

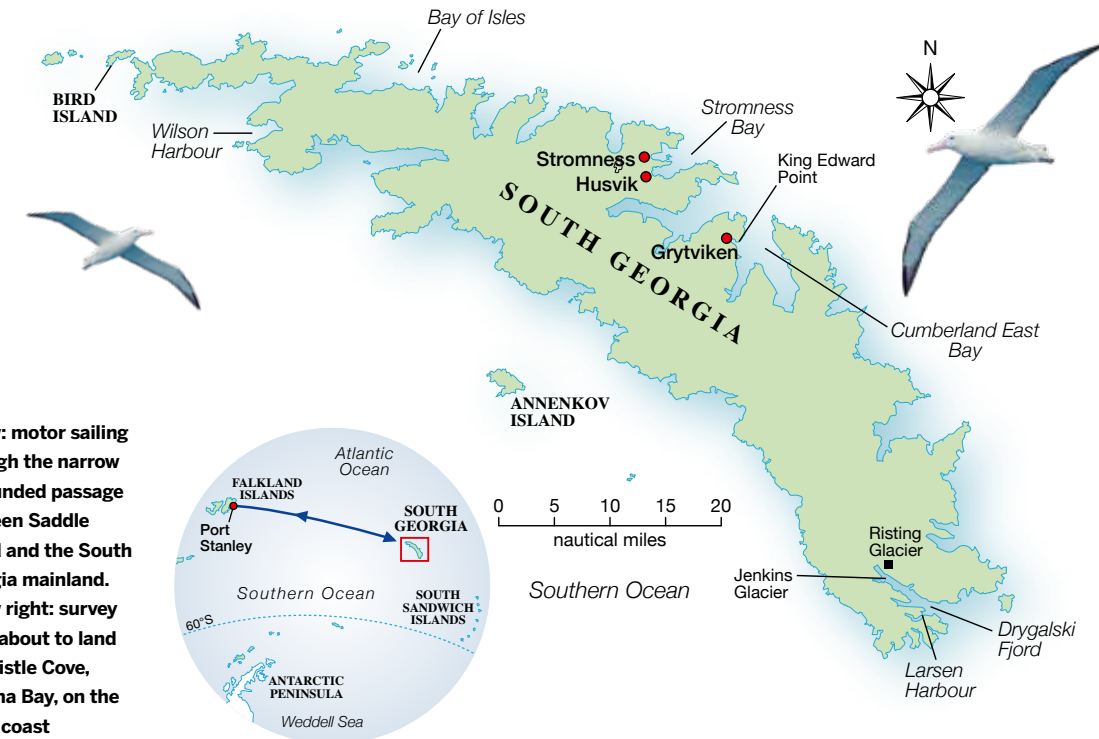
LAND OF THE BIRDS

SKIP NOVAK DESCRIBES THE PERILS, CHALLENGES AND JOYS
OF A CRITICAL EXPEDITION VOYAGE TO SURVEY
SOUTH GEORGIA'S ENDANGERED WANDERING ALBATROSS

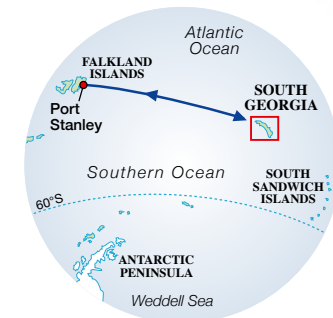




Keivin Floyd



Below: motor sailing through the narrow unsounded passage between Saddle Island and the South Georgia mainland. Below right: survey team about to land at Whistle Cove, Fortuna Bay, on the north coast



Above: the south coast studded with icebergs was both a hazard and offered some protection from swell
Left: Skip sailing it like a dinghy in the Southern Ocean

The mood on the *Vinson of Antarctica* was a wee bit on edge. Justino was staring into the radar in the pilothouse and Dion was all eyes on deck in a sharpish south-west wind. The flat light of a late evening on the wild coast of South Georgia was slowly fading.

"She's coming up!" Justino shouted to us up on deck. He was in no doubt we had to up anchor – and fast. Tor, our Rambo, who was already kitted up and on standby, ran forward for the windlass. I was closest to the wheel and we started to motor ahead on our 80m of chain, closing the distance to the berg even faster.

It was an agonising five minutes and a race against time as we just snatched the anchor off the bottom, at the same time pulling hard to starboard to miss a broadside and then hard to port so the stern would clear – just. The bergy bit slid to leeward, marching on unchallenged, a truly unstoppable force of nature eventually grounding in 10m of water behind us.

We have taken knocks with ice many times over the decades and it is part of the game in the far south. What can't happen, though, is having an errant berg or bergy bit overrun and/or ground on your anchor and chain. That is a full blown fiasco. It's 'lose your anchor time' at best and hopefully not all of your chain – have an angle grinder charged up to hand. And be ready to slip the whole shooting match if need be. I have some experience – and a souvenir in my back garden in Hamble: a CQR from the *Pelagic* days pressed flat as a pancake.

Earlier that morning on *Vinson of Antarctica* we'd

'We threaded through a wall of crystalline icebergs'

threaded our way through a wall of crystalline icebergs hard by the coast. Some years there is only the odd berg along the coast, but this was a bumper crop, spawned from a major calving of shelf ice in the Weddell Sea.

We'd been chased into Wilson Harbour on the 'forbidden' south coast of South Georgia, seeking shelter from a Force 6 south-westerly on the rise. The entire island is now a Terrestrial Protected Area (TPA) and in the island's management plan; no cruise ships or yachts are allowed to disembark passengers on the south coast. Only small expedition vessels like ours and survey ships with a Regulated Activity Permit can land. In our permit, we were allowed there for the science work.

Although this 'iceberg cemetery', as we call these features, looks daunting it actually provides a safe barrier to the heavy swell that would otherwise enter this open bay.

The double-edged sword was that we had to up anchor twice when bergy bits, otherwise grounded, jumped off the bottom with a tide. With plenty of sail area they were quickly on the move, threatening our anchor and chain.

Vinson only draws 2.2m, which is an important advantage in this game of draughts between bergs and boats.

Vinson was on a six-week science support cruise on behalf of the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, funded in part by the Antarctic Research Trust, principally to census *Diomedea exulans*, the wandering albatross, across the whole of the island. Secondary objectives were to carry out environmental surveys of official visitor landing sites to enhance the South Georgia TPA management plan. And, lastly, we were to monitor mortality events from the avian flu that had spread over the island during the previous six months.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

We were a small team of 10. Our sailing crew consisted of Justino Borreguero, skipper, myself as co-expedition leader, and Dion Poncet as the local knowledge and landing expert along with crew Tor Bovim and Jennifer Coombs. The science team was co-led by Jennifer Black, the South Georgia government's environment officer, and Sally Poncet, the ▶

All photos by Skip Novak unless stated



wandering albatross expert for the island, who has monitored this majestic species of seabird for decades.

Field ecologists Andy Black and Ken Passfield, and Kelvin Floyd, an invasive plant specialist and drone pilot, rounded out the team of five researchers. Collectively, the experience of this team on the island was second to none.

The last time this census was carried out was in 2015 and before that 2004, a once in every 10 years event which not only informs the South Georgia government of the health of this endangered species, but also fulfils a commitment to The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), a group of 13 Antarctic Treaty parties that monitor and then suggest mitigation measures for what has been a steady decrease in population of albatross and petrel species in general due to the ravages of long line fishing in the Southern Ocean.

There are 34 known wanderer breeding sites on the island, of which 24 had active nests at the last census in 2015. The largest population is on Bird Island, at the far north-west end of South Georgia. This island, which is closed to tourist visitors, is occupied year round by a science team from the British Antarctic Survey, which monitor the many albatross, petrels, penguins and fur seals that breed there.

After leaving Port Stanley in the Falklands on 12 January, we made short work of the 800 miles to reach first shelter along the north-east coast, sailing wing and wing all

Above: landing was usually a slippery affair and often requiring a heave to make it back into the dinghy

the way in a fresh westerly. These were glorious Southern Ocean conditions and especially so when picking our way through the bergs from about 100 miles out.

Some 10 days into the project we'd ticked off four of the 33 sites we needed to visit. Most were along the south coast and a handful in the Bay of Isles on the north-east coast. Wind and swell dictate whether we could make a landing. Some of the trickiest landings were on rocky headlands where a few birds were nesting up above the tussac hidden from view, guardians of their solitude.

The unspoken highlight for everyone was our brief time spent on the almost mythical island of Annenkov Island, a significant outlier 20 miles off the south coast, which has 176 breeding pairs. We can say this exactly, as

'These were glorious Southern Ocean conditions'



Kelvin and Dion launching the drone to survey an islet in the Bay of Isles; nesting albatross; King Penguins, guardians of the solitude at Will Point, Royal Bay



Kelvin Floyd



we spent two spectacular days (some of it in the mist and rain) hiking up and down the pristine terrain counting these Southern Ocean denizens.

Due to the untouched nature of Annenkov, we could be the last humans to set foot ashore there for the near- to mid-term future. It will most likely be left to its fastness, possibly for another decade, until the next census – maybe. Enhanced satellite imagery, although not yet there, can make human intervention a thing of the past.

Progress yes. Less impact on the island, another yes, but the researchers who have followed this story for decades with boots on the ground are not convinced. They believe they still need to be there in person to assess what is actually going on at any particular nesting site between breeding pairs and non-breeders, adults and fledglings, to make accurate assessments of the health of the population. A white dot on a satellite photo doesn't cut it.

A LIFETIME'S EXPERTISE

Dion Poncet was a key figure in the success of this project. His experience along the entire coast of South Georgia is profound, particularly on the restricted south coast where he began sailing as a toddler with his father, Jerome, and mother, Sally. The Poncets made some of the first wildlife surveys of these areas in the 1980s and '90s on their celebrated yacht *Damien II*. Dion went on to skipper his own boats, the *Golden Fleece* and *Hans Hansson*, on many more scientific surveys over the years. Without his tracks on our display console in what are largely unsounded waters, we'd not have been able to approach and land with any degree of efficiency, let alone a peace of mind.

The landings to get teams ashore were rarely what you'd call straightforward. Some were more sporty than others, more often on slippery rocks in heave and surge.

The technique is to drive the Zodiac's bow hard on to a wall or up a steep slope and keep it powered up in gear while the team piles out, taking note that if the bottom drops out and the bow gets stuck, it's a possible dunking by the stern. It's all about reading the water, having an eye over your shoulder and knowing what is possible and what is not – one of Dion's many excellent talents. (The other is butchery, and he was in charge of dispatching and cooking our four properly sea-salted half mutton carcasses that hung off the gantry).

There are no days off in these projects. When the weather is good to reasonable we're always working flat out: up at 0530, coffee on (no time for pancakes and bacon, sadly), morning briefing, up anchor by 0600, and off to the next landing, making sail when possible for a more comfortable ride. In addition to our albatross survey ▶

Right: *Vinson* probing into a cove looking for nests

sites, at every overnight anchorage or short stop the team was assessing the avian flu situation by inspecting and recording mortality events and taking swabs from dead birds and seals for later analysis in the UK. These observations and test results help inform the government about which sites are to be opened or remain closed for visitors, and in this season precious few were opened.

In addition our botanical expert Kelvin roamed above the beaches taking note of natives and invasives. He, Jen Black and others developed a three-tiered approach to managing alien plant species and have written the *Field Guide to the Introduced Flora of South Georgia*, which is a give-away booklet to all ships visiting South Georgia, to educate visitors and enhance the island's biosecurity.

UNIQUE TERRAIN

On 10 February, pouring rain and katabatic, ball-busting winds made this a good day to collate the information and sum up. We were at anchor in the kelpy bottom off the abandoned whaling station of Husvik in Stromness Bay. Just around the corner at the Stromness whaling station, Shackleton, Worsley and Crean had strolled in and knocked on the door of the manager's 'villa' after their epic trek across the spine of the island in April 1916.

Five laptops were opened and lit up on the salon table. Furrowed brows focussed on their crib sheets. They were not to be interrupted with frivolities such as what they'd like for dinner. Our researchers had come to the end of our principle objective, the census of 33 wandering albatross nesting sites on South Georgia, those that were logged in the surveys of 2004 and 2015 (excluding the largest repository on Bird Island, which is monitored by the British Antarctic Survey). They were checking and double checking their data loggers, drone footage, trackers on phones and scribbles in their notebooks, comparing the numbers and drawing some conclusions and accepting some assumptions.

At the beginning of February we'd bottomed out at the south end of the island, having toured the Drygalski Fjord (on a rare fine day), and landing on several headlands and islets. This was interesting terrain for the team to document the vegetation establishing on features exposed after the relatively recent retreat of the Jenkins and Risting glaciers. The beaches and accessible slopes surrounding the Tolkienesque Larsen Harbour were also surveyed for baseline data of flora and fauna, before we spent a quiet night at anchor in this well-known refuge, relatively secure in a pool surrounded by kelp.

At this stage we still had three sites to visit at the bottom of the south coast and another prime site in the north central section. This was done in short order with a period of calm, sheltered from the swell by an army of icebergs



Left: *Vinson* made good use of her reefed mizzen as a riding sail

right along this stretch of shoreline. We always had a weather eye out to re-visit the jewel of Annenkov Island, to land in clear conditions instead of the dense fog day the team had experienced some weeks previously. Possibly some albatross were missed!

Although desirable, this was not to be, with the weather systems fluid and short-lived. We couldn't rely on a clear spell without the risk of wasting precious time transiting there and back from the main coast.

In a whirlwind tour with the time available, we made visitor site survey stops along the north-east coast, in conjunction with more avian flu observations and sample collection. There was definitely avian flu all over the island, but some sites have fared better, some worse. Young elephant seals and male fur seals seem to have been the hardest hit, while penguins have been relatively unaffected, for now. The jury is out on how this pandemic will progress.

On our last day at Grytviken we completed formalities with the government officers at King Edward Point. We loaded equipment and sustenance for one month for Ken, Sally and Kelvin, who were to move into the historic manager's villa at Husvik. They were to engage with the government's annual alien vegetation control programme in the Stromness Bay area.



Kelvin Floyd

A HABITAT IN RECOVERY, BY SALLY PONCET

My passion for the Southern Ocean began in 1977, when I sailed to South Georgia on *Damien II* with my first husband, Jerome Poncet, en route to Marguerite Bay on the Antarctic Peninsula where we over-wintered at 68°S. During the following decade we made the Falkland Islands a home base for our growing family, while carrying out wildlife and habitat surveys. For me, that developed into a lifelong commitment to conservation in the region.

For more than four decades now I have been involved with habitat restoration, surveys, pest control and eradications.

Most of this work has been done from yachts. These days I work with my partner Ken Passfield on *Porvenir II*, and on occasion with my sons Dion and Leiv on *Golden Fleece*, *Peregrine* and *Hans Hansson*.

The January 2024 wandering albatross survey on *Vinson of Antarctica* was a very different way of operating, bringing in a new generation of technology in the form of mobile phone apps, drones, 24/7 comms and navigational equipment we could not have dreamt of 45 years ago. In contrast, South Georgia's coastline remains as remote and challenging as ever; beach landings are still dependent on sea state and wind conditions, and the skill and experience of crew.

We found wanderers at the same nests as on our previous surveys of 2015 and 2004, and rejoiced to find numbers were finally on the increase at some sites after decades of decline. Compared to the first 150 years of human occupation, when South Georgia's whale and seal populations were decimated by hunting, the island today appears to be in full recovery, despite alarmingly rapid glacial melting and a warming climate.



So how are the wandering albatross doing? Several months later I received this message from Sally: 'The results: the team counted 567 breeding pairs. After applying correction factors for nest failure and taking into account the Bird Island population, this means a decline of only 0.1% over the past 10 years, compared to 1.7% between 2004 and 2015. Some colonies have actually increased, perhaps a promising sign of a recovery in South Georgia's wandering albatross population. Welcome news indeed.'

In retrospect we on our 'small boats' have proven our worth yet again in facilitating these science projects in the Southern Ocean. A survey ship would not have had the time, flexibility and capability to land teams as efficiently as we had done. Long may this situation last.

On 14 February we set sail for Port Stanley, the long way home. As usual, it was against a howling westerly.

Below: easy downwind sailing with wing and wing in the Southern Ocean

