

Bird Island

November Newsletter

Well, this has been a productive month, the base is slowly ramping up to the main seal breeding season, with many pups appearing now. We have returning penguins with all manner of beeping science strapped to them, and the big Albies stretching their wings on the hilltops.

Unfortunately, your humble narrator is a tech, so we will be talking about tech things, which are of course far from humble! This includes boilers, wiring, wood bashing, in short all manner of heroism that usually lives under the stairs.

The local wildlife view us with some curiosity, as we quite often share the same workspace as their home (under buildings etc). The big guy here is guarding the walkway off the jetty, he would not let me past, no way, until I woofed to him and all was well.

This season has seen myself and Mike Reid (a purveyor of common witchcraft – electricity) come in at first call and set to work preparing the base for a major influx of personnel and kit, due during the rebuild of the base.

This process started with the rearranging of the food stores and installation of extra fridges, moving on to the construction of a new temporary food store for the contractors' dry provisions. This will be approximately 10m³ of food, plus 4m³ of frozen. Lots!

Mike has set to and wired the Dorchester hut with lights and power, this is to be the construction site hut during the early stages of next year.

On the beaker front, Mike and Chris have installed two wind generators over at the Love Shack, each producing about 20v for battery charging. From our perspective this involved a measure of creative scaffolding, but unfortunately, one of the generators suffered a little in transit from the Cambs, and has required a bit of panelbeating. From all reports it makes a fine beacon in the fog as it squeaks on rotation. Mike and I have scrounged all the mousetraps available in an effort to fix it in the next couple of days, but fear (ala Southpark) the effect it will have on Little Mac, as the penguins react to the strange godlike apparition that issues monosyllabic commands.

While over on the other side of the island, we replaced the Love Shack heater and stove, and modified the flue to get around fume problems of the past.

The previous heater had suffered an ignominious fate, whereby the Great Leader (a certain Mr Crox...) had discharged a fire extinguisher into it! The effect of senior management upon the hapless plumbing can only be wondered at ... but I digress. The powder from the extinguisher promptly turned into a glass like substance which defies all modern power tools and strong chemical attempting its removal.



Alas, old faithful had had his chips, and all we need now is a strong northerly wind to test the replacement.

That side of the island is home for many of the bird colonies, and we were roped into doing several bird censuses. Unfortunately this requires a disproportionate amount of bondu bashing to actually get to them, especially when you have a guide who is a walking power pole, labouring under the belief that the straightest line is the shortest way.

The birds seemed amused anyway, and the view was good over a cup of tea afterwards.



Cup of tea in the tussock.

Mike the sparkie actually disappeared into the tussock on occasion, with only his bobble hat showing.



View From Colony

Looking out over Johnson Beach with Willis Isle in the background.

Willis hosts the biggest macaroni penguin colony in the South Georgia area, and is largely inaccessible due to shear cliffs and submerged rocks.



Upon return to base, we were treated to a tranquil evening, hosted by Zack the Aussie out on the jetty. The evening light made for one or two excellent photographs.

Towards the end of the month, the long awaited first fur seal pup arrived. This momentous moment in science was overshadowed by the base lottery upon this date, the subsequent prize being a cake that is awarded to the winning guess. Jaume is the happy baker this season, though the debate over the actual date and time of the relevant pup was fast and furious. As with all arguments of this import, politics were invoked – and it was eventually settled using statistics. A sad day for bodger pole aficionados.



One of the first seal pups.

Ian, Sarah, and Jaume (with the odd technical tourist) hike across to the seal study beach every morning, just over the hill. From there they monitor the seals progress and mark the young seals with a harmless bleach for identification. As the season progresses the beach becomes more and more crowded, up to 700 to 800 pups on a beach 400m². It's noisy!

Last year saw the construction of a new scaffold walkway on the study beach. During the winter the base suffered a 10 year storm that moved landmark logs about the beaches, rearranged the gravel, and wiped out most of the snow cover on the island.

The walkway never moved.



Unfortunately the festivities announce the start of the 'blonding' of the base, One of the more startling examples is shown here, Mike, our darts champion trying out a fine set of handlbars.

And now a word from me, him over there with the face! Don't worry if you've never heard of me, no-one has. Some outrageous oversights in Cambridge, (failure to invite me to any of the conferences etc) resulted in me arriving at Heathrow with my only point of reference to my travelling companions being Paul Cousens' beard!!! Lucky for me its not your average beard. I made it to BI though,

via Santiago, Falklands and Signy, getting the full BAS tour, so to speak. This truly is a fantastic place, until you've been south, you don't appreciate the full extent and beauty of the nature here, and the amount of interaction, even for a lowly "tech" like me. Unfortunately, the studies here take in penguins, various albatross species and of course, fur seals, and , well, I just can't get as enthusiastic about them as I do about the elephant seals. Ellie pups rock.



'George' the Ellie pup performing the periscope manoeuvre.

With the onset of furry pups, comes the onset of noise, both around, and under the base, especially at night. If it were just a little warmer, I'd sleep outside and see how they like my snoring!! Now, I'm no expert, but everybody seems happy enough with their respective studies this year, and the mood on the island is good. All bets have been placed, and the cakes are coming thick and fast (although Ian's insider knowledge seems to be paying off). One of our film nights, after a BBQ last week, was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the "Golden Fleece", a yacht on a scientific cruise, out of the Falklands. Being unable to land here, they came as close as they

could, and sent over some fresh meat, mutton from Beaver island for the next night's tea.

The weather has been remarkably good during my stay here, opening up the island for numerous walks/climbs. Its visually stunning on top of La Roche, naturally beautiful, with Cuz as my guide pointing out the sights. If I never visit BI again, it will stay firmly imprinted on my memory forever. I'll let Mr. Cousens finish up, Muggins-in-a-meat-suit-Mike Reid.

Well that's about it, all is well here. We are both to be uplifted in a week or so and move on to the Real Antarctic – the land of the Emperor penguin, Halley.

As a last bit, the BC approached me the other week and commented that we were out of water, could I fix it?



After a quick look, I had to say that this would require both the Sparkie's and Plumbers' wands on full charge.

P Cuz