather was dry and it was not too windy and the views were fantastic. I was well above others from the ship who were exploring the main valley above the chairlift. I also saw a new species of bird being a Grey-flanked Cinclodes. Back into town to buy another of those wonderful ice-creams before joining the bus and travelling to the airport.

Buenos Aires

It had been dry and warm in Ushuaia, by its standard, and it was probably about 10 degrees in Ushuaia when we left so imagine how we felt when we got to Buenos Aires when, at 7.30 pm when we landed, it was still 35°C. Here we said goodbye to all the friends we had made on the trip including the two great Naturetrek trip leaders John Carruthers and Rob Mileto and then found a taxi to take us to our hotel (after lending my phone to Ditte so she could call her hotel as her phone would not work). This took some time as the staff at her hotel did not speak much English!

We just had time to get to our hotel and have a quick shower before going off to the restaurant recommended to us by the Argentine chef on board the ship. It was about 20 minutes away by taxi, nowhere near any of our hotels and four groups of us were to meet up there, Peter, my mother and me, Jonathan and Robert, Soo and then Ditte (one of the assistant expedition leaders who was staying near the airport). We all arrived within five minutes of each other. The staff spoke very little Spanish and we had not spoken any for almost three weeks). Fortunately the menu was also shown in English so we got by. We said our final goodbyes to these friends and got back to the hotel at about 12.45 for a good night's sleep

Peter and my mother were spending the next day sightseeing in Buenos Aires but I had organised a day's birding with James Lowen, a friend of Chris Collins whom I had met on the Kamchatka trip. James collected me at 6.40 when I found the earliest cup of coffee I could get at the hotel was at 6.30. No coffee facilities in our room at the hotel! We had a brilliant day and I did think of all the Naturetrek companions travelling home that day whilst I was standing in the sunshine birdwatching. Having said that it was 35 degrees for most of the day and, at the last place we went to bird, there was no shade but I had some great sightings and James was a really good guide and companion with whom to be. He has led Antarctic tours and so was really keen to hear about the trip. He was very envious to hear that we had seen an Emperor Penguin as he had never seen one. Peter tells me that he and my mother had a good time as well and got worn out walking all the streets in the heat. In the afternoon they tried a visit to the botanical garden but retreated to the hotel to escape the heat (mad dogs and Englishmen sprang to mind).

The following day we had to leave at 10.30 for the airport. However I still managed some birding at the Costanero Sur which is a nature reserve on the coast and relatively close to the city centre. I had chosen our hotel upon the basis that it was the closest, reasonably priced hotel to the reserve. James had told me it had been shut a few days earlier due to a fire but, fortunately, it was open and I had some great views of some of the birds I had seen the previous day. The sun shone all the time I was there and I was getting quite warm again. Fortunately Peter agreed, when I telephoned him, that I did not need to return to the hotel but instead they would pick me up from the entrance to the reserve. This gave me about an extra 45 minutes birding in the sunshine. Not only did I get good views of birds seen briefly the previous day, I also had views of some new species. One I could not identify as I only caught its rear view as it flew past but I did manage to photograph it as well (I had had the camera in my hands as

it flew up and not my binoculars) and, through e-mail, James has told me that what I saw was a Scissor-tailed Nightjar which is very exciting.

I have to say the benefits of digital photography are huge. Not only for assisting in bird identification but you can also take so many photographs on continuous mode and then delete all the ones which have just the splash (about half of my porpoising Penguins I reckon). Anyway this trip has many records but one is the number of photographs I took (over 5000). I passed 10,000 on the holiday so over half of all the photographs I have taken were on this trip.

Home

Preparing this report brings back so many happy memories and puts off the thought of what is to come tomorrow (i.e. the first day back at work for over four weeks). Yes Antarctica is a long way to go and there is a huge amount of travelling (particularly with all the sea days) but it is well worth it. The privilege of sitting with Penguins, watching very small birds flying as if nothing was different in a storm and watching the majestic Albatrosses soaring over the waves are some of the memories of this trip that I will never forget.

As for now, the cats are very pleased to see us and I have one sitting beside me purring at the moment **and** the birds are singing outside. I saw two blue tits inspecting a nest box yesterday and birding in the UK is fun it is just not the same as being surrounded by Penguins. You will see that we have a separate section for the photographs for Penguins because we took so many pictures of them. I hope you enjoy looking at them as much as we do.