The Falklands, South Georgia, and Antarctica
February 5 – 24, 2015
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One of the great things about birds is that looking for them brings you to the great places on earth. If there's a pristine forest, an untrampled grassland, a remote mountain range, chances are birders have a good reason to go there. And nowhere epitomizes that ideal more than Antarctica. One of the last great wildernesses on the planet, the wildlife spectacle there is matched only by the sheer beauty of the terrain and the remoteness from the rest of humanity. Sure, you won’t see many species on a trip to Antarctica, but what you do see will be burned into your memory unlike any other travel experience.

On this trip we not only visited the Antarctic Peninsula, we also called in at several sub-Antarctic islands that were every bit as impressive as the ice continent. The crown jewel of these was clearly South Georgia, with its rugged, towering peaks covered in enormous glaciers, and plethora of wildlife everywhere you turned. Any one of our destinations alone would have made an unforgettable trip, but taken together I don’t think it would be exaggeration to call it the trip of a lifetime!

Any trip to the polar regions is highly dependent on the weather. Wind and sea conditions can mean the difference between a problem-free voyage to one where you never get off the boat. The Antarctic area is especially famous for bad weather – high winds and rough seas – but we for the most part lucked out, making all of our scheduled landings in the Falklands, all but one on the notoriously difficult South Georgia, and all in the Peninsular area. Our first two long sea crossings (between the Falklands and South Georgia, and across the Scotia Sea) were both blessed by relatively calm seas, while the notorious Drake Passage started out rough as expected, but then calmed for the majority of the crossing. On the flip side, strong northerly winds just before our crossing to South Georgia are likely the reason for large numbers of certain pelagic species, and a few unexpected rarities.

Most trips to Antarctica leave from the southern tip of Argentina in Ushuaia. The Ushuaia area has some good birding (and gorgeous forest!) just outside of town, and to take advantage of that we arranged to meet the day before boarding our ship and see what we could find. On the way to Tierra del Fuego NP we found some Black-faced Ibis among the
multitude of Southern Lapwings, but saw little else before making it into the forested park.

In the dense Nothofagus forests we found a different suite of birds. Noisy Thorn-tailed Rayaditos were the common flock leader (and made up the majority of said flocks), but we also found both Gray-headed and Patagonian Sierra-Finches, many White-crested Elaenias, and Austral Thrushes. In the more open, grassy areas there were good numbers of Upland Geese, mostly of the barred form, as well as both Buff-winged and the rarer Gray-flanked Cinclodes. One marshy area produced a very close, but shy, South American Snipe.

Down by the coast, where the forest started thinning out, we encountered good numbers of Black-chinned Siskins, many of which were down low eating seeds off of flowering composite flowers. In the same area a raucous voice had us looking at our only Austral Parakeets of the trip, an exceptionally cooperative bird that perched in the open for us. In the waters of a protected bay off the Beagle Channel we found many Flightless Steamer-Ducks. These large, almost goose-like ducks are characteristic of the southern cone, and we spent a good deal of time watching them display and “steam” across the water, as well as take care of many young in tow and aggressively chase competitors. Some careful searching found their smaller cousin, Flying Steamer-Duck, a pair with three chicks hanging close to shore. Several wary Kelp Geese moved through the same area, though a bit of cautious stalking got us close enough for excellent views and photos.

Returning to a more forested trail, we spent a good deal of effort (alas, in vain) searching for Magellanic Woodpecker. Our efforts weren’t entirely unrewarded, though, and we had superb views of one of the most cooperative tapaculos I’ve had the pleasure of seeing, a young Magellanic Tapaculo. A nearby high-pitched whistle alerted me to the presence of a Patagonian Tyrant, and some careful searching soon had us looking at this uncommon
species. A rapidly moving flock was mostly Rayadito, but again a distinctive call gave us the nuthatch-like **White-throated Treerunner**.

Abandoning the forest, we returned to the visitor's center area, and checked the river. Here we had our only **Black-necked Swans** of the tour, a pair with two old cygnets. The highlight, though, was being able to watch a pair of **Great Grebes** repeatedly feed their young chicks, which were hiding on the back of one of them.

Leaving the National Park behind, we returned to town, and the made our way down to the shoreline. The gravel beaches here, while not as productive as mudflats further north, were still quite birdy. Our first stop gave us many **Dolphin Gulls**, a few flyby **Chilean Skuas**, a noisy **Blackish Oystercatcher**, and finally a wonderfully diverse (for Tierra del Fuego) flock of shorebirds that included **Surfbird**, **Baird’s Sandpiper**, and two **Rufous-chested Dotterels**.

A nearby sandspit had many more **Dolphin Gulls**, and our only **Chiloe Wigeon** of the trip. It also contained a few more **Baird’s Sandpiper**, and the largest congregation of **Kelp Geese** I had ever seen – 30-40 birds.

We spent most of the next day preparing for our cruise – we were set to board the ship in the afternoon, so there was one final morning to relax before heading out. The process of boarding couldn’t have been smoother, and the very professional One Ocean staff made everything easy and painless. The mandatory lifeboat drills were conducted, and we were on our way! By the time the boat started moving we only had a couple of hours to watch the Beagle Channel stream by, but they were a birdy couple of hours! Many **Imperial** and a few **Magellanic Cormorants** flew by the boat, as well as good numbers of **Chilean Skuas**, **South American Terns**, and our first Albatrosses – **Black-browed Albatross**. As it got
dark we gazed into the best sunset of the whole trip as Argentina (and Chile!) faded into darkness, and looked forward to the many new birds to come.

Awaking the next morning to the open ocean, it quickly became apparent how rich the waters were! Hordes of birds were following the ship from the get-go, and standing on the stern gave us repeated, close views of a good mix of pelagic species large and small. By numbers the most common were **Slender-billed Prions** and **White-chinned Petrels**, but we had lesser numbers of **Sooty Shearwaters**, **Southern Giant Petrels**, and **Black-browed Albatrosses**. These main components of our faithful followers were joined now and then by the bird giants of the ocean – both “**Southern**” and “**Northern**” **Royal Albatrosses**, and a few **Wandering Albatross**. It’s hard to appreciate how massive these birds really are until you see them next to their smaller Black-browed cousins – the great albatrosses make the “mollymawks” look like gulls!

Picking through the flocks both kept us entertained and produced a few less common species. Perhaps the rarest was our only **Fairy Prion** of the tour (this species is an uncommon to rare breeder in the area), along with our only **Cape Petrel** until later in the trip. A single **Gray-backed Storm-Petrel** joined the much more abundant **Wilson’s** in making a quick swing by the boat, and good numbers of **Great Shearwaters** put in an appearance as well.

After our day at sea, it was land-ho! We had two days scheduled to visit various points in the Falkland Islands, and much depended...
on the weather. Luckily we arrived to calm seas and clear skies! Our first port of call was West Point Island in the West Falklands. Like many remote islands, much of the Falklands has suffered from introduced rats, and West Point was no exception. While this affected the variety of passerines on the island, the large specialties were all still present, in numbers. Our first endemic didn’t even wait for us to land, with large numbers of 
Falklands Steamer-Ducks “steamed” right by our boat as we arrived. Smaller numbers of 
South American Terns and our first Brown (Falklands) Skuas also flew over the harbor (with many of the skuas deciding that chasing the terns was good sport!).

On land our first birds were the local subspecies of a few more widespread birds – Austral Thrush, Long-tailed Meadowlark (with a shocking red breast for those used to yellow meadowlarks!), and Black-chinned Siskin. Some remarkably tame Kelp Geese haunted the shoreline, while oodles of Upland Geese moved along the grassy slopes. Their rarer doppelganger cousins, Ruddy-headed Goose was also present, albeit in much smaller numbers. Quite unlike mainland South America, where the bird can be quite local and extremely shy, the ones on the Falklands were nearly as tame as barnyard geese. Not that there were any complaints about that!

From our landing point we had about a mile walk to the Devil’s Nose, on the opposite shore of the island. The walk through the grassy slopes didn’t have too much activity going on, but we did see some Correndera Pipits and a few Dark-faced Ground-Tyrants. Arriving at the Devil’s Nose we were immediately greeted with another the great sites of the planet – albatrosses on the nest. Black-browed Albatross, to be exact. The colony gave us a good mix of large, fluffy youngsters (some being fed by their parents), and non-breeding birds playing at courtship.

Adding some spice to the scene (and lots of noise!) were hundreds upon hundreds of “Southern” Rockhopper Penguins. Now don’t get me wrong, all penguins are rather comical when on land, but Rockhoppers take it to a whole new level! Few birds on the planet can induce such laughter a Rockhopper looking directly at you. The Devil’s Nose

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gave us our first taste of what would become a repeat performance, that of abundant, charismatic wildlife – at point blank range. Like the albatrosses, most of the young penguins present were quite well along on their way to fledging.

As with most large bird colonies, the Devil’s Nose had its attendant scavengers. In this case it was a parent and three juvenile Striated Caracaras, all wonderfully tame. Perhaps too wonderfully, as several people had one of the juveniles come up to them and even, in one case, sit on someone’s foot! The adult was a bit more skittish, but would frequently come in bearing gifts (typically a piece of bloody, gooey penguin) for its offspring, eliciting squeals (well, screeches) of joy.

Back on the landing beach we had a bit of time to stalk the ridiculously cooperative (almost oblivious) Falklands Steamer-Ducks, and get close and personal with a few Magellanic Cormorants sitting on some rocks.

Our afternoon stop, after a short ride on the ship, was the rat-free Carcass Island. The differences between a rat infested and rat free island were immediately apparent upon landing. How could it not be when the first sight on Carcass was of dozens of Blackish Cinclodes walking right up to you, and sometimes even on you?! This species (the southernmost
passerine on earth) is somewhat of a Falklands specialty, being very difficult to see in its Fuegian range on the South American continent.

Even more of a Falklands specialty was the endemic **Cobb’s Wren**, which while not as obvious as the many cinclodes, was nearly as tame. Long lumped with the widespread House Wren, all it takes is one look at the bird to know it deserves its own status, with its large size, bold behavior, and habit of picking through shoreline tussock grass and washed up kelp. As one person on the trip said “that ain’t no House Wren!” A few other passerines called the beach and the grass above home, including our only **White-bridled Finches** of the tour.

Carcass also had its share of nesting colonies, in this case a large **Magellanic Penguin** colony mixed with some **Gentoos**. With our late season visit the young Magellanic Penguins had mostly left their burrows (this was our only burrow nesting penguin species of the trip, as this trait is more common with species found further north) and formed a large crèche by the beach. Haunting the edge of the crèche were the familiar scavengers, a few **Striated Caracaras** and some **Brown Skuas**. The beach held more **Gentoo Penguins** (including some surfing in on the waves, always a hilarious sight!) and a smattering of **Blackish** and **Magellanic Oystercatchers, Kelp Gulls**, and **South American Terns**.

The next day was one of our few that primarily focused on culture, with a visit to Stanley, capital of the Falklands. Our landing was delayed by a few hours due to 40 knot winds, but
eventually we made it to shore. Hal, Kirsten, and I, being more interested in the birding opportunities nearby (I know, say what you will about birders!) hired a cab and visited the nearby Gypsy Cove. While this didn’t give us any new species, the startlingly white sand, contrasting with the clear blue water and bright green tussocks was reminiscent of a Caribbean beach – except it was 35° F and extremely windy! A good-sized flock of Baird’s Sandpipers were loafing on the beach, joining another crèche of Magellanic Penguins and a number of Magellanic Cormorants on the rocks. A few cooperative Austral Thrushes by the parking lot, and some Peale’s Dolphins offshore rounded out our haul.

Back in Stanley we walked around town for a bit for our last experience of civilization – from here on out we would only be getting more and more remote. The waterfront did have a few birds, just to keep us from getting bored – many Falklands Steamer-Ducks and Kelp Gulls, and a few Dolphin Gulls mixed in. The same wind that kept us from landing early as Stanley then kept us pinned in until after sunset, so our departure for the next two days at sea commenced with little fanfare.

In much of the world, two days at sea would be rather boring from a birding perspective. And perhaps for the non-birders on the ship (read, almost everyone other than Hal, Kirsten, and myself) it was! For them, the various expert guides on the ship had a wide variety of lectures planned, with everything from history to biology to politics covered. For
us, though, there were birds galore! The incredibly rich waters of the southern ocean continued to provide, and we were rarely bored for long.

Awaking on our first day out of Stanley it was quickly apparent that the pelagic birdlife had changed. Good numbers of **Soft-plumaged Petrels** were immediately apparent, and we were rarely out of sight of one of these fast, erratic fliers during our entire crossing. Scanning through these gave us one of our rarer sightings of the trip in the form of an **Atlantic Petrel**, a species more typical of waters further north. Several **Black-bellied Storm-Petrels** were also new, and the mass of prions following the ship started to show signs of containing some **Antarctic Prions** in with the **Slender-bills**.

Our rarest pelagic find of the whole tour also came on that first morning, when I picked out a distant *Phoebetria* albatross. I was excited for what I thought was to be our first **Light-mantled Albatross**, so you can imagine my shock when a closer view showed it to be the rare **Sooty Albatross**! Like the Atlantic Petrel we had seen, this is a bird of more northern waters, and quite unexpected down where we were.

Over the next day and a half we were able to watch the birdlife slowly change as we approached, and then crossed the Antarctic convergence – a line where the colder waters of the circumpolar current meet the warmer waters of the Atlantic. The prions changed from a mix to almost entirely **Antarctic**, the ratio of Royal to **Wandering Albatrosses** strongly favored **Wandering** until we
stopped seeing Royal entirely, and the smaller **Gray-headed Albatross** became more and more common. Decent numbers of **Greater Shearwaters** still followed our wake, but **Sooty Shearwater** disappeared entirely after the first morning at sea.

Closing in on South Georgia on our second day at sea, we began to see a few diving-petrels. Using the “chimp to ID” method, photos showed these to all be **Common Diving-Petrels**. A scattering of mammals also put in a show – I personally was most excited by two different pods of Hourglass Dolphins, but some excellent views of both Fin and Sei Whales were also appreciated.

Finally, after nearly two days at sea, we sighted bits of land in the mist – Shag Rocks. Though still a ways from South Georgia, the variety of birdlife picked up immensely in the shallower waters near the rocks. The eponymous **South Georgia Shags** flew by in numbers, along with many **Kelp Gulls** and our first **Antarctic Terns**. Seabird variety and numbers increased dramatically as well, with many hundreds (if not more!) of **Antarctic Prions**, dozens and dozens of **Black-browed Albatross** along with a smattering of both **Gray-headed** and **Wandering Albatrosses**, many **White-chinned Petrels**, and tiny **Wilson’s** and **Black-bellied Storm-Petrels** dancing on the waves below. The experience of literally being surrounded by the multitude of birds was among the highlights of the trip, and perhaps the best pelagic birding experience I’ve ever had!

Ironically, though, the rarest bird of the entire trip appeared soon after, and it was NOT a seabird. Glancing upward at one point, I saw a small, swallow-like bird flying over the boat. Expecting a storm-petrel, I was shocked to see that it was, in fact, a swallow! A **Barn Swallow** to be precise, and one many, many miles from its nearest kin. What it was doing in the middle of the ocean by a small lonely rock stack is anyone’s guess. It certainly didn’t bode well for the survival of said swallow, though we all hoped that it managed to find its way to South Georgia, where at least there were some insects it could feed on.
Due to the requirement of clearing customs, our first stop on the actual island of South Georgia was at the administrative center at Grytviken. This was also one of the most interesting “culture” stops of the tour, with a large abandoned whaling station, well curated museum, and of course Ernest Shackleton’s grave.

Our first duty upon landing, of course, was a toast to the famous explorer (though getting to the grave site required some careful maneuvering around the abundant Antarctic Fur Seal and Southern Elephant Seals!). Then the group from the ship split, with many heading off to visit the whaling station, while others (us included) worked our way up on a longer hike onto the grassy slope and away from “civilization”, such as it was. The main target of the walk was an area that had previously had Light-mantled Albatrosses, but we apparently they were not nesting this year so we had to settle for a few Brown Skuas and Antarctic Terns. The view, though, was stunning to say the least, and well worth the walk!

Back down in Grytviken, Hal and I worked our way along the beach towards King Edward Point, dodging the many aggressive (though mostly small) Antarctic Fur Seals along the way. A few tame “South Georgia” Yellow-billed Pintails were haunting the shoreline, our first of this endemic form. Good numbers of noisy Antarctic Terns with fledged juveniles in two were sitting on various rocks, and
some Kelp Gulls nearby were likely waiting for one of the adult terns to bring in some fish they could steal.

Nearing the point, we soon had our first good looks at the many King Penguins in the area. Good looks may be a bit of an understatement, actually – we had many birds within 3 feet, and got to witness almost every behavior from preening to singing to porpoising to beating each other with their flippers! Also providing some rather exceptional views were some South Georgia Shags resting on the dock.

Returning to the ship for the evening we were greeted by the site of a large outdoor barbecue on the stern deck. A delicious grilled dinner, stunning calm aquamarine waters, and an incomparable backdrop – what better welcome to South Georgia is there?!

Salisbury Plain is one those places that has to be experienced to be believed. No matter how much you hear about it in advance, the sight, sound, and smell of 150,000 King Penguins is an assault on the senses unlike almost any other avian spectacle on the planet.

The Plain is a notoriously fickle spot to land zodiacs on, so we lucked out that the wind and swell had died a bit the night before. Even so, it was the wettest landing of the entire trip, and as the winds picked up later in the morning it became apparent we made it by the skin of our teeth. Other than the mobs of King Penguins that greeted us, practically the first bird we saw was a pair
of **South Georgia Pipits** that obliged us by flying in and landing out our feet. This rare species, South Georgia’s only passerine, used to only be found on remote, rat-free islets and beaches. Since the large-scale rat eradication program of the past few years, though, it has expanded to areas where it had previously been eradicated. And luckily for us one of those areas was the Salisbury Plain.

As gratifying as the pipit was to see, it was the penguins that stole the show. No written description could do it justice! Since we were fairly late in the season, most of the chicks were large, brown, furry-looking monsters, in many cases larger than their parents! A few younger chicks were apparent at the upper reaches of the colony (perhaps due to the less desirable location on the upper slopes?), and even a few birds still on eggs. Just as memorable was watching many of the adults arriving and departing on the heavy surf – they sure knew how to arrive in style!

The open grassy areas of the plain were good for a few other species, including “**South Georgia**” **Pintail** (wonderfully tame for a duck, more than most barnyard birds!) Several more **South Georgia Pipits** flew around, but never offered as a good a view as the first ones. **Brown Skuas** moved hither and fro in the colony as well, no doubt searching for pieces of penguins for dinner! The many **Southern Giant-Petrels** loafing around were less
aggressive – perhaps they had their fill already? A shame, really, since the sight of fighting giant-petrels at a seal or penguin carcass is another of the world’s unique bird sights!

Prion Island, in the Bay of Isles just offshore from Salisbury Plain, is one of the few areas of South Georgia to have never had rats. While the recent rat eradication on the mainland has been a wonderful success story, it is thanks to islets like Prion that South Georgia Pipit didn’t follow the grim road to extinction. Visitation to the pristine island is tightly controlled, and only open to a limited number of visitors during a six-week window. We were lucky that our trip fell within that window, and that we had the necessary permits to visit.

Nearly the first bird that greeted us upon landing (after the groups of loafing Gentoo Penguins on the shore) was a single South Georgia Pipit, soon followed by up to 10 more foraging in the washed up kelp. The real highlight of visiting the island, though, was the chance to stand within a few feet of nesting Wandering Albatrosses! It’s one thing to know that this is the largest flying bird on the planet, and quite another to have one at arms length and appreciate how big they really are. Prion also gave us our closest encounters with Northern Giant-Petrels, with a couple of pairs nesting near the end of the boardwalk and giving their screechy hisses as they displayed to each other.

Back down at shore, we boarded the zodias for a quick cruise of some offshore rocks. Here we saw some more South Georgia Pipits, and our first Snowy Sheathbills of the trip, but not too much else of note.

For our last day in South Georgia we relocated to the southern end of the island. The morning’s excursion was to Gold Harbor, which held another large King Penguin colony in the shadow of a stunning hanging glacier and steep green slopes. The aforementioned penguins were the first to greet us upon landing, and who could ask for a better welcoming committee? Decent numbers of Gentoo Penguins were also mixed in, along with the standard hangers on – Southern Giant-Petrel and Brown Skua.
For the first time we also found good numbers of **Snowy Sheathbills**, though here at least they were shy and standoffish.

As enjoyable as that whole scene was, for some of us Gold Harbor offered something of greater interest. And luckily for us, Derek (one of the One Ocean guides) agreed to bring Hal and me up one of the grass-covered hills that flanked the harbor in search of some **Light-mantled Albatross** nests. We had seen several of this graceful and gorgeous bird previously from the ship, but seeing it on land was a goal for both us, and one thwarted so far during our unsuccessful search in Grytviken. It took a bit of work, but eventually we were situated on the high cliffs over the harbor. The view alone would have been worth it (see the pic above), but we had albatross on the mind. Some more searching and stumbling through the tussock grass, and there they were! Our first sight was of a pair of the albatrosses in their incredibly graceful and intricate synchronized flight display over the cliffs, at times coming so close to us it
almost felt like we could reach out and grab one! Eventually they landed, but we never could find a nest. Perhaps they were scouting out sites for a future nesting area, or we may just not have spotted the actual nest site, but with the experience we had, who could complain?

The later part of the morning and early afternoon was consumed with our trip to the very southern tip of South Georgia, and our last experience of the island. That’s not to say the trip was boring – far from it! Incredible numbers of pelagic species we sprinkled throughout the ride, including good numbers of Wandering Albatross, and even larger groups of Black-browed Albatross, more White-chinned Petrels and Antarctic Prions than we could count, and cetaceans! At one point we were passing through the greatest concentration of whales I’ve ever had the privilege to witness, including multiple Blue, many Fin, and a couple of Sei and Humpback Whales, all in the space of an hour or so! The Blue Whales especially were unexpected and a trip highlight.

Finally arriving at Drygalski Fiord we also finally found some bad weather. This wasn’t good news for our chances of making our last excursion on the island, but the birding didn’t suffer at all! Far and away the highlight was our first Snow Petrels, a species reminiscent of Ivory Gull from the north but with far more grace. By the end of the day we had seen an incredible 20 or so of these charismatic species. We also found our first definite South Georgia Diving-Petrels (taking photos and studying them helped) among the many Common Diving-Petrels, along with a
couple of **Blue Petrels** and a smattering of **Black-bellied** (below, right) and one **Gray-backed Storm-Petrels** (below, left).

With the weather growing worse, the expedition leader wisely decided to can the afternoon excursions, and we began our way south through the Scotia Sea towards Antarctica. On our way out we passed through one of the best icefields of the entire tour – it seemed like iceberg upon iceberg were piled on top of each other as far as the eye could see! A fitting departure to South Georgia indeed.

Traversing the Scotia Sea, between South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula, was the focus of our longest sea voyage of the trip. With our hoped for stop at the South Orkneys called off due to heavy sea ice, the total time out of site of land totaled three days. As we headed south a distinct change in the pelagic sea life became apparent – there were fewer birds. Not to say it wasn’t still exciting! Especially on the first day, when we weren’t yet too far away from South Georgia, we retained our faithful following of **Antarctic Prions**. Albatross numbers were still decent as well, with **Black-browed** being the most common, but also a few **Light-mantled** and **Gray-headed**.
The following couple of days slowed down significantly in terms of birdlife. A few straggling Great Shearwaters and Soft-plumaged Petrels were unexpected as far south as we were, and there were still a few albatrosses and prions following along, but in general time out on the decks was much less productive than previously. We still managed to find a new species for the tour, in the form of Southern Fulmar, and the odd cetacean (a pod of Hourglass Dolphins and a few Fin Whales) kept the watch interesting. The varied and interesting lectures offered by the One Ocean staff helped pass the slower hours of the crossing as well.

Finally, after our time at sea, our first sight of land – Elephant Island. Mostly famous as the location where part of Shackleton’s crew were marooned for months while The Boss went for help at South Georgia, Elephant Island is a worthy wildlife destination in its own right. And the glacier covered peaks towering above the ocean made for a dramatic sight indeed!

As we neared the island the amount of wildlife picked up immensely. This was most apparent in the numbers of penguins, now mostly Chinstrap, but also a few Macaroni. Good numbers of Fin Whales were also sighted near Point Wild. Unfortunately for us, the wind was also blowing quite strongly as we neared the island. We were lucky enough to get out on zodiacs to cruise around Point Wild, close enough to see the statue left to the captain who rescued Shackleton’s crew, and get up close and personal with the many Chinstrap Penguins perched there, but not close enough to land. On the way back to the ship some rather tame Fin Whales that came up very close to our zodiac made us the envy of every other group out on the water. And having an eye-to-eye view with a porpoising penguin wasn’t half bad either!
With the wind getting ever stronger, we had to cancel our planned afternoon trip to the other side of Elephant Island, and instead we steamed ever southward towards the Antarctic mainland.

We awoke the next morning to our first sight of Antarctica! Cruising around the very tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, snowy peak after snowy peak passed by as we headed towards our morning’s landing at Brown Bluff. After the wind of the day before we were all relieved to feel the calm air, and looking forward to setting foot on dry ground again.

With the landing going exactly to plan it wasn’t long before we had our feet on the continent and selves surrounded by wildlife! This time the penguin mix was a bit different – Adelie Penguins of various ages were our greeting committee. Mingled throughout were pockets of Gentoos, and with the shoreline littered with ice it made for the archetypal Antarctic scene.

The scavenger scene was also wonderfully active, and we spent as long watching Brown and South Polar Skuas tearing at bits of penguins as we did the actual penguins themselves! Snowy Sheathbills were also wonderfully tame, and every behavior from head-bobbing displays to feeding young to tearing into a juicy bit of carrion were seen at
close range. Some attendant Kelp Gulls and a very lost Rockhopper Penguin rounded out the bird scene at Brown Bluff.

Getting back in the zodiacs, it soon proved to be the mammals that really stole the show of the morning! Seeing a group of Adelies huddled on an iceberg (see the photo on page 2), we motored over. Then all of a sudden, right in front of us, exploded a Leopard Seal! In its mouth was a hapless Adelie chick, and we got to watch in awe (and perhaps a bit of sympathy) as the seal proceeded to thrash the penguin out of its skin and eat the remains. It was truly nature in action, and while it may have been a gruesome thing to behold, it was one of the top highlights of the whole trip.

For the afternoon we moved only a few miles up the coast, to Hope Bay and the Argentine Esperanza Base. The wind had picked up through the morning, and by the time we arrived in the bay it was downright howling. Thankfully the base is somewhat protected, and we were still able to land. Awaiting us on shore were the residents of the base, and we were able to take a nice, short, and informative tour. In addition to acquainting ourselves with how the people who live at the ends of the earth go about their lives we also saw the rough stone hut that Nordenskjold and two others spent an Antarctic winter living in – a true testament to the hardiness of those early explorers!

In the avian department, Esperanza Base wasn’t all that bird-filled. A few Adelie and Gentoo Penguins, and some inquisitive Snowy Sheathbills...
meandered around the complex, but the highlight were some amazingly close Wilson’s Storm-Petrels that foraged just offshore.

For the next day, we had a full schedule visiting the South Shetlands, and thankfully the weather gods smiled on us. The first of our two islands for the day was Halfmoon Island, a small but wildlife-filled stop in beautifully calm waters. Even as we approached land an uptick in birdlife was apparent, with gangs of porpoising Chinstrap Penguins coming and going, along with good numbers of Southern Giant-Petrels and a few Antarctic Terns.

On the island itself we were able to get up close and personal with the Chinstraps, most of which were rather dirty from sliding around on all the mud around their colony. The large numbers of Southern Giant-Petrels and Skuas all seemed to just be loafing around the edges of the colony, but the many Antarctic Fur Seals were in fine form. Our first good looks at Weddell’s Seals came from a few individuals resting on the snowbanks and beaches of the island, and we finally found a cooperative Antarctic Shag sitting nearby. Some dramatic icebergs on the way back to the ship gave us a nice dose of quintessential Antarctica.

Deception Island, our next destination, was perhaps the most unique of the many islands visited. An eruption 10,000 or so years ago blew the top off of the island, and
the ocean filled the resulting caldera. The only access is through the 500m wide Neptune’s Bellows, and the whole scene has a certain drama quite different than elsewhere on our trip. After passing through the Bellows we anchored at Whaler’s Bay, site of yet another old whaling station. Birds in general were far and few between (with a few lonely Chinstrap and Gentoo Penguins being the only representatives of their family present), but a freshwater pool played host to a large group of South Polar Skuas, with a few Brown Skuas and probable hybrids mixed in.

The real avian highlight of Deception Island was a short walk away, at a low point in the crater rim overlooking the Bransfield Strait. Here, in addition to the vertigo-inducing views we had our only close encounter with a Cape Petrel colony. While most of the birds had already left due to the time of year, a few fluffy gray chicks remained, and we spent a good deal of time watching the adults on and off the cliffs and listen to their weird cackles.

Steaming through the night, ever southward, we awoke the next morning at the head of the stunningly glaciated Wilhemina Bay. The morning’s excursion would be from the zodiac only, and it took but one look at the ice-bound shoreline to see why – even if you wanted to land here, it would be nearly impossible without serious ice climbing equipment! Given the lack of dry land in the area, birdlife was also rather low in variety.

The scenery more than made up for any lack of avian diversity! Cruising among gigantic icebergs colored every shade of azure and coming in shapes from squat blocks to towering pinnacles was an experience not soon to be forgotten. A few close Humpback Whales gave us by far our best cetacean encounter of the trip, with one coming up mere meters from the zodiac, while others fluked against the dramatic glacial backdrop. Several Antarctic Fur Seals resting on top of floating ice also entertained us for a while, and a few Antarctic Terns and South Polar Skuas provided the obligatory dose of bird for the morning.
Returning to the ship, we turned to the west, and our next destination, Cuverville Island. Cuverville is one of those places that is about one bird – **Gentoo Penguin**. That’s not to say that there weren’t other species there, but very few places we had yet gone to were so overwhelmingly uniform over most of the terrain. Like many penguin colonies, we got to watch the whole gamut of behaviors, including mostly grown chicks actually chasing down their parents and practically forcing them to feed them!

After some time on land at Cuverville, we boarded the zodiacs for a cruise around the island. This brought us into proximity of some different species, including our first Crabeater Seals and nice and close **Antarctic Shags**. A sneaky Leopard Seal disappeared before we could get much of a look at it, doubtless searching for a penguin for dinner and not
wanting us to mess up its hunt.

Our last day in Antarctica called for two more landings. Unfortunately, when we awoke just off of Orne Harbor the wind was howling. And I do mean absolutely howling! We waited around for a bit in the hopes it would die off, but it just got stronger and stronger. So our excellent expedition leader called around to different ships in the area to figure out where the wind wasn't howling, and we had a new plan. The rest of the morning was a write-off as we turned southward towards what would be our last destination on the Ice Continent – Andvord Bay.

And what a happy decision that was! We arrived in Andvord to stunningly calm winds and seas, and probably the most beautiful scenery of the entire trip. The bay was absolutely filled with glacial brash ice, and lined with knife-like peaks covered in snow and ice. It was truly everything we had come to expect from Antarctica, in spades. Combine the scenery with the porpoising groups of Gentoos all around us and Crabeater Seals below, and it was a perfect afternoon.

For the afternoon outing we divided our time between a zodiac cruise and a last landing on the continent. During the cruise portion we investigated the different forms of ice all around us, and enjoyed eye-level views of the penguins and seals. For the landing we went to the small bit of land free of ice and walked among the Gentoos one last time. With South Polar Skuas and Antarctic Terns overhead, and ice all around, it was the perfect finale to our time on Antarctica.

All that remained between us and Ushuaia now was two days across the infamous Drake Passage. Our first morning crossing the Passage was indeed the roughest water of the trip,
to the point where the outside decks were off limits and it became hard to walk around the ship. Even so, we saw good albatross variety (Light-mantled, Black-browed, Gray-headed, and Wandering), along with a few White-chinned Petrels. In general, though, the bird numbers were exceptionally low. For the second day the seas calmed quite a bit (to the relief of all on board!), but the bird numbers remained very low for most of the time. As we approached South America and Cape Horn became visible in the distance we did enjoy a small uptick in variety – in addition to more Gray-headed Albatrosses we saw a few Southern Royal Albatross and some Cape Petrels, but overall it was surprisingly quiet.

Finally pulling in to the Beagle Channel, we enjoyed one final dinner on the ship and the good company of everyone we had met. The next morning in Ushuaia, disembarkation went without a hitch and our journey was over. Many, many thanks to the wonderful One Ocean staff, including the many expert guides, Russian ship crew, and Cheryl Randall, the expedition leader. You all made for an unforgettable trip to one of the most amazing places on Earth!

**Trip List:**

This list includes both species seen during our pre-cruise birding around Ushuaia, and everything seen while on the ship and during shore excursions. *Taxonomy follows Clements, J. F., T. S. Schulenberg, M. J. Iliff, B.L. Sullivan, C. L. Wood, and D. Roberson. 2012. The eBird/Clements checklist of birds of the world: Version 6.9 (2014).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DUCKS, GEESE, &amp; SWANS</strong></th>
<th><strong>ANATIDAE</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black-necked Swan</td>
<td><em>Cygnus melancoryphus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Upland Goose</td>
<td><em>Chloephaga picta</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelp Goose</td>
<td><em>Chloephaga hybrida</em></td>
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<td>Ruddy-headed Goose</td>
<td><em>Chloephaga rubidiceps</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Flying Steamer-Duck</td>
<td><em>Tachyeres patachonicus</em></td>
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<td>Flightless Steamer-Duck</td>
<td><em>Tachyeres pteneres</em></td>
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<td>Falkland Steamer-Duck</td>
<td><em>Tachyeres brachypterus</em></td>
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<td>Crested Duck</td>
<td><em>Lophonetta specularioides</em></td>
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<td>Chiloe Wigeon</td>
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<td>Red Shoveler</td>
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<td>Yellow-billed Pintail</td>
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<td>Yellow-billed Teal</td>
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<th><strong>PODICIPEDIDAE</strong></th>
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<td>Great Grebe</td>
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<th><strong>SPHENISCIDAE</strong></th>
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<td>King Penguin</td>
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<td>Adelie Penguin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentoo Penguin</td>
<td><em>Pygoscelis papua</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinstrap Penguin</td>
<td><em>Pygoscelis antarcticus</em></td>
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</table>
Magellanic Penguin
Macaroni Penguin
Rockhopper Penguin
**ALBATROSES**
Gray-headed Albatross
Black-browed Albatross
Sooty Albatross
Light-mantled Albatross
(Southern) Royal Albatross
(Northern) Royal Albatross
Wandering Albatross

**SHEARWATERS & PETRELS**
Southern Giant-Petrel
Northern Giant-Petrel
Southern Fulmar
Cape Petrel
Snow Petrel
Soft-plumaged Petrel
Atlantic Petrel
Blue Petrel
Fairy Prion
Antarctic Prion
Slender-billed Prion
Gray Petrel
White-chinned Petrel
Great Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater

**STORM-PETRELS**
Wilson’s Storm-Petrel
Gray-backed Storm-Petrel
Black-bellied Storm-Petrel

**DIVING-PETRELS**
Common Diving-Petrel
South Georgia Diving-Petrel

**CORMORANTS AND SHAGS**
Neotropic Cormorant
Magellanic Cormorant (Rock Shag)
Antarctic Shag
South Georgia Shag
Imperial Cormorant

**HERONS AND EGRETS**
Black-crowned Night-Heron

**IBISES AND SPOONBILLS**

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Spheniscus magellanicus
Eudyptes chrysolophus
Eudyptes chrysocome
**DIOMEDEIDAE**
Thalassarche chrysostoma
Thalassarche melanophris
Phoebetria fusca
Phoebetria palpebrata
Diomedea e. epomophora
Diomedea epomophora sanfordi
Diomedea exulans

**PROCELLARIIDAE**
Macronectes giganteus
Macronectes halli
Fulmarus glacialisoides
Daption capense
Pagodroma nivea
Pterodroma mollis
Pterodroma incerta
Halobaena caerulea
Pachyptila turtur
Pachyptila desolata
Pachyptila belcheri
Procellaria cinerea
Procellaria aequinoctialis
Puffinus gravis
Puffinus griseus

**HYDROBATIDAE**
Oceanites oceanicus
Garrodia nereis
Fregetta tropica

**PELECANOIDIDAE**
Pelecanoides urinatrix
Pelecanoides georgicus

**PHALACROCORACIDAE**
Phalacrocorax brasilianus
Phalacrocorax magellanicus
Phalacrocorax bransfieldensis
Phalacrocorax georgianus
Phalacrocorax atriceps

**ARDEIDAE**
Nycticorax nycticorax

**THRESKIORNITHIDAE**
Black-faced Ibis

**NEW WORLD VULTURES**

Turkey Vulture

**HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES**

Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle

**SHEATHBILLS**

Snowy Sheathbill

**OYSTERCATCHERS**

Blackish Oystercatcher

**PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS**

Southern Lapwing

**SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES**

Lesser Yellowlegs

Surfbird

Baird’s Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper

South American Snipe

**SKUAS AND JAEGERS**

Chilean Skua

South Polar Skua

Brown (Subantarctic) Skua

Brown (Falklands) Skua

**GULLS & Terns**

Brown-hooded Gull

Dolphin Gull

Kelp Gull

South American Tern

Antarctic Tern

**PIGEONS AND DOVES**

Rock Pigeon (I)

**KINGFISHERS**

Ringed Kingfisher

**FALCONS AND CARACARAS**

White-throated Caracara

Striated Caracara

Southern Caracara

Chimango Caracara

American Kestrel

Peregrine Falcon

**PARROTS**

Austral Parakeet

**NEW WORLD VULTURES**

Theristicus melanopis

**CATHARTIDAE**

Cathartes aura

**ACCIPITRIDAE**

Geranoaetus melanoleucus

**CHIONIDAE**

Chionis albus

**HAEMATOMPIDAE**

Haematopus ater

Haematopus leucopodus

**CHARADRIIDAE**

Vanellus chilensis

Charadrius modestus

**SCOLOPACIDAE**

Tringa flavipes

Calidris virgata

Calidris bairdii

Calidris fuscicollis

Gallinago paraguaiae

**STERCORARIIDAE**

Stercorarius chilensis

Stercorarius maccormicki

Stercorarius antarcticus lonnbergi

Stercorarius antarcticus antarcticus

**LARIDAE**

Chroicocephalus maculipennis

Leucophaeus scoresbii

Larus dominicanus

Sterna hirundinacea

Sterna vittata

**COLUMBIDAE**

Columba livia

**ALCEDINIDAE**

Megaceryle torquata

**FALCONIDAE**

Falco sparverius

Falco peregrinus

**PSITTACIDAE**

Enicognathus ferrugineus
TAPACULOS
Magellanic Tapaculo

OVENBIRDS
White-throated Treerunner
Blackish Cinclodes
Buff-winged Cinclodes
Gray-flanked Cinclodes
Dark-bellied Cinclodes
Thorn-tailed Rayadito
Austral Canastero

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS
Tufted Tit-Tyrant
White-crested Elaenia
Austral Negrito
Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant
Fire-eyed Diucon
Patagonian Tyrant

SWALLOWS
Blue-and-white Swallow
Chilean Swallow
Barn Swallow

WRENS
House Wren
Cobb's Wren
Sedge Wren

THRUSHES
Austral Thrush

PIPITS
Correndera Pipit
South Georgia Pipit

TANAGERS AND ALLIES
Gray-hooded Sierra-Finch
Patagonian Sierra-Finch
White-bridled Finch

SPARROWS
Rufous-collared Sparrow

TROUPIALS AND ALLIES
Long-tailed Meadowlark
Austral Blackbird

SISKINS
Black-chinned Siskin

OLD WORLD SPARROWS
House Sparrow (I)

RHINOCRYPTIDAE
Scytalopus magellanicus

FURNARIIDAE
Pygarrhichas albogularis
Cinclodes antarcticus
Cinclodes fuscus
Cinclodes oustaleti
Cinclodes patagonicus
Aphrastura spinicauda
Asthenes anthoides

TYRANNIDAE
Anairetes parulus
Elaenia albiceps
Lessonia rufa
Muscisaxicola maclovianus
Xolmis pyrope
Colorhamphus parvirostris

HIRUNDINIDAE
Pygochelidon cyanoleuca
Tachycineta meyeni
Hirundo rustica

TROGLODYTIDAE
Troglydytes aedon
Troglydytes cobbi
Cistothorus platensis

TURIDAE
Turdus falcklandii

MOTACILLIDAE
Anthus correndera
Anthus antarcticus

THRAUPIDAE
Phrygilus gayi
Phrygilus patagonicus
Melanodera melanodera

EMBERIZIDAE
Zonotrichia capensis

ICTERIDAE
Sturnella loyca
Curaeus curaeus

FRINGILLIDAE
Spinus barbatus

PASSERIDAE
Passer domesticus
### Mammals

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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Leopard Seal</td>
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<td>Weddell Seal</td>
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<td>Crabeater Seal</td>
<td>Lobodon carcinophaga</td>
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<td>Southern Right Whale</td>
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