

Southern South American and Antarctic Cruise

February 2010

by John van der Dol

Sixteen days on the luxury cruise ship the “Star Princess” was the order of the day for this year’s family holiday. It was also the only way the whole family would ever stand a chance of visiting the Antarctic at a price we could afford. Most specialist birding holidays cost considerably more and as most birds are seen from the deck of the ship I considered this to be a suitable alternative. We did however not visit South Georgia or land on the Antarctic mainland but I felt that was a price worth paying.

We flew from London to Buenos Aires via Madrid. A long and arduous journey but worth it in the end. We were transferred to our hotel NH09 De Julio where we spent the first and last nights of the holiday. The bus transfer produced a few things including Southern Martin, Rufous Hornero, Picui Ground-Dove, Southern Lapwing and Grey-breasted Martin.

The next morning after a walk in the local park which produced Picazuro Pigeon, Rufous-bellied Thrush, Chalk-browed Mockingbird and Shiny Cowbird and the inevitable Rufous-collared Sparrow. Later this morning we were taken by bus to the docks and eventually boarded our five star luxury accommodation which was going to be our home for the next 16 nights.



The Star Princess in Punta Arenas

Feb 2nd

We set sail a little later than planned about teatime and had a look from the deck but apart from some Kelp gulls and a Neotropic Cormorant in the harbour there was little to be seen. We explored the ship and waited until the next morning to try and find some birds.



Antarctic Petrel

Feb 3rd

An early morning start enabled us to meet up with the other serious birders on deck with whom we were to be spending rather a lot of time over the next two weeks or so.

A White-browed Blackbird flew past the ship, several Eared Doves too and a mixed flock of Brown-hooded and Grey-headed Gulls flew by. There really was not much doing but we were still in the River Plate which is a huge river and one could not see either bank. By late afternoon we headed south into the Atlantic and now birds started appearing. White-chinned Petrels, Great and Cory's Shearwaters, a few Manx and a single Little Shearwater. Yellow-nosed Albatrosses were in evidence, Wilson's Storm Petrels and my first ever Atlantic Petrel. A Southern Minke Whale gave a brief show and this was to be the only one of the cruise.

Feb 4th

I was on deck by just after 7am and already serious birds were being seen. Petrels and shearwaters and a few albatrosses were noted. New ones included Soft-plumaged Petrel, White-bellied and Black-bellied Storm Petrels, Pintado Petrels, Northern Giant Petrel and some Arctic Skuas. Albatrosses included Wandering, Atlantic Yellow-nosed and Black-browed.

Feb 5th

This morning we were fast approaching the Falkland Islands. An early morning watch produced Southern Giant Petrel, Sooty Shearwaters, and Grey-backed Storm Petrel amongst more of yesterday's species. The further south one sails the more birds appear. The final approach produced our first Magellanic Penguins, Antarctic Prions, Imperial Cormorants and Sub-polar Skua.



Black-browed Albatross

Jim and I eventually landed in port Stanley from we started walking towards Gypsy Cove. We were seeing Kelp and Upland Geese, Rock Cormorants, Falkland Island flightless Steamer-Ducks, Blackish and Magellanic Oystercatchers.

We met a guy, who turned out to be from England, and living in Wales who too was visiting the islands. He had a vehicle and proceeded to give us a lift to Gypsy Cove which harbours a Magellanic Penguin colony. A few photos

and a few Austral Thrushes later and we were off again to a small bay where we got out and said goodbye to our driver. I had read about this place and we followed the tide line in search of any birds we could find. Rufous-chested Dotterel was a target species and duly located, Two-banded Plovers were apparent too and a flock of 70 or so White-rumped Sandpipers were feeding up and preparing for the long flight towards the northern pole. We found some beautiful Dolphin Gulls, some Correndera Pipit , some Long-tailed Meadowlarks and a couple of Black-chinned Siskins flew past.

We eventually got back to the town, had a beer and waited in the queue to re-board the ship.

A great day and although windy, the weather by their standards had been extremely kind to us. I would like to have spent a few days on the islands but on this occasion this was not possible.



Magellanic Penguins at Gypsy Cove

Feb 6th

Today we steamed rapidly south towards the Antarctic crossing the Antarctic convergence Zone at 14.25. The temperature was dropping by the day. Probably the highlight today was the huge flock of Prions consisting of several thousand birds. We sailed through the flock for a good half an hour. New birds today included Southern Royal Albatross, Slender-billed and Fairy Prions, later identified with the aid of photographs , Grey-headed Albatross and Adelie Penguins. Half a dozen Hourglass Dolhins swam beside the ship too.



Grey-headed Albatross

Feb 7th

Today we cruised past Elephant Island for most of the day and we encountered our first ice bergs. The usual birds were being seen again today but new species included Antarctic Terns, Chinstrap Penguins, South Polar Skuas, White-faced Sheathbill which flew right past the deck, and Gentoo Penguins. Humpback Whales were becoming common place although mostly quite distant. Antarctic Fur Seals were seen in the distance.

Feb 8th

Today the weather conditions dictated what the Captain was able to do and this morning gale force winds and heavy sea ice prevented us from entering Admiralty Bay. However by the afternoon the weather had subsided and we entered the bay and made our approaches to the Polish Artowski Research Station. Some scientists embarked for a couple of hours and gave a short talk about their work in the Antarctic.

Birds were getting more exciting today and our first two Snow Petrels were seen this morning followed by another three during the rest of the day. Blue-eyed Cormorants were new and my second target species, a Light –

mantled Sooty Albatross was seen from the restaurant in the late afternoon



Polish Research Station

Feb 9th

Today was spent cruising the Bransfield and the Gerlache Straits. Winds blew up in four minutes from calm to Hurricane force 1 (gale force 9) which prevented us from entering the Neumayer Channel. Birds were much the same today and nothing new was noted although a further 8 or more Snow Petrels were seen. At one stage as the ship was turning round the wind caused the ship to list by a good five degrees. It is a dangerous place!

Two Southern Elephant Seals were noted by the ship and a group of 8 Crab-eating Seals floated by on an ice-flow. The scenery was just spectacular.



Ice Berg in the Gerlache Strait

Feb 10th

We started the morning looking at Deception Island which was the first bit of land we had seen without ice on it since South America.

First new bird was the only Antarctic Petrel of the tour which spent quite some time at the back of the ship while some beautiful white form of the Southern Giant Petrels were noted too. Some South American Sea Lions were seen as was a small pod of half a dozen Orcas accompanied by a large flock of seabirds including several albatrosses and Giant Petrels. Close views of Light-mantled Sooty Albatross made up for the rather distant and misty views the other day.

We spent the last few hours of the morning and the rest of the day sailing north through the Drakes Passage towards Cape Horn. It was remarkably calm and I think we were lucky.



Austral Pygmy Owl

Feb 11th

At sea all day arriving at Cape Horn in the late afternoon. It was a little hazy for good photos but plenty were taken nevertheless. No new birds today. Good to see Cape Horn from the south. I have now visited all three southern most points in the world and another ambition achieved.

Feb 12th

Today I had arranged to have a day-long outing to the Tierra del Fuego National Park with a guide but by the time we got off the ship it was already mid morning. However in the event there were eight of us being taken around in a bus and a successful day's birding was had. The main specialities being a couple of Austral Pygmy Owls sitting out in the open, and after much taping without success by the guide I found a pair of Magellanic Woodpeckers from a moving bus. Great views were obtained and some reasonable photos too. Other birds of interest were Ashy-headed Goose, Great Grebes, a pair of Flying Steamer-Ducks, 5 Andean Condors and 3 Black-breasted Buzzard-Eagles, a number of new passerines and a South American Snipe, some rare Spectacled Ducks and some Flightless Steamer-Ducks.



Male Magellanic Woodpecker

A trip to the local rubbish tip resulted in Chilean Skua and the sought after White-throated Caracara.

All in all a very successful day.



Chilean Flamingos

A full list can be seen in the table below.

We set sail again late afternoon through the Beagle Channel towards Punta Arenas in Chile. More Chilean and South Polar Skuas were noted as well as the now usual Black-browed Albatrosses and Northern Giant Petrels.

Feb 13th

We arrived in Punta Arenas quite early but at least we did not have to disembark via tenders. This time we had early disembarkation tickets and again the 8 birders set off to the port car park to meet our guide. He had a minibus ready and off we went to spend the day on the steppes. A very windswept habitat and although quite cold, at least the sun was out for most of the day. Our first destination was a lake where we were to look for the very rare Magellanic Plovers of which three were found quite quickly. Great views but no photos.

Other birds of interest here were Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans, Chilean Flamingos, Silvery Grebes, and a couple of Condors.

It was cold so we got out of there and made stops along the route for the rest of the day. Over 70 Least Seedsnipes were seen in small parties and 7 Baird's Sandpipers, a few Tawny-throated Dotterels and interesting waterfowl such as Silver Teal, Chiloe Wigeon, Red Shoveler, White-winged Coot, and three Cinereous Harriers. Passerines included Common Miner, Black-throated Finches, Mourning and Grey-hooded Sierra Finches, Austral Negrito, Ochre-naped Ground Tyrant and Scale-throated Earthcreeper.

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Patagonian Grey Fox was also seen as were a number of Guanacos, a member of the Lama family.

On returning to the ship we sailed through the Magellan Straits towards the Atlantic Ocean. Some more spectacular scenery during the early evening with many glaciers seen whilst having our dinner.

Feb 14th

A day sailing north in the South Atlantic produced only two new birds in the shape of a Magellanic Diving Petrel and finally identified Slender-billed Prions. Much the same stuff was being seen as we had noted on the way down. A couple of Chilean Swallows landed on board but as I was able to pick one up I don't feel they would have made the cold night. It was extremely thin.

Two Southern Royal Albatrosses and some Grey-backed Storm Petrels were of interest.

Feb 15th

More of the same as were heading further north. Northern Royal Albatross was a first for the tour as was White-capped Albatross.

Feb 16th

Our last day in oceanic waters produced one or two Spectacled Petrels and a couple of White-capped Albatrosses. Our only Pomarine Skua was seen at some distance and Albatrosses again consisted of Yellow-nosed and Black-browed as they had done on the way south two weeks ago. A Common Dolphin was photographed



Common Dolphin

Feb 17th

We arrived in Montevideo at breakfast time and spent the morning in the City. On foot there was not that much to see so we were back on board by mid afternoon. However we did note Monk Parakeet breeding in a city park, A Cattle Tyrant and an Olivaceous Cormorant and some Brown-hooded Gulls.

The late afternoon we set sail for our final destination of Buenos Aires and the end of our adventure.

Feb 18th

We arrived in Buenos Aires at breakfast time. Quite a job getting off the ship and on to the coaches for the hotel. However we eventually arrived at the hotel mid morning. We had a quick late breakfast and Jim and I set off for Reserva Ecologica Costanera which is a reserve about ten minutes taxi ride from the hotel and on the edge of the city. The girls spent the day wandering round the city.

<i>Birds of the Southern Oceans and Southern South America</i>																		
	1/2	2/2	3/2	4/2	5/2	6/2	7/2	8/2	9/2	10/2	11/2	12/2	13/2	14/2	15/2	16/2	17/2	18/2
Lesser Rhea													8					
White-faced Whistling Duck																		20
Fulvous Whistling Duck																		6
Black-necked Swan													6					2
Coscoroba Swan													4					4
Upland goose					√							√	√					
Kelp Goose					√							√						
Ashy-headed Goose												4	4					
Ruddy-headed Goose													5					
Ringed Teal																		8
Flying Steamer-Duck												2						
Flightless Steamer-Duck												4						
Falklands Steamer-Duck					√													
Crested Duck												√	6					
Spectacled Duck												10						
Red Shoveler													6					
Silver Teal													2					
Chiloe Wigeon													4					
Speckled Teal												2	2					
Yellow-billed Pintail												2	2					
White-tufted Grebe																		
Great Grebe												3						
Silvery Grebe													4					
Chilean Flamingo													200					
Gentoo Penguin							√	√	√									
Adelie Penguin						15												
Chinstrap Penguin							√			√								
Magellanic Penguin					√							√						
Wandering Albatross				3	√							20				√		
Southern Royal Albatross						2								2	2+			
Northern Royal Albatross															1			
Light-mantled Sooty Albatross								1		1								
Yellow-nosed Albatross			17	5											√	√		
Black-browed Albatross				11	√	√	√			√	√	√		√	√	√		
Grey-headed Albatross						1	1			2	1							
White-capped Albatross															1	2		
Southern Giant Petrel					√		√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√			
Northern Giant Petrel				2			√					√		√	√			
Southern Fulmar							√	√	√	√								
Cape (Pintado) Petrel				√	√		√	√		√								
Antarctic Petrel										1								
Snow Petrel								7	8+									
Atlantic Petrel			1	√												6		
Soft-plumaged Petrel				√		√	√											

<i>Kelp Gull</i>			√			√				1				√					√	
<i>South American Tern</i>														√						
<i>Antarctic Tern</i>								√		√	√									
<i>Picui Ground-Dove</i>		1																		
<i>Picazuro Pigeon</i>			4																	√
<i>Eared Dove</i>		√	√	√										√						√
<i>Nanday Parakeet</i>																				6
<i>Monk Parakeet</i>																			12	√
<i>Guira Cuckoo</i>																				10
<i>Austral Pygmy Owl</i>													2							
<i>Glittering-bellied Emerald</i>																				1
<i>Ringed Kingfisher</i>												1								
<i>Checkered Woodpecker</i>																				1
<i>Green-barred Woodpecker</i>																				1
<i>Magellanic Woodpecker</i>														pr						
<i>Common Miner</i>															2					
<i>Scale-throated Earthcreeper</i>															1					
<i>Bar-winged Cinclodes</i>													4	√						
<i>Dark-bellied Cinclodes</i>													1							
<i>Rufous Hornero</i>		4	4																√	√
<i>Thorn-tailed Rayadito</i>														1						
<i>Pearled Treerunner</i>														1						
<i>White-crested Elaenia</i>														10						
<i>Austral Negrito</i>															6					
<i>Ochre-naped Ground-Tyrant</i>															2					
<i>Fire-eyed Diucon</i>														1						
<i>Cattle Tyrant</i>																				1
<i>Great Kiskadee</i>																			6	√
<i>Fork-tailed Flycatcher</i>																				3
<i>Tropical Kingbird</i>																				4
<i>Blue-and-white Swallow</i>																				√
<i>Grey-breasted Martin</i>		√																		√
<i>Southern Martin</i>		1																		
<i>Brown-chested Martin</i>																				6
<i>Chilean Swallow</i>													√		2					
<i>Southern House Wren</i>													2							2
<i>Masked Gnatcatcher</i>																				2
<i>Rufous-bellied Thrush</i>			4																	6
<i>Austral Thrush</i>								6					√							
<i>Chalk-browed Mockingbird</i>			√																	6
<i>Correndera Pipit</i>								3							4					
<i>Yellow-billed Cardinal</i>																				1
<i>White-lined Tanager</i>																				2
<i>Rufous-collared Sparrow</i>			√																	
<i>Grey-hooded Sierra-Finch</i>															2					
<i>Patagonian Sierra-Finch</i>													√							
<i>Mourning Sierra-Finch</i>															2					
<i>Black-throated(Canary-winged) Finch</i>															√					
<i>Black-capped Warbling-Finch</i>																				2
<i>Saffron Finch</i>																				8
<i>Double-collared Seedeater</i>																				6
<i>Yellow-winged Blackbird</i>																				6
<i>Chestnut-capped Blackbird</i>																				4
<i>Bay-winged Cowbird</i>																				8
<i>Shiny Cowbird</i>			6																	6
<i>White-browed Blackbird</i>				1																
<i>Long-tailed Meadowlark</i>								12							√					
<i>Hooded Siskin</i>																				2
<i>Black-chinned Siskin</i>								2					√	√						

<i>House Sparrow</i>		✓	✓			✓												✓	
MAMMALS																			
<i>Culpuo Fox</i>													1						
<i>Patagonian Grey Fox</i>														1					
<i>Guanaco</i>														✓					
<i>Minke Whale</i>				1															
<i>Atlantic Grey Seal</i>				1															
<i>Hourglass Dolphin</i>						6						1							
<i>Common Dolphin</i>																		1	
<i>Antarctic Fur Seal</i>							✓	✓	✓										
<i>Antarctic Sea Lion</i>												✓							
<i>Crab-eating Seal</i>								8				✓							
<i>Humpback Whale</i>						2+	✓	✓	4										
<i>Southern Right Whale</i>																		1	
<i>Southern Elephant Seal</i>								2											

John van der Dol

March 2010