

DIARY NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2004

Hello again. Welcome back to the dairy section of the site. I sit once more at Novo air base in the Antarctic, having spent the most extraordinary month in a very remote, very beautiful part of the planet. Svarthamaren is the name given to a ridge of mountains in Dronning Maud Land, Antarctica, and has been my home over the past 4 weeks or so. The reason for my visit was described in last month's diary, and now, having witnessed a truly remarkable natural event I again sit at the air base waiting for the Ilyushian cargo jet to depart later this evening from Cape Town. More regarding the purpose of my visit later, but first a bit of detail to paint the picture of this wild place.

On the 10th November, once the wind relented and allowed us to fly, we travelled the 130k by Antonov 2 (a large and powerful Russian bi-plane that looks and sounds a bit like an aerial tractor) from Novo air base, to Svarthamaren. The journey alone was breathtaking, passing as we did over some of the most spectacular scenery and mountain ranges in the Antarctic continent.

Just 0.4% of this land-mass sticks above the ice - the peaks of jagged and weather beaten mountains whose feet lie deep under the vast blanket of ice. Our journey in was blessed with clear blue skies and still air. Just as well because there is no landing strip at Svarthamaren and only the skill of our pilot, Valery Ratnikov, ensured we were able to put down on the blue ice fields, a kilometre or so from the mountain.

Gear unloaded, we waved goodbye to the aircraft and other people for the next 3 weeks. My colleague on this trip has been Jason Roberts; an Australian who has lived in Svalbard, Norway, for many years and whose experience with polar logistics is immense.

The two of us set about making home at the tiny station put here by the Norwegian Polar Institute in the late 80's to study the bird colony. Home was a 10m metal container on stilts. Surprisingly cosy once we struck up the stove and banished some of the chill from the walls. No-one had used the site for the best part of 3 years, yet in this frozen environment, it might just as well have been yesterday. This is a true desert, with very little snow-fall throughout the year. That said, one of the fist jobs was to clear the door of one of the storage huts of ice build up with a pick axe; warm work in the -20°C temperatures. Similarly, I had also to



prepare our toilet facilities. Environmental etiquette, quite rightly, dictates that all waste, and I mean ALL waste, is removed from Antarctica by any visiting parties. Our loo was constructed by one of the founders of the station - a small hut looking out across the mountains with a seat and a space beneath for bin liners. Over the years though, what little snowfall there was, had found its way in here, melted from time to time in the summer, and then re-frozen. Before any facilities were to be used, I faced shifting half a ton of solid ice with the pick-axe. Needless to say, I had an incentive! Job done in double time. With bin liners in place, doors cleared, stove on and all other logistics sorted it was time to take in our surroundings.

Spectacular! Great white and blue space punctuated by jagged teeth of rock bursting towards the clear blue sky. In pictures I know it looks positively summery, but this is a harsh world with dramatically changing moods. We were glad of our refuge.

We now faced a wait. We didn't expect to see birds before the 20th November, almost two weeks away.

Our early arrival was dictated by the logistics of travel rather than a desire to be on location early. In

hindsight, I am very glad we were in place in good time. I had expected to film only the vast flocks of Antarctic Petrels which nest on the scree slopes, but don't arrive until later. But within a few days of our arrival, another bird, the diminutive but very beautiful snow petrel began to arrive in good numbers.

I cannot give you the absolute detail of all that I saw - that is to be shown in the series "Planet Earth" in a year or so. What I can say is that we witnessed



some behaviour and activity, which was totally unexpected, very beautiful and very dramatic involving the snow petrels and south polar skuas. The skuas are scavengers, but can also be dynamic hunters, looking like powerful brown gulls and with a capacity in the air to rival some falcons. Throughout the filming at this time, my primary camera position was very

close to our home, in fact it was on it! The roof of the container gave a good view of the area where the activity occurred, but it also presented a temptation. However beautiful the place, when the wind was cutting through at 20m a second, the air temperature was -25°C (no idea what the wind chill was, but I escaped with nothing more than a small frost bite on my ear), and all the birds sleeping, it was very tempting to crawl back inside for a bit of respite from the cold. That temptation resisted though, I was able to witness behaviour hitherto unrecorded. Very exiting!

The 22nd November saw the arrival of the first wave of Antarctic Petrels to the colony, and the beginning of a frenzy of activity. Within a few days, the rocky



slopes had gone from a relatively subdued hush, to a mad bustle of birds all vying for a nesting place and in a rush to get on with the seasons nesting efforts. A wonderful scene, with added drama once again provided by the skuas. I did have some misfortune though. From time to time, extraordinarily strong winds pick up and howl along the slopes. Known as katabatic winds, caused by the shift of cold air over the mountains, they are fierce and unpredictable. Perched on the side of the mountain I was caught by one of these gusts, which literally lifted the camera complete with heavy telephoto lens and tripod into the air, and sent it crashing down the cliff. A bad moment! My greatest concern was for the many nesting Petrels below, but miraculously, not one bird or egg was hurt by the accident. The same can not be said of the camera! By good fortune though, I was able to continue working with some back-up gear, and complete the assignment.



JANUARY

That all seems a very long time ago already! Since Antarctica I have spent a good deal of time in Britain and Europe. The most recent series of Big Cat Week has aired (many, many thanks to all those of you who wrote regarding the series), Christmas and New Year have come and gone and I am preparing to return to Kenya to catch up with Toki, the surviving brother of the Cheetah twins that we helped to rehabilitate. As ever, I am frantically trying to get everything organised in time for the trip, but can't wait to be back out in that beautiful land. I'll keep you posted.

Warmest regards

Simon

