# Antarctica, The Falkland Islands and South Georgia Tour Report 2020

## 11 May 2020

by Inger Vandyke

Antarctica. It is one of the most highly desired and most photographed continents on earth. The stunning landscapes, habituated wildlife and soft light are almost unrivalled in a photographic sense. This year's Wild Images tour was blessed with no less than three landings at Adelie Penguin colonies, a stunning sail across the northern edge of the Weddell Sea and even a pod of Orcas chasing our boat for over an hour like dolphins!

Our group met on board the MV Plancius, our expedition vessel for Antarctica late in the afternoon. After our compulsory safety briefing and introductory talk on shipboard procedures, we set sail through the Beagle Channel a little later than planned due to high winds in Ushuaia.

Despite these winds, we enjoyed the soft light of the setting sun which illuminated the stunning mountains adorning each side of this famous channel. The entire group spent the last light of day on the decks watching for seabirds and other creatures as we sailed including a couple of Dolphin Gulls; numerous Chilean Skuas, Kelp Gulls and Antarctic Terns, Black-browed Albatross and Southern Giant Petrels. A few swimming Magellanic penguins were seen along with many Imperial Shags and a few Rock Shags.

As we sailed past a group of rocky islets we spotted a colony of South American Sea Lions.

It was a superb way to start the tour and the calm conditions allowed us ample time to unpack and secure our things due to the forecast of rough seas and strong winds as we left Cape Horn through the night.

Our first full day at sea as we travelled towards the Falkland Islands. We caught our last glimpse of land as we sailed away from the south-eastern corner of Tierra Del Fuego at sunrise and afterwards most of the group spent the day on deck familiarising themselves with some of the seabirds for which this part of the world is famous.

We saw many Wilson's Storm Petrels and the occasional Black-bellied Storm Petrel gave us a good chance to watch and understand the plumage differences between these two species.

Sailing further away from the South American mainland, we noted that the numbers of Chilean Skuas began to decrease but we continued to see good numbers of Black-browed Albatrosses and Southern Giant Petrels.

Throughout the day we saw many Slender-billed Prions circling the boat but the most numerous bird was Sooty Shearwater which we estimated were around 3000 in number!

We spotted several solo Antarctic Fur Seals and South American Sea Lions at sea, along with a pod of around half a dozen Peal's Dolphins who decided to chase the boat for a while.

On our second day at sea, we spotted our first glimpse of the Falkland Islands as we sailed past Steeple Jason towards the island of West Point at sunrise.

The closer we sailed to the islands the more abundant sea life and we began to see numerous Black-browed Albatross who probably opted to feed closer to their breeding colonies on these islands while they have chicks.

We sailed past numerous swimming Rockhopper, Gentoo and Magellanic penguins and we spotted two large Gentoo Penguin colonies on islets as we entered a channel that brought calmer seas. Fluttering around the boat were numerous Slender-billed Prions and Wilson's Storm Petrels.

As we neared our anchorage at Carcass Island, we saw our first group of Falkland Island Steamer ducks swimming on the water that took flight when we approached with their trademark “steamboat” style wing flapping.

After breakfast we landed on Carcass Island, one of the highlights of any visits to the Falkland Islands. To the delight of our group we were followed into shore by a pod of curious Commerson’s Dolphins that chased our zodiacs.

Our key bird targets on Carcass were the endemic Cobbs Wren and Blackish Cinclodes and we found both as soon as we landed on the beach. We enjoyed good views of these for a while before we started our walk across the island under mild, grey skies. Little did we realise that our beach views of these birds certainly weren’t going to be our last. The cessation of sheep grazing by the island owners and subsequent flourishing of Poa Tussock has meant that both of these birds have hugely increased in numbers and during our walk, a few members of our group had Blackish Cinclodes landing on their backpacks! Cobbs Wrens were spotted almost everywhere, even around the buildings of the settlement!

We enjoyed our first up close views of nesting Magellanic penguins as we walked across the island towards a white sand beach. The local grasses were in full flower and we were blessed to see lovely Upland Geese wandering through the grass flowers. A solo South American Snipe was found and also a nesting Brown Skua.

On a nearby hill we saw two colonies of nesting Gentoo Penguins that we walked over to slowly and then we quietly lay on our stomachs to photograph them. Getting down to eye level with Gentoo penguins is always wonderful and it really is the best way to get good photos! While we were lying there the sun had started to come out and our walk was interrupted by our first sightings of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants, White-bridled Finches, Black-chinned Siskins, Long-tailed Meadow Larks and Turkey Vultures. We also spotted our first Yellow-billed Teal of the trip and we walked through groups of both Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese who were so habituated towards visitors, they barely walked away from us!

It was quite hard to get out of the grassy saddle of the island but the white sands and turquoise waters of the beach tempted us all to see what was beyond the dunes to photograph. By the time we reached the beach the light was stunning and photographed our first Magellanic Oystercatcher, a beautiful pair of Falkland Island Steamer Ducks resting on a mattress of kelp and small groups of Magellanic penguins at the end of the beach. As we took it all in, a couple of Magellanic penguins joined us from the nearby turquoise seas.

None of us wanted to leave the beach that morning. The conditions were simply perfect for birding and photography. Just as we decided to go, another pair of Falkland Steamer ducks landed on the shore and decided they didn’t like the resident Falkland Steamer Ducks stealing their beds so they chased them off, sending the latter back to sea in a mix of flying and running down the beach!

Time began to run out for us to make the five kilometre walk back to the settlement on Carcass so we left the beach and followed the track through the Poa Tussock and grasslands adjacent to the shore towards the jetty.

We spotted another South American Snipe on the walk and a few more nesting Magellanic Penguins. Walking through the Poa was sometimes wondrous due to the number of birds we spotted in these tall grasses. More Cobbs Wrens were found and we spotted a couple of Austral Thrushes while good numbers of Turkey Vultures and Southern Giant Petrels circled overhead.

A Grass Wren was heard on the walk but none of us could find it in the dense vegetation. At one point the Poa Tussock had grown so high that taller members of our group were only just able to see over the top of it to walk through it! Some of our smaller members of the group made their way through this Poa outcrop slowly, only to be rewarded with a stunning Striated Caracara which landed on the open grass right in front of them when they emerged from the tussock.

We were joined by both Kelp Gulls and South American Terns flying around us as we neared the settlement buildings. When we left the grassy hillsides and descended to the beach we found beautiful Kelp Geese with goslings, both Blackish and Magellanic Oystercatchers foraging, several Rock Shags, a pair of Crested Ducks and three Black-crowned Night Herons on the coast.

Surprisingly we even found Cobbs Wrens on some rusted tanks near the base of the shoreline and seeing so many of these delightful little birds was a highlight of what could only be described as a stunning morning on Carcass Island.

As we returned to the boat we were once again chased by a pod of Commerson’s dolphins who seemed to want to farewell us from their island.

That afternoon we were scheduled to land on Saunders Island but increasing winds caused us to land on West Point instead.

Followed by yet another pod of Commerson's dolphins ashore, our group split into two smaller groups – one who wanted to walk up to the albatross colony and the other who were offered a lift by the owners of the settlement on West Point in their old Landrovers.

Arriving at the beautiful colony of Black-browed Albatrosses on West Point, we spotted a Variable Hawk in the distant grasses. Joining it were a couple of Turkey Vultures and Southern Giant Petrels flying overhead – the usual predators and scavengers of large seabird colonies in the Falkland Islands.

As we approached the large colony of nesting Black-browed Albatrosses we were delighted to see many mature chicks of these magnificent birds. Nesting around them were many active and loud Rockhopper Penguins, all jostling for space in this tight knit colony of birds.

It was a superb, sunlit afternoon so our group enjoyed many incredible views of both species while feeling the wind of albatrosses landing at the colony, less than 50cm or so above their heads.

Normally abundant Striated Caracaras on West Point were conspicuously less in number on our visit. Nevertheless we managed to see a small group of adults and immature birds squabbling on the cliff edge towards the north western ridge of the colony.

Walking back down to the vessel we were delighted to see more Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese which we photographed in beautiful light along with some pretty Austral Thrushes. At the base of the walk we found both resting Kelp Geese and Falkland Island Steamer ducks on the jetty.

What a tremendous afternoon to land at West Point! We set sail at sunset for the town of Stanley, the capital of the Falklands in the east of the islands.

Arriving in Stanley on a beautiful sunny morning we split our group into two again – one to photograph wildlife and another to photograph Stanley. While the majority of our guests decided to join us on a birding tour of the island, a few decided to stay back and just enjoy the sights and delights of the Falklands capital, one of the most isolated island capitals in the world.

The wildlife fanatics left for Surf Bay where we tried to look for Two-banded Plovers without success. We enjoyed views of Crested Ducks, Kelp Geese and Upland Geese on our drive through the island. When we missed the Two-banded Plovers at Surf Bay,we decided to drive over to Gypsy Bay where we eventually found four of them – two adults with two chicks. Due to the fact that much of Gypsy Bay is cut off due to unexploded landmines after the Falklands war, we were restricted to a gravel path at one end of the beach where we only really had distant views of the plovers. We did, however, find two large and very shy Magellanic penguin chicks in a burrow not far from the viewing platform over the beach.

We decided to drive over to the Cape Pembroke area, which had a lot of good habitat for the second of our target birds on the island, the Rufous-chested Plover. Walking around a pretty selection of peat bog vegetation and cushion plants we found Upland Geese, some very pretty White-bridled Finches and Corondera Pipits. We eventually found several Rufous-chested Plovers around 150 metres or so off the track so we enjoyed lovely views and photographic opportunities of both adult and mature chicks. While we watched we spotted some pretty little Grass Wrens which were remarkably bold. After they got used to use being there, a couple of group members had Grass Wrens alighting less than 20 metres in front of them!

Returning to the port we found an immature Black-crowned Night Heron fishing in the shallows of the harbour and also a nesting colony of Rock Shags on a pylon.

We set sail under stunning conditions of windless, calm seas towards South Georgia. Joining our departure from the Falklands were numerous Kelp Gulls, South American terns, a couple of Brown Skuas and several Rock Shags.

Curiously we spotted two massive feeding flocks of Sooty Shearwaters that we estimated were around a thousand birds in total and we spotted a large group of feeding Imperial Shags on the water off Cape Pembroke.

Further out to sea the pelagic seabirds returned and we enjoyed sightings of our first Fairy Prions on the trip, both Grey-backed and Wilson's Storm Petrels, White-chinned Petrels and even two small groups of our first King Penguins swimming in the open water.

A group of four Sei Whales were spotted late on an afternoon that capped off an incredible stay in the Falkland Islands.

Our first full day at sea en route to South Georgia gave us all a chance to start watching and studying some of the more pelagic wildlife in these latitudes. Soft-plumaged Petrels were seen in abundance, along with Black-bellied and Wilson's Storm Petrels.

Following the boat throughout the day were quite a number of White-chinned Petrels, a suite of various Wandering type albatrosses, Black-browed Albatrosses and Southern Giant Petrels. We saw our first Northern Giant Petrels of the trip on this day and as we sailed towards South Georgia, our first Fairy Prions of the trip also materialised.

Perhaps the biggest highlights of the day were two significant cetacean sightings. During our compulsory bio-security cleaning sessions in the morning, a large feeding pod of Long-finned Pilot whales was spotted near the boat. Joining them in the feeding session were several Peale's Dolphins and quite a number of seabirds. Unfortunately they were all sighted while the passengers and crew were busy inside so our views of this feeding frenzy were not long enough to study exactly what types of animals were present in full detail.

Later in the day a pod of around ten or so Southern Right Whale Dolphins were seen from the back of the boat.

The next morning the sky was socked in by fog as we crossed the Antarctic convergence. This typical phenomenon occurs when we cross into the cold waters of Antarctica from the north and it can sometimes make seabird watching and photography a little difficult.

Despite this we spotted good numbers of Antarctic Prions, Southern Giant Petrels, Wandering Albatrosses, Black-bellied Storm Petrels and our first South Georgia Shags of the trip.

Today was mainly a pelagic sea watching day and the highlights were not just restricted to the birds. We had three incredible cetacean encounters on this day including our first sightings of Southern Bottlenose Whales (two), one huge pod of feeding Fin Whales and as the day drew to a close, more Fin Whales joined an incredible dozen or so Killer Whales in bow riding the Plancius away from Shag Rocks, the only land sighted that day. This was an absolute cetacean highlight of the trip!!!

From sunrise the next day we began to see the incredible coastline of South Georgia which translated into an increased number of seabirds including our first white morph Southern Giant Petrel. Our time here initially started well as we anchored up at the first of the island's large King Penguin rookeries at Salisbury Plain. Our greeting party at St Andrews was a small group of our first Snowy Sheathbills of the trip who came out and landed on the ship almost like the harbour masters of St Andrews.

A few of us enjoyed an encounter with a bathing Southern Giant Petrel having a wash in the icy waters right next to our boat!

The weather appeared to be calm enough to land but the lack of wind was deceptive. A large shore swell had developed at Salisbury and sadly we couldn't land there. By way of consolation the seas were calm enough for us to do a Zodiac cruise along the shoreline where we were greeted by large numbers of King Penguins swimming around our boats.

Occasionally we would see huge groups of King Penguins swimming in the surf and watching their sheer number of bobbing heads in the swell was really entertaining.

On the beach we spotted many, many Antarctic Fur Seal pups running after each other on the beach and hassling other young animals on the beach in little "gangs".

In between all of them we saw our first Elephant Seals of the trip.

Catching a zodiac raft is never really a bad "Plan B" in Antarctica. Yes, the inability to land on the beach can be disappointing but there is really something special about drifting slowly around the shoreline and watching Penguins pop out of the water to look at you or an overly curious seal swimming over to check you out. Even from the boat, the wildlife of places like South Georgia is incredible.

That afternoon we arrived at a pretty bay of South Georgia called Fortuna where we could land at the King Penguin colony. Although a smaller colony than Salisbury Plain, the landing at Fortuna still entertained us with our first views of South Georgia Pipit and South Georgia Pintail, the only two endemic birds of the island.

We also learned to negotiate our way through groups of aggressive Antarctic Fur Seals that afternoon as we explored channels through the tussock, crossed streams and wandered the plains behind the beach.

It was here that we spotted a Southern Giant Petrel feasting on the remains of a fur seal carcass which was a highlight for the photographers in our group.

Returning to the beach we enjoyed our first encounter with a leucistic Antarctic Fur Seal in the tussock and we remained on the beach with the King Penguins and seals until the last light of day forced us to leave.

The next day was Australia Day and after the Aussies were given flag tattoos we all reveled in the fact that we were celebrating on South Georgia and we spent the first half of it exploring the incredible King Penguin rookery of St Andrews. Home to over 40,000 pairs of penguins, St Andrews is one of the wildlife wonders of the world and we had abundant opportunities to play with different depths of field in photography as we photographed the entire colony and individual penguins up close. .

A group of lounging Elephant Seals and a curious group of King Penguins greeted us at the Zodiac landing point on the beach of St Andrews. After landing some of us opted to just stay on the beach for a while to survey the incredible wildlife. It was here that we found our first leucistic King Penguin. This remarkable looking bird had a white back, an orange head and “freckles” of black feathers giving him a rather painted look which was profoundly different to all the King Penguins we saw on the trip. After watching him for a while we left to cross a running stream and walk over the large King Penguin colony of St Andrews.

We crossed through beautiful flowering grasses and native plants with small outcrops of Azorella. En-route we found a few Brown Skua chicks and we even met one parent Skua feeding its hungry chick the remains of a very young King Penguin!

Arriving at the colony we were astounded to see countless King Penguins of varying ages and sizes on the plains below our viewpoint. The sheer sight, sounds and smells of your first King Penguin colony remains a forever memory for nearly everyone who encounters it. Sitting on the rocky hillock above the colony we watched Snowy Sheathbills scouring the colony for food, Brown Skuas hoping for a meal of an unsupervised penguin chick and Giant Petrels constantly on the lookout for the weak or dying. The sheer abundance of life and death in a colony of this size was astounding.

While we enjoyed lunch, the Plancius sailed around to the historical harbour of Grytviken, home to an ageing and fascinating Norwegian whaling station and the only permanent settlement of people on this remote British territory.

Exploring the ruins of the station we had great views of the only two endemic birds of South Georgia – the South Georgia Pipit and South Georgia Pintail. Since the last rats were removed from South Georgia in 2017, the sudden increase in both species was a thrill to see.

Some of our group opted for a guided tour of the whaling station while others simply took the time to enjoy the nature of the harbour with its displaying Antarctic Terns, Antarctic Fur Seals and Elephant Seals.

Our last stop before we disembarked for the boat was the grave of the famous explorer Ernest Shackleton whose epic expedition to Antarctica was chronicled in the story “Endurance” by Alfred E. Scott. Here we drank a small sip of whiskey (Shackleton’s favorite drink) to toast his incredible feat of crossing the island of South Georgia on foot to raise a rescue party for his men who were stranded on Elephant Island after his expedition to the Antarctic failed.

That evening we enjoyed a delicious barbecue at sunset on the back deck of the Plancius.

During the night we arrived at the sheltered anchorage of Godhul and our first excursion was a wonderful Zodiac cruise west of the bay towards Rookery Point where we saw our first Macaroni Penguins of the trip. Calm conditions made for a beautiful, slow cruise around basaltic cliffs painted with lichens which plunged into the sea and became homes for large forests of macrocystis and dervillea kelp. It was on this Zodiac cruise we encountered our first close views of a breeding colony of South Georgia Shags. Numerous Kelp Gulls were spotted and several Sheathbills fluttered around the cliffs above our heads.

As we rounded the headland of Rookery Point we found a small group of both Northern and Southern Giant Petrels feeding off a dead penguin on the shoreline. Interloping Brown Skuas tried to catch their piece of the carcass but they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of Giant Petrels present at the scene. Leaving them, we motored past quite a number of Giant Petrels resting on the water where we reached our first colony of zany Macaroni Penguins. It was our first real encounter with these fantastic and charismatic penguins and we all enjoyed funny scenes of them trying to get into the water, get out of it and we had some fantastic opportunities to photograph them plopping in and out of the water as they porpoised around our boats. One of the Zodiac groups also watched a pair of leucistic Antarctic Fur Seal pups playing in the water with a few normal coloured pups.

After lunch and a rest in the bay, the passengers split into three groups to explore the Gentoo Penguin colony of Godhul. The more active team were put together to summit the nearby peak behind the bay. An intermediate group was formed to explore a high lake on the way to the mountains and a less active group spent the afternoon with a colony of Gentoo Penguins in the afternoon sun.

This was to be our last chance to watch and photograph Gentoo Penguins in grasses on this trip. From here on we would only see them in the ice and stones of Antarctica so the penguin watcher group enjoyed marvelous views of Brown Skuas patrolling the colony looking for incidental prey or cleaning up uneaten pellets of krill. We also watched several well grown Gentoo chicks scoot around after adults hoping that they would get a meal. For the quieter and patient members of the group who decided to just sit silently in the grasses, they were rewarded with incredible encounters of Gentoo chicks approaching them fearlessly and sitting less than 30cm from them. At one point both a photo tripod and also a backpack was inspected by curious Gentoo chicks and their chosen proximity to some of us was a true highlight. Their sweet and very inquisitive natures made it very hard to leave the colony and head back to the boat.

As we entered our last day on South Georgia, we reached the eastern side of the island which is considerably more Antarctic in its feel and temperature. We started to see the verdant tussock hillsides give way to more starkly beautiful glaciers, ice-capped peaks and gargantuan rocky mountains capped with snow.

An early start (5am) saw us arriving at the stunningly beautiful Gold Harbour, one of the finest landings on South Georgia. Although our sunrise was marred by mist covered mountains we all held out hopes that the waters would stay calm for a pre-breakfast landing. After boarding the Zodiacs we attempted to go ashore but after the first Zodiac landed in a large shore swell where one person went overboard, the landing was cancelled. The remaining passengers in Zodiacs were taken around the shoreline of Gold Harbour, which is effectively a narrow sand beach filled with King Penguins, Elephant Seals and Antarctic Fur Seals. We did see a group of Southern Giant Petrels feasting on a dead penguin in the water while a living penguin tried to scare them off it! For a short time, the passengers who made it ashore were amused by a pair of young elephant seals trying to practice their play fights on the sand. Gold Harbour is hemmed in by the sea on one side and huge glacial faces on the other so it is little wonder that it is deemed as one of the most beautiful on the island.

During breakfast we sailed around to Cooper's Bay which is home to a large colony of Macaroni Penguins and a somewhat smaller colony of Chinstrap Penguins. After we anchored up between Cooper Island and Cooper Bay, thankfully the winds stayed calm enough to allow all of our guests to enjoy two Zodiac tours around these colonies where we saw nesting South Georgia Shags, Snowy Sheathbills, Antarctic Fur Seals and many penguins both on land and in the water. Curiously the swimming penguins were a little more chaotic than the birds of the previous day so it was harder to get shots of them diving out of the water but some of us still managed to get images like this, even despite the haphazard nature of the birds. Seeing our first swimming Chinstrap Penguins of the trip was a definite highlight of the day.

While we dined at lunch the Plancius motored towards the stunning Drygalski Fjord as the sun came out in perfect time for us to enjoy a few hours in this incredibly beautiful, narrow waterway. On our way to the fjord, we spotted our first ice penguins with three cheeky Chinstrap Penguins sitting on a beautiful iceberg at the mouth of the fjord area. Our entrance into the fjord was also held up for a few minutes by a small group of Humpback Whales which swam very close to the boat allowing for great views by everyone on board.

Inside the fjord there was no vegetation whatsoever. Steep mountainous cliffs dotted with waterfalls and glaciers lined a waterway where the water changed from the deep blue of the ocean to the beautiful aquamarine colour of glacial melt. Larger chunks of ice and ice bergs gave way to a see of brash ice as we neared the terminus of the fjord and looked out over a huge glacial face. We were thrilled to see both Snow Petrel and Weddell Seal on this afternoon. Also sighted were young South Georgia Shags, Gentoo Penguin, Antarctic Fur Seals,

Antarctic Terns and quite a number of pretty Cape Petrels flying around and swimming in the brash ice.

At one point we watched one of the dainty Snow Petrels land on a piece of ice and drink freshwater from it as the afternoon sun melted enough for it to do so.

Leaving Drygalski we sailed into the setting sun surrounded by thousands of prions and other seabirds.

The abundance of ice in this almost Antarctic feel corner of South Georgia whetted our appetite for the next leg of our journey to South Orkney where the real Antarctica leg of the trip began.

Another sea crossing day of the trip was spent up on deck where our group eagerly looked out for Antarctic sea birds including prions, albatrosses, giant petrels and storm petrels. Probably the highlight of the day was more on the cetacean side when we spotted two breaching Strap-toothed whales early in the morning. This rarely seen whale is most usually identified through glimpses of their dorsal fins on the surface of the sea so to see two breaching was truly magnificent.

During the day we sighted around twenty Fin whales and five Humpback whales at sea.

A flurry of snow and icy conditions greeted us at South Orkney the following morning. Looking out the window most of us could see many icebergs with snow capped peaks nearing the horizon in the early morning gloom. The cold, grey mist of the islands gave us a sense that we had truly entered the realm of the Antarctic and we planned for our first landing on Shingle Cove on the southern coast of Coronation Island, the main island of the South Orkneys.

Shingle Cove is home to a breeding colony of Adelie penguins and our landing 'beach' was more like a tiny cove lined with sea pebbles with the terminus of a large glacier at one end.

Landing ashore, we walked over the rocky hillocks lining the cove towards the Adelie colony. When we arrived we found many mature chicks covered in penguin faeces chasing their mothers around hoping for food. After a while we weren't sure if these chicks were actually chasing their own mothers or just any adult who might be able to give them a regurgitated mouthful of food to eat. It was quite amusing watching the antics of this breeding colony and we managed to photograph many birds in the snow, which continued to fall for the entire morning we were there.

Close to the colony, two Brown Skuas had also nested and some of our group watched on as the parent skuas fed a very young Adelie chick to their own two fluffy brown chicks. Such is the cycle of life in these huge nesting seabird colonies.

Returning to the beach we found a good number of male Antarctic Fur Seals resting on the wet stones. Amongst them, oddly, was a young, solo King Penguin! Seeing this bird was an unlikely surprise in South Orkney as we thought we said goodbye to King Penguins on the trip when we left South Georgia.

Towards the edge of the glacier there was a tiny pool of water and a couple of large Elephant Seals lounging at the edge of the surf completely unperturbed by the falling snow.

Despite the snowy, wet and cold conditions we really enjoyed this landing surrounded by Antarctic wildlife in this very isolated patch of South Orkney.

That afternoon we set sail for Elephant Island, the famed island where Sir Ernest Shackleton left his men after the Endurance expedition failed in the ice of the Weddell Sea. The sea, still filled with ice bergs, was a constant source of delight for our group as we found our first Southern Fulmars and we encountered many Antarctic Fur Seals, diving penguins, Fin and Humpback whales during the cruise.

The snow ceased to fall on our overnight sail towards Elephant Island yet the grey conditions persisted and shortly after breakfast we spotted the stunningly beautiful Cornwallis Island on our way to Elephant Island. Shrouded by a layer of cloud near its summit Cornwallis' steep sea cliffs really gave us a taste of the harsh Antarctic landscape that Shackleton's men must have seen as their first sight of land after leaving the Weddell Sea.

Between Cornwallis and nearby Elephant Island we spotted many Fin Whales. We estimated we saw over fifty of these streamlined whales in total between the two islands and at one point we simply slowed down to a near stop as they surrounded the Plancius in the

icy sea off Elephant Island.Arriving at Elephant Island, we assessed the winds to see if we could land and while they had abated somewhat from the approach at Cornwallis, the swell wasn't calm enough for us to do so. Instead we enjoyed a stunning zodiac cruise around Point Wild where Shackleton's men had been left to survive over a hundred years ago.

Sir Ernest Shackleton took his crew to Elephant Island where he left them while he sailed to South Georgia in one of the Endurance's lifeboats, the James Caird, in order to arrange a rescue. Only after over-wintering on Elephant Island were the men rescued by a Chilean ship captained by Luis Pardo, whose bronze bust sits on a rocky spit at Point Wild to this day as a memory to his extreme bravery in rescuing the stranded men of Shackleton's expedition.

Point Wild sits on the edge of a bay that is lined by a glacier and while we anchored up we watched and heard many glacial 'calvings' as large sheets of ice sheered off from the glacier into the sea.

The point itself is spectacular due to its high sea cliffs, rocky stacks and large colony of Chinstrap penguins.

Launching the zodiacs we cruised around to the ocean side of Point Wild so we could see the bust of Pardo facing towards the open ocean. It was here we spotted two Leopard Seals swimming in the surf, hoping for a dinner of an unwary Chinstrap Penguin. The Chinstraps seemed to sense they were there also as they gathered to enter the sea in large numbers as a safety measure. For a while we cruised around trying to spot these Leopard Seals and when one of them surfaced right next to our Zodiac we decided that was a little too close for comfort so we left them in peace and cruised around to the brash ice filled side of the rock spit on the inside of the bay.

Cruising through the brash really gave us a sense of what it was like to float on ice, Antarctic style and while our boat drivers expertly negotiated their way through numerous boulders of ice we watched the comings and goings of the nesting Chinstraps, many of whom had mature chicks on the rock cliffs.

We also managed to 'souvenir' a large boulder of ice from the brash which formed the basis of many celebratory gin and tonics that evening as we toasted Shackleton, his men and Pardo for their heroism in surviving the Endurance expedition all those years ago. Of course we also celebrated our crew that afternoon for allowing us to do a Zodiac cruise at Elephant Island when the weather conditions generally stop most visitors from getting anywhere near the island to see it.

Later that afternoon we headed back to Cornwallis Island as we set sail for the Antarctic mainland and the end of our day was once again filled with sightings of Fin Whales and numerous seabirds as the sunset.

Most of us got up early the next day due to our scheduled arrival in the continent of Antarctica and the early starters were certainly not disappointed as we woke, albeit on a grey day, to see many large icebergs floating around the ocean in one of nature's most spectacular 'sculpture parks' in the world.

We started to see good numbers of the white morph Southern Giant Petrels in the sea around these bergs and it was really them that signaled we were really in Antarctic waters, as you normally only see one or two of these beautiful birds at sea elsewhere.

Our first landing today was on Paulet Island and as we arrived the grey skies cleared to a soft blue allowing for beautiful photographs of the island's incredible colony of nesting Adelie Penguins.

We launched the zodiacs to go ashore and while we cruised to the beach our drivers had to negotiate their way through bits of bergs that were covered in resting penguins close to the shore.

Paulet is a beautiful landing with a large colony of penguins adorning a rocky landing just above the beach. Also nesting here were a good number of Antarctic Shags who shared their real estate with many boisterous Adelies on a nearby hillside. The views from this colony over a glacial lake and the nearby sea were tremendous and we enjoyed many wonderful encounters including a distant predation of an Adelie chick by a Southern Giant Petrel on the beach. Sadly this macabre scene unfolded too far away for any decent photographs but the encounter allowed some members of our group to witness, first hand, the gruesome nature of giant petrels and their activities around a large colony of nesting seabirds.

We reluctantly left the beach of Paulet after taking way too many photos of pretty Adelie penguins in and around the beach as they came and went. A request was made for the zodiac drivers to take us on a short cruise around the bergs so we could see the Adelies on the ice

and we all enjoyed some spectacular photography of Adelie penguins jumping on and off icebergs, sitting at the top of the ice and we even spotted a White-morph Southern Giant Petrel swimming around the bergs in the blue skies of a beautiful morning.

Leaving Paulet we set sail for Brown's Bluff on the Antarctic continent in near millpond conditions with a beautiful blue sky. Sailing past numerous icebergs we spotted resting seals, many penguin and swimming whales in the ice of the sea. The flat, mirrored surface of the water allowed for beautiful shots of penguins diving out of the water alongside the boat and whale watching easy as blows and dives created ripples across the water. In the distance, however, the skies were getting cloudy and by the time we reached our next landing at Brown's Bluff a light wind had stirred up the surface of the sea and brought snow with it also.

We landed at Brown's Bluff in sleet and were instantly greeted by some adorable Gentoo Penguin chicks on the beach. Joining them were also Adelie chicks, just a short walk from where we landed.

This was the first time we actually set foot on the Antarctic continent. We had finally arrived! Some of our group opted to walk up on to a nearby glacier while others simply enjoyed sitting on the beach and being approached by overly curious and sweet little Gentoo chicks who thought their human entertainment was a new world of wonder. Some of them tugged gently on the straps of our backpacks. Others decided to inspect the soles of our boots or peck gently at the legs of our tripods.

As with all Antarctic wildlife the animals have the right of way so it took quite some time for these chicks to get bored by their human guests and all the glamorous trappings that chicks don't get to see often. Eventually when they did, we walked to the opposing end of the beach past many berg bits floating next to the coast. Examining this ice we found a lounging Leopard Seal on one piece and it even raised its head to yawn at one point, allowing some of our group to photograph it and examine its tremendous teeth. Leopard Seals are equipped with both sharp molars for attacking penguins and then a series of trident shaped teeth for filtering krill when larger prey like penguins are not able to be hunted. This almost reptilian seal really did look like the "smiling assassin" of a penguin colony as we watched it out on the ice.

At the terminus of the beach walk we were able to watch more Adelie penguins on the ice and also several displaying South Polar and Antarctic Skuas in a nearby puddle of the beach.

The sleet turned to into a light snow fall as we left Brown's Bluff and set sail for Devil Island overnight.

After a snowy night we woke the next morning to find ourselves still surrounded by so many icebergs as we approached Devil Island, our first landing for the day.

We were treated with beautiful views of the Devil Island's surrounding sea cliffs and large, horn-shaped peak that looked over our landing beach like a sentinel.

Home to another large nesting colony of Adelie penguins, Devil Island has a pretty black pebble beach dotted with ice and kelp where we were greeted by several wandering Adelie penguins as we landed.

Given the sheer number of birds nesting at Devil Island, we were encouraged to walk along the beach in single file near the water to allow the penguins to wander freely along the beach at the base of their colony.

A few of our group opted to hike to the summit of Devil Island where they were rewarded with spectacular views over the bay where the Plancius was anchored and another bay filled with ice on the opposite side of the island.

Some opted to visit the saddle before the summit hike and were rewarded with views of Adelie penguins lounging the snow at the top of the hill.

For most of us it was simply a great few hours spent watching Adelie penguin chicks chase parents around for food, enter and leave the sea by the ice and simply take in the surrounding views of this beautiful colony.

Leaving Devil Island we were blessed with ice and sea conditions that were calm enough for us to sail around the northern edge of the Weddell Sea towards the east coast of Seymour Island.

In what turned out to be the most scenically spectacular sail of the trip we enjoyed watching the many icebergs of the Weddell and the wildlife that called these bergs home. Shortly after we left Devil Island a pod of Killer Whales was spotted in the ice bergs, alongside

another pod of Humpback Whales. At one point it seemed that the Killer Whales were taunting the Humpbacks and our group watched on in awe as the Humpbacks tried to fend off the Killers in a series of vocal sighs, blows and spy hopping displays. It was a thrilling encounter and as the intensity of it all died down we spotted many more Humpbacks as we ventured further along the edge of the Weddell Sea. More Weddell, Crab-eater and Leopard seals were seen lounging on the ice along with numerous Adelie penguins on the ice.

The most incredible aspect of this afternoon at sea, however, was the ice. We were incredibly lucky to have the right conditions for a sail along the northern edge of the Weddell Sea, a situation that isn't always possible due to high winds and the wrong ice conditions for most ships to do it.

The captain of the Plancius expertly navigated the ship through a myriad of sea ice, natural and tabular icebergs in stunning conditions of calm seas and soft light. We all enjoyed looking through the beautiful clear seas at icebergs above and below the water; beautiful reflections of icebergs in the mirrored surface of the ocean; listening to 'growlers' hit the Plancius when we couldn't avoid them and finally a mind blowing navigation through a maze of gargantuan tabular icebergs that left us all in wonder of the beauty of Antarctica at sea!

As a surprise afternoon tea the hotel staff on board decided to serve a glass of rum and hot chocolate on the top deck of the boat which we sipped on while we floated through a sea glowing golden with the reflection of the late afternoon sky. It was certainly a memorable afternoon in a rarely visited part of Antarctica.

In the end the only thing that forced most of us inside was an increasing wind, which plummeted the temperature to a below zero wind chill and the setting sun which was enough to draw most of us back up on deck after dinner. That night we set sail for the South Shetland Islands where we enjoyed the last two landings of our cruise in Antarctica.

At sunrise the beautiful icebergs of Antarctic had decreased in number as we approached Half Moon Bay on South Shetland. Thankfully the grey skies at sunrise also cleared up and we were lucky that the winds calmed down for us to enjoy an incredible landing at Half Moon Bay near one of the Argentine research bases on South Shetland.

Half Moon is home to a large colony of nesting Chinstrap penguins and after a short stop at the landing beach where we photographed the remains of an old whaling boat, we did the short hike up to the jagged rock stacks of the colony. Half Moon is one of the prettiest landings in South Shetland. Its rocky hillsides are pockmarked with Wilson's Storm Petrel nests; the beaches provide excellent resting points for Weddell Seals and Antarctic Fur Seals and Chinstrap Penguins are everywhere.

As we approached the largest colony of Chinstrap Penguins of the landing we had to watch our step as the rocks were made slippery by a combination of penguin faeces and mud. Sitting on the nearby rocks and watching the activity of the colony all of us wondered just how grotty a pretty penguin could get as we saw many mature chicks absolutely covered in faeces and even visiting adults covered in both faeces and vomited food!

The dynamics of this colony were, however, fascinating to watch. At one point a Southern Giant Petrel swooped in and try to grab an unaware Chinstrap chick by its neck, only to have the chick react quickly and twist itself free of the giant petrel's bill!

Several Snowy Sheathbills were spotted both flying around the colony and scavenging on both faeces and any uneaten, regurgitated penguin food.

We even found the solo Macaroni Penguin that has called this colony of Chinstrap Penguins home for the past year or so and we wondered how on earth this bird ended up there and liked it enough to stay. After all the bustle of the Chinstrap colony was a very noisy and mucky place!

Leaving the colony to walk back to the landing we heard about a Weddell Seal that had decided to land on the beach to rest so we stopped by to look at it, hoping that it would do something interesting other than sleeping so we could get some good photos. Finally it opened its eyes, stretched and even scratched its nose with one of its flippers before time began running out and we had to leave.

The weather had turned so beautiful that it was a very slow walk back to the landing as many of us stopped to take photos of the lichen covered hillsides, more penguins and the nearby glacial clad peaks of the bay opposite Half Moon.

Over lunch we had a short sail to nearby Yankee Harbour, our landing point for the afternoon.

Boarding the Zodiacs at Yankee Harbour, we cruised around a rocky spit to a sheltered bay that is home to a large colony of Gentoo Penguins.

As soon as we arrived we received news that a large Leopard Seal had been spotted on the floating ice surrounding the beach at the Gentoo colony so we headed there first, just in case the Leopard Seal decided to move off during our visit. As it turned out this seal was lying fat and content on the ice for the duration of our landing, only occasionally moving to stretch and yawn in the afternoon sun.

Two walks were possible at Yankee Harbour, a shorter walk to the Gentoos and a longer walk along the rocky spit where we saw a good number of resting Weddell Seals on the pebble beach and even another Leopard Seal on that spit! The latter decided to take to the sea at the first sight of humans but the Weddell Seals remained and our group enjoyed great views of these pretty seals with their pudgy, cuddly faces enjoying their beach siestas in the afternoon sun.

The walks in both directions afforded everyone with incredible views of the stunning scenery at Yankee Harbour. On one side of the landing bay was a huge glacier. On the other, across the narrow channel of sea, was a chain of snow mountains and glaciers glistening in the sunlight.

At the colony of Gentoos most of us simply sat taking it all in, watching Gentoo Penguins come and go in the ice next to the beach, an occasional Antarctic Fur Seal also exploring the sea ice for a path to the beach and this was to be our last chance to spend time with the adorable and curious chicks of Gentoo Penguins.

While we all enjoyed the earthly delights of this beautiful place, giant petrels wheeled overhead and Antarctic Skuas engaged in an occasional aerial stoush in the skies above the colony.

You couldn’t imagine a more perfect way to end our Antarctic landings and we tried our best to stay until the very last zodiac back to the Plancius.

Reluctantly we set sail for the Drake Passage in a light breeze and beautiful, sunny skies with most of us watching the last glimpses of Antarctica disappear on the horizon as we left South Shetland to return to Ushuaia in two days’ time.

To top off an incredible trip to Antarctica, we crossed the famous Drake Passage in quite calm conditions and we arrived in Ushuaia on a stunning, calm morning. What a tremendous end to one of the most cetacean rich and varied Wild Images photography tour to Antarctica!