

Flock to Marion Again - Remembering the Unforgettable Journey

The nostalgia I feel towards “Flock to Marion Again” conveniently omits the first two days on board the cruise which were all but enjoyable. I was sick, despite having taken medication against motion sickness! Fortunately, by the third day I was feeling much better, although I cannot say that my body ever felt fully comfortable being on a rocking and swaying ship.

However, I could shift my attention to the breath-taking marine life! It was fascinating to watch how the abundance and the species composition of birds changed as we headed further into the Southern Indian Ocean. At first the sightings of seabirds were few and far between, but as we approached Marion Island the number of birds rose quickly. Tropical Shearwaters gave way to Little and Subantarctic Shearwaters and as these disappeared the spectacle that is the seabirds around the Prince Edward Islands unfolded before our eyes!

In the two days that we spent around the islands in the frigid Subantarctic, we found ourselves amidst an explosion of life. To try and describe it all is impossible, but I will give you a few impressions. Half a dozen Albatross species, Giant Petrels and Brown Skuas, circled and followed the ship, often mere meters from the excited birders. Thousands of prions danced low over the heaving swell; making a mockery of the howling winds. Penguins burst from the foaming waters, porpoising away from the ship, while Common Diving Petrels whizzed by, fluttering frantically.

The ever-present Great-winged and Soft-plumaged Petrels carved out splendid arcs in the air, hurtling along but turning in the wind with the greatest ease! Something that made the cruise so special was how ordinary the extraordinary became. I often found myself sitting at the breakfast table watching the bird with the largest wingspan in the world, the Wandering Albatross, soar past the large window of the cafeteria!

When I think of the birds that I saw; Blue Petrel (which I took three days to spot amidst the masses of prions), Barau’s and White-headed Petrel, the Grey-headed Albatross (a spectacular bird that I came to adore) and King Penguin (a bird that I had only ever dreamt of seeing), I shake my head in disbelief! And I have not even mentioned the non-avian wildlife that we saw! Take for example the multiple species of beaked whale- animals whose pelagic distribution and diving habits render them rarely seen and poorly understood.

On par with the sightings of fantastic animals, were the people I met from across the world: youth birding members, legends of the birding world and many more lovely people from across the globe. Being in the company of people who are as (or often more) crazy about birds than you, is amazing and I walked away from the experience having made some life-long friends!

By Joshua Wenzel