

# *The* **WANDERER**

*Marion Island Newsletter January 2022*

**BIRDERS' ROUND  
ISLAND**

**MARION  
MOMENTS**

**DON'T FORGET  
YOUR GPS**

**REPETTO'S WALK**



**forestry, fisheries  
& the environment**

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Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA





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# The Wanderer

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## *Letter from the editors*

Welcome to our first issue for the new year! It is a year with loads of possibilities. With the busy breeding season over the last few months time has just flown by. We can't believe we only have three more months left on Marion Island.

The field assistants were hardly at base during these last months, being so busy with newborn seals and birds all over. With colonies growing bigger and endless cuteness from the newborns there was never a dull moment. There is still so much to experience, but with so little time left.

In this issue, we will be giving you an insight into the life on Marion Island over the past two months. May every reader enjoy this edition of our experience as a team on Marion Island.

**D.J. VAN WYK AND DANIELLE CONRY  
EDITORS**



DANIELLE CONRY

FRIKKIE VAN DER VYVER

# MARION MOMENTS



DJ VAN WYK

**TOP: Fur seal pup calling out for it's mother.**

**BOTTOM: New born fur seal pup taking a nap.**



DJ VAN WYK

## The Wanderer

# Killer Whaler Diaries

DANIELLE CONRY

We are still riding the high from the "Killer Fever" experienced in November and December with many exciting sightings. Here are some of the highlights!



The best day ever! During the newborn gazella pupweigh at Trypot many of us enjoyed a close encounter with killer whales at Trypot. The sighting lasted an incredible 2 hours and involved 17 of Marion's killer whales.



A spectacular breach observed during an observation session at Kill Point. This behaviour is not commonly observed at Marion and so it was a real treat to witness.

# The Wanderer



FRIKKIE VAN DER VYVER

*An underwater view of O'Neil and Wishbone as they swim by Kill Point.*



DANIELLE CONRY

Marion Island's latest calf, Star, is still doing well and has been seen on a number of occasions with mother, Scratches, and sibling, Ringo. Here, Scratches and little Star inspect the kelp beds at Rope beach.



DANIELLE CONRY

*"These lucky penguins were not on the menu on this particular day at Ships Cove."*

# MARION MOMENTS



**TOP: A white chin petrel enjoying the sunset.**

**BOTTOM: A skua sitting on their nest.**



# The Wanderer

## Birds' Field Diaries

ISABEL MICKLEM



*"To get a good idea of what the states of birds are on the island, counting the number of incubating birds per species is the best starting point."*



Tired birders finishing day 6 of the January RI - Isabel Micklem

As always, where do you start to summarise the last 3 months? I think it's important to mention that we have made it through the most hectic part of the year: breeding season! So many birds are back on the island, finding their mates, refurbishing their homes, so that eggs can be laid and incubated successfully in these harsh Marion conditions.

To get a good idea of what the states of birds are on the island, counting the number of incubating birds per species is the best starting point. From there, counting chicks then provides us with a success rate which can be used to assess the health of the Marion populations.



Rock hoppers somewhere along the coast - Isabel Micklem



# The Wanderer

We ended November and started December moving coastally around the island counting all the incubating Rockhopper penguins, Macaroni penguins, Kelp gulls, Kerguelen terns, Crozet Shags, and Southern Giant petrels. Further into December the island was once again rounded to seek out all the Sub-Antarctic Brown skua nests.



SABEL MICKLEM

*A tern egg nestled in the 10 cm wide nest.*

Treasure hunting for the well camouflaged tern and gull nests and skua chicks can be quite a challenge but luckily the adults will let you know that you are close to their precious possessions by shouting at you, flying at your head, landing on your back (in the case of skuas), or even pooping on you (in the case of gulls).

While the penguins are much easier to find, all 100+ km of coastline needed to be inspected since the Rockhoppers are very aptly named and make use of probably 90+% of the rocky coast line, only sometimes avoiding sheer cliffs.



THANDO CEBEKHULU

*A very protective skua parent*

# The Wanderer

During December and January, we continued with monitoring several colonies for breeding success. For various reasons this becomes more intensive during these last two months. The Northern Giant petrels have grown big enough to receive their permanent metal bands, devices were deployed to track birds foraging to feed themselves and their chicks, the white chins have started hatching and their chicks can be heard in the burrows, and the shags are developing their flying muscles with every breeze they feel in their face.



ISABEL MICKLEM

Ola's chick showing off her new jewellery.

We saw the Wandering albatross fledglings take their first flights and leave home while we set up the colonies with new parents laying. Each of our “Walbie” (**W**andering **a**lbatross) colonies has more than 100 nests for us to mark and follow to study the breeding success. And we managed to finish all of this just in time to get ready for the Walbie and king penguin incubation round island, during which we also had a chance to metal band as many kelp gull, skua and tern chicks that we could catch.



ISABEL MICKLEM

Thando carrying poles to mark nests in the Maccie Bay Walbie monitoring colony while holding ringing pliers in his hands as he chases after a skua chick to give it some jewellery so that it can be identified in future years.

# MARION MOMENTS



ELEANOR WEIDEMAN

**TOP: A brave young skua chick.**

**BOTTOM: Eleanor with a skua chick.**



ELEANOR WEIDEMAN

# OUR WALK FROM REPETTO'S

Charles Thomas

On this day during takeover we walked for seven and a half hours which included going up Long Ridge with a backpack weighing almost 10kg. For me it was a very good experience seeing the island's beauty while walking from Repetto's Hut back to base, except for the extra weight.



Errol assisting Rodney (DM) getting water out his boots.

We walked through areas with mires and got stuck on a few occasions but managed to crawl out. There was a time while we were walking where I felt like I can't walk anymore but I kept on going. The good thing was on that day we had good weather. I felt we could make it, this being our first experience walking on Marion, I realized how wonderful the world is and I never thought one day I would be walking in this kind of environment.

I have enjoyed climbing mountains before, but never with a load on my back (like the Springboks during *kamp staal draad*). At some point when we looked back from where we were coming from we were amazed to see the distance we had walked. I had a good time seeing penguins, albatrosses and other birds; I still want to explore the rest of this beautiful island soon. To all the field assistants, I salute you guys, keep on doing a good job out there.



Charles (BE) and Rodney (DM) enjoying a lunch break.

Together we can make the island stay this beautiful!

# MARION MOMENTS



**TOP: Yinhla, Dani, Eleanor and DJ walking through Hoppies Hell with beautiful views of the interior mountains at the start of DJ's first round island!**  
**BOTTOM: Yinhla and Dani enjoying a snowy Karoo kop before summer fully set in.**



# PLANNING A ROUND ISLAND

Isabel Micklem

We do “round islands” (RI – walking around the whole island over a few days) every month with the aim of counting different breeding bird species throughout the expedition. This gives us a good idea of the health of the bird populations breeding on Marion. Most birders have their favourite and least favourite RI, but some are notoriously harder than others.

The January RI is one of the hardest round islands. This is because of the numerous tasks that need to be accomplished such as diet sampling, ringing chicks and counting 6 species, but more because of the spread of these said species. Penguins are found on the coast while wandering albatross (Walbies) dot the landscape, enjoying the mires that can go inland for over 2 km (which sounds little until you consider the terrain and inclines). All this is done while carrying the equipment necessary for each task.

Luckily we successfully recruited help for the January RI starting in June last year, as visiting every Walbie for a quick chat can add up to a few hours when there are more than 2000 birds breeding on the island. There is one section, a stretch of almost 4 km with walbies going inland for over 1km, where 3 of us spent 6 hours counting the walbie fledglings (half the number of birds but still totaling 389 birds). So for the January RI we aimed to tackle that section with 6 of us.



ISABEL MICKLEM

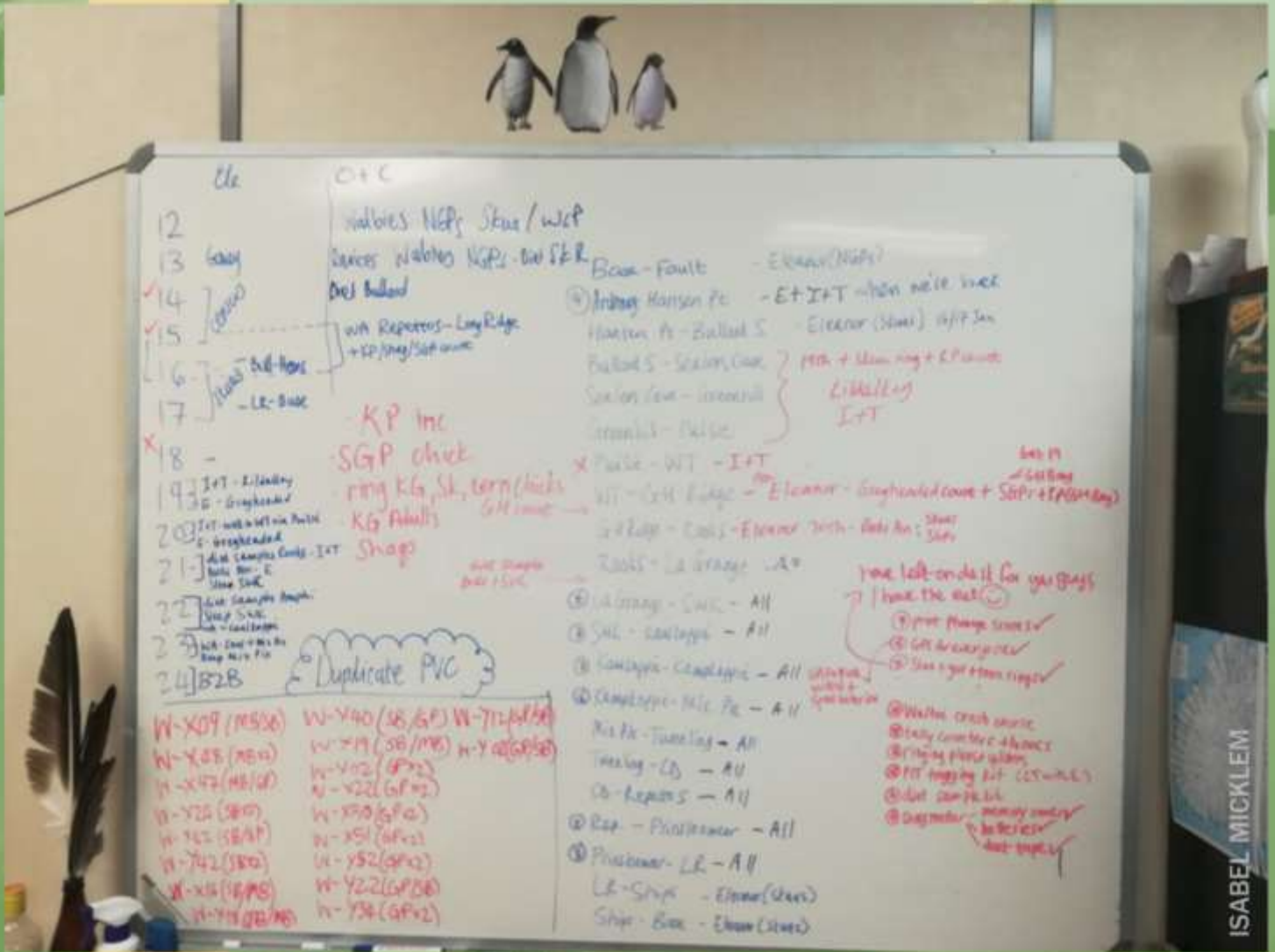
*All the birders in the office one rainy morning!*

# The Wanderer

While it seems straight forward to leave on a round island (after all, we can't walk off the island) it takes a bit more planning than packing some water, sleeping clothes and putting our gumboots on. So how did we plan this trip?

Step 1 - Get all the birders into the office.

Step 2 - Make a list of all the tasks that need to be accomplished during the RI.



White board schedule in the birders office after their meeting.

The white board after our meeting: the dates on the left with good and bad weather ticks and crosses, MAPRU birder and O&C birder schedules for the days leading up to the RI as well as who will be where doing the RI, a list of management zones and how many people are needed per zone, and a packing list. Naturally things still changed but at least we had the most of it on paper and could visualize the work better.

# The Wanderer

## Count:

- \* All the incubating King penguins.
- \* All the adult kelp gulls and their chicks, nests and any eggs.
- \* All the Crozet shag colonies.
- \* All the surviving Southern Giant petrel chicks.
- \* All the incubating Walbies (Wandering albatross)
- \* Greyheaded albatross chicks at 4 monitored colonies



Counting birds on the cliffs below, trying not to be buffeted by the wind so that binoculars can be kept steady enough.



Thando saying thank you to a Rockhopper for the diet sample she just gave us.

## Diet sample:

- \* 10 Macaroni penguins (Maccies) at Rooks cave (South Western part of the island)
- \* 10 Maccies and 10 Rockys (Rockhopper penguins) at Swartkops (Western part of the island)



## Ring:

- \* All the kelp gull, skua and tern chicks found around the island.
- \* Remove any devices found on Walbies.
- \* Any Walbies that have a plastic ring but no permanent metal ring.

## For the Walbie incubation count:

Check each bird for an egg. If it has an egg: take a GPS point, score their plumage, and check for pollutants. Then, so as to know if the nest has been checked, make a mark in the mud close to the nest. The plumage can give an indication of age as the whiter the bird, the older it is, though males whiten faster than females.

Stage 2 are the very new breeders still exhibiting a lot of dark feathers and being around 10 years old, while the stage 7, and very rarely seen stage 8 birds are considered older, with Walbies being known to live over 60 years.



# The Wanderer

Step 3 - Once the work that needs to be tackled is known, work out how many people each section of the island needs. Then if necessary, split up the team and decide who will cover which sections. It is very important not to underestimate how long various sections will take, and rather to add additional nights at specific huts.



*The Walbie team! Our recruiting efforts were rewarded with a team of 6 covering the hardest section. As with the fledglings, it still took us 6 hours but spirits were higher with more hands on deck.*

Step 4 - Write a packing list for all elements of the work.

Step 5 - Consider the dates each birder has already planned what work they need to do leading up to the RI, and consider the weather as far in advance as possible. Then set dates for where you need to be when, and assign the tasks according to the spread of the team.

Step 6 - Pack, hope you have not forgotten anything, leave and appreciate the island, no matter how much you do not want to climb another blechnum slope for that one Walbie deciding to nest up there.

# MARION MOMENTS



DANIELLE CONRY

**TOP:** Frikkie and Dani enjoyed watching the spectacular dances of the wandering albatrosses while censusing Archway.

**BOTTOM:** Wandering Albatross nesting near Sealer's.



DJ VAN NIEK

# DON'T FORGET YOUR GPS

Zenande Kabase

Life has a strange way of teaching us lessons that we are less likely to forget, especially here on the island. From the simple things of learning patience and endurance, to things like always checking the condition of your boots for holes before leaving and carrying a reliable walking stick. Well for me it was a lesson on the importance of a GPS, no matter how familiar you are with a certain place on Marion Island.



The trusty GPS is an essential on a trip in the field.

It was the season of high frequency sampling at Mesrug and Santa Rosa hill sites. Usually part of my work involves retrieving sediments from BSNEs (spinning bucket-like instruments with metal wings, that are held up by tight hose-clamps and washers, at a certain distance from the floor and each other to a 1m pole mounted to the ground; these are designed to face the incoming wind direction and catch sediments blown by the wind) but there comes a time when I have to retrieve sediments from them on 5 consecutive days, thus resulting in me staying in one of the huts nearest to the sites. This day I was leaving for Watertunnel via Mesrug to high frequency sample at Santa Rosa hill but it so happened that I forgot my GPS and remembered it when I was at Rooikasteel.

Not too worried about it I went on to spend my days at Watertunnel, for I was confident that I've done this route more than ten times, so I can make it back to base without it (the things we tell ourselves when we are "used" to walking on the island). Little did I know what was in store for me the day I returned back to base! The days went by. I did comms every evening and colleagues passed by as they were going to Grey Headed or working at the beach before heading back to the base, but I kept silencing that little voice that kept reminding me to ask someone to bring my GPS for me. Until my stay was over at Watertunnel and I had to return to base. There I was writing a sweet departure message in the hut book, as one always does before leaving the hut, after seeing the thick mist on Karookop. Patting myself on the back, I went into the low cloud.

# The Wanderer

Suddenly the mist became thicker and I couldn't see the shape of any mountain before me. It was cold and windy, but my forehead began to sweat and my throat began to itch. I kept on going diagonally upwards until I thought I was too high. This is where everything began to change and one's experience or knowledge of the island gets challenged and exposed. I descended diagonally, since I thought I was quite high, thinking that I should see the figure of Snok or Karookop by now but then suddenly everything was now different.



ZENANDE KABASE

## View of Green Hill

The geology was different. I was not used to seeing or passing so many *Azorella* cushions by that time. I saw a stream that I never noticed before in normal circumstances... I was now confused and my mind blanked out. "Hayibo! Where am I?" I asked myself. It was like I was on a different island. I kept on thinking I was low so I kept on descending, until I passed a few skua nests, which I've never noticed before in normal circumstances. I was shocked and began to slowly lose my patience, as by that time I thought I would be descending Black Haglet. The forecast of that day said that the wind would be coming from the south to south-west that morning and from how I calculated it the wind was to begin blowing from my right hand side and later behind me. However, I found the wind to be blowing in front of me.

# The Wanderer

As I went down I could hear the ocean water getting louder and the wind stronger until I saw the waves beating against the cliff! You did not see me climbing up again! All this time I was heading for the cliff. I was frustrated with myself as I regretted not checking earlier if I had my GPS with.

To cut the long story short, I found myself at Green Hill thinking that it was Johnny's kop as the sky began to clear at 12:00 p.m. It took me 6 hours to get to where I was and I arrived at base at 14:30 after passing by Kildakey and working at Mesrug...

I learnt important lessons that day:

1. No matter how much you have walked a path on this island, do not be overconfident. This island will surprise you.
2. Have multiple ways of marking or knowing where you are; do not depend solely on the peaks. Look at the geology, vegetation, topography etc. during good weather as you are walking to your destination. You will need the knowledge for a misty day.
3. Don't forget your GPS! Even if you have arrived to a point where you rarely use it when walking; even if you are by Tom, Dick and Harry or you remember it at Stoney ridge, if you going out no matter for how long, turn back to fetch it or organize with someone at base who will pass by the hut where you will be staying.

**Don't forget your GPS on Marion Island!**

*The landscape towards Kildalkey showing, from left to right, Mesrug, Green Hill, Johnny's and Black Haglet in the distance.*



# MARION MOMENTS



**TOP: Frikkie censussing at Goney towards the end of breeding season.**

**BOTTOM: Weaners everywhere!**



# MARION MOMENTS



ISABEL MICKLEM

**TOP: Grey-Headed albatross chick being all fluffy in it's nest.**

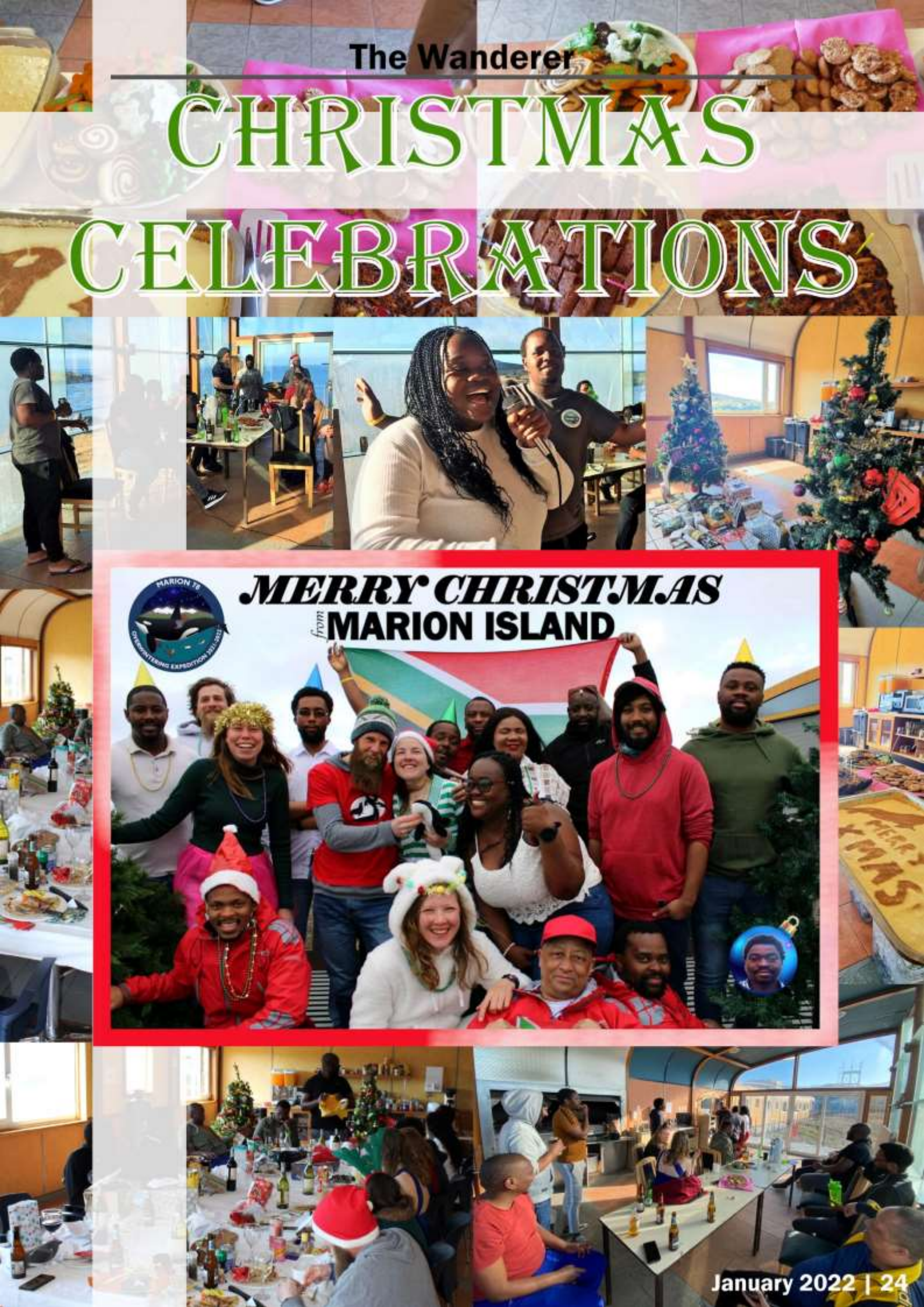
**BOTTOM: New born Giant Petrel enjoying the morning sun.**



DJAVAN WAKA

The Wanderer

# CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS



**MERRY CHRISTMAS**  
from  
**MARION ISLAND**





# The Wanderer

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