

Antarctica and Argentina

4-17 December 2016



At the end of the fall 2016 semester at Iowa State University I co-led (with Dr. Julie A. Blanchong) a Study Abroad trip to Antarctica. Our group of eight students spanned several academic majors in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) and the trip was the culmination of an ISU course entitled *Natural History of Antarctica*. Prior to the trip we met weekly to introduce students to the birds, mammals, geology, and exploration of Antarctica. The logistical challenges for such a trip were many and included arranging for students to either take their exams early, or during the trip. This was because the travel dates included all of ISU's dead week and final exam week. Overall our travel went smoothly, and we are indebted to the CALs Study Abroad staff and Betchart Expeditions for making most of the arrangements. Our boat was the M/V *Ortelius*, which carried 88 passengers and 44 crew members. The total navigated distance was 1,615 nautical miles by boat during the 12-day excursion. Some of the many trip highlights included seeing a nice diversity of wildlife (77 bird and 9 mammal species), viewing icebergs of many sizes, shapes, and colors, breathtaking views of mountains and glaciers, stops at several places of historical (exploration) significance, moderately rough and incredibly calm crossings of the Drake Passage, and much more. Simply put, it *was* the trip of a lifetime!

4 December

The trip departed from Des Moines as planned at 6 a.m. on 4 December. After connections in Atlanta, Miami, and Buenos Aires (Argentina) we finally arrived at our destination in Ushuaia (Argentina) at 11:40 a.m. on 5 December.

5 December

On arrival in Ushuaia we met our local guide (Leandro, the same guide as in 2014) and were transferred to Hostel Yakush where we were booked for two nights. After checking in we walked to a nearby sandwich shop for lunch. The weather was gorgeous (sunny and temperatures in the mid-50s) so afterwards we went for a nice hike along the waterfront where we saw our first local birds including Rock Shag, Buff-necked Ibis, Flying Steamerduck, Yellow-billed Pintail, and Correndora Pipit. Some of the group split off for a short hike above Ushuaia with a nice view of the town and harbor. We met back at the hostel at 5 p.m. for a short break and then met at 5:30 p.m. to walk to dinner. We ate at a local pizzeria and enjoyed several local varieties of pizza and drinks before returning to the hostel by 8 p.m. Everyone was tired and went to bed almost immediately. [Clear, temperature 52-56°F, winds SW 5-15 mph]

6 December

After a good night's sleep, we met for breakfast in the hostel at 7:30 a.m. (rolls and bread, jelly, orange juice, and coffee). At 8 a.m. we were picked up by Leandro and our driver for a day trip to Tierra del Fuego National Park. After entering the park, we made a quick stop at the parking area overlooking Bahia Ensenada. Our morning hike was west and then south along the shore of La Patia Bay where we saw Great Grebe, Black-necked Swan, both steamerducks, Andean Condor, and Austral Parakeet. Afterwards we went to the visitor center to eat lunch (sandwiches, a chocolate brownie, and water) before doing another short hike. Leandro and the driver dropped us off at Hostel Yakush at 5:15 p.m. We took a short break and then walked a couple of blocks to dinner and a nice restaurant along the waterfront. [Overcast, temperature 41-47°F, wind S 10-15 mph, intermittent light rain in the morning with partial clearing after lunch]

7 December

Today was our last day in Ushuaia and we planned to spend some time seeing the town. We ate breakfast at the hostel at 7:30 a.m. (rolls, butter and jelly, apples, oranges, and coffee). After breakfast we checked out of the hostel and walked our luggage a couple of blocks to the tour company office for drop-off. Then we had the rest of the day free. Some of the students hired a taxi to take them to a glacier above Ushuaia where they had a short 2-hour hike up to the tundra in a snowstorm. We ate a late lunch at 1 p.m. at a quaint local deli (same as in 2014) on the waterfront and ended up staying there until a little after 3 p.m. We gathered our bags and were quickly transferred to the dock where we boarded the M/V Ortelius at 4:15 p.m.

On board we quickly checked into our rooms and our bags were delivered there ahead of time. At 5:30 p.m. we met in the lounge for a welcome toast (champagne or fruit juice and many excellent hors d'oeuvres), after which some of us explored the boat. The expedition leader was Agustín Ullmann and he was assisted by Valeria Faus (assistant leader), Lida Pimper (biologist), Alejandro Ajó (biologist), and Pablo Arias (guide). We met again at 6:30 p.m. in the lounge for a safety briefing, immediately followed by a short drill with the life boats. There was a 30-minute break before dinner, so some of us looked for wildlife and saw our first Black-browed Albatross and Southern Fulmar plus the more common species. Dinner was at 8 p.m. and consisted of a



Clockwise from top left: Blackish Oystercatcher, Crested Duck, Buff-necked Ibis, Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Flightless Steamerduck, and Chilean Swallow.

salad, dinner rolls, spaghetti with shrimp sauce, and dessert that included a brownie, a creampuff, or cookies. After dinner we returned to the upper deck to watch for wildlife and saw many

Magellanic Penguins plus huge numbers of King Cormorants and South American Terns. It was getting dark so we headed to our rooms by 10 p.m. for some much-needed rest. [Mostly cloudy, temperature 42-48°F, wind SW 10-25 mph and gusty, intermittent light rain with some sleet in late afternoon]

8 December

We awoke in the morning to a gentle swell, which was a pleasant sign for the Drake Passage! The seas were generally light (1-3') with some chop and it was very easy to spot birds. However, there were very few birds to see! In almost 10 hours of deck time we noted Southern Rockhopper Penguin, small numbers of albatrosses, Blue Petrel, White-chinned Petrel, Common Diving-Petrel, Slender-billed Prion, and Arctic Tern plus a brief look at 2 Hourglass Dolphins. Breakfast was a buffet with lots of hot and cold choices. After breakfast we watched the ocean and found a decent variety of birds and the 2 dolphins. Lunch was lentil soup, rice with pork and vegetables, and cake for dessert. After lunch we spent more time on deck but also had a short break to pick up our boots (for landings) and a life jacket for zodiac rides. Dinner was a shrimp cocktail, pan fried cod with vegetables, assorted breads, and an interesting custard for dessert. Many of us spent the evening in the bar and I went to bed at 10:30 p.m. [Mostly cloudy with intermittent light rain and fog all day, temperature 39-44°F, winds NNW 0-5 mph]

9 December

We awoke at 6 a.m. and spent a little time on deck before breakfast. It started as overcast with very light snow, then partially cleared by lunch before becoming overcast again. Overnight we had crossed the Antarctic convergence and were now in colder waters. The morning highlights included many Blue Petrels and Antarctic and Slender-billed prions, which comprised >95% of all birds seen. We also saw a few albatrosses and our first Cape Petrel and Black-bellied Storm-Petrel. But the real highlight was sighting several small groups of Humpback and Fin whales, plus many more unidentified whales on the horizon. The morning also included a short talk on the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO), which contained important information about visitor conduct and other protocols. Lunch was at 12:30 and consisted of fried chicken, French fries, a salad bar, and assorted breads. Ocean watching after lunch produced more Fin and Humpback whales in addition to the expected seabirds plus a Brown Skua and our first Gray-headed Albatross. At about 1:45 p.m. we sighted the first land with distant views of Smith Island. In mid-afternoon we all had to clean our landing gear in the bar using a vacuum cleaner; this was to prevent the introduction of seeds or other invasive species during our landings. At about 5 p.m. we passed through Boyd Strait and into de Gerlache Sound. At this time the birds thinned considerably, but the scenery was spectacular. We especially enjoyed the sun on Smith Island. Dinner was at 7:30 p.m. and consisted of antipasti, baked trout in a sauce, mixed grilled vegetables, and vanilla ice cream with warm fruit for dessert. After dinner we went back on deck for a short time to take photos, but birds were few.



Clockwise from top left: Paradise Bay, Blue Petrel, Light-mantled Albatross, Southern Fulmar, Gentoo Penguins, and Antarctic Shag.

The group then retired to the bar for drinks and conversation. [Partly to mostly cloudy, temperature 31-37°F, winds N becoming NE 5-20 mph]

10 December

We awoke at 4 a.m. and were in the Gerlache Strait. Watched from deck until 7:30 a.m. and saw many icebergs with Gentoo Penguins, 2 small pods of Minke Whales, and our first Antarctic Terns. At about 8 a.m. we entered Orni Harbor where the boat halted. After breakfast we saw a Humpback Whale with a calf, many Antarctic Shags, and assorted other birds from the deck as the sea kayakers and the first zodiac group debarked for a short cruise. Our group debarked at 10:15 a.m. and was back on the boat by noon. Today was, simply put, AWESOME!!! We entered Gerlache Strait overnight en route to our first stop at Orni Harbor. Some of us were on deck a little after 4 a.m. to enjoy some spectacular scenery – endless snow-capped mountains, glaciers, massive icefalls, and hundreds of icebergs of all flavors. In Gerlache Strait we enjoyed many Gentoo Penguins plus some distant Minke Whales. At 7:30 a.m. we arrived at Orni Harbor where we were scheduled to take a short zodiac (boat) cruise among the icebergs. While waiting on deck we spotted a distant Humpback Whale with a calf. The cruise took us through some great scenery and up to a small colony of Chinstrap Penguins. The cruise ended at noon and we moved the boat a short distance into Paradise Bay for an afternoon landing at Brown Station (an Argentinian research station). We cruised slowly through a lot of ice where we had great looks at Weddell, Crabeater, and Leopard seals; the latter included close looks at a female with a pup! We landed at Brown Station at 4 p.m. and took a short hike upward for good views of the bay, then ended at a small Gentoo Penguin colony. Afterwards we had another short zodiac cruise through the ice. We had just returned to the boat when the expedition leader announced that a small group of Orcas (Killer Whales) had been sighted near the station! We were able to view them from a distance for several minutes before they disappeared. [Overcast, temperature 32-36°F, wind light and variable]

11 December

Today we cruised through the Aguirre Passage at daybreak and the scenery was breathless – endless glaciers, icefalls, and icebergs in a very serene environment. Our first landing was at Neko Harbor in Andvard Bay where we enjoyed more great scenery, a Gentoo Penguin colony, and some nearby Crabeater Seals on ice floes. There was also a nice uphill hike through the snow to view a small glacier, which rumbled several times but never calved during our visit. We did a short zodiac cruise after departing Neko Harbor and were fortunate to get very close to a group of four loafing Crabeater Seals. Upon returning to the boat we were greeted by hot chocolate with rum to help us warm up. During lunch we steamed towards our planned afternoon landing spot at Danco Island where we arrived at 2:30 p.m. After landing we climbed to the stop using snowshoes – an elevation climb of about 270 meters. The scenery at the top was spectacular! We had an afternoon landing at Dorian Bay/Lamoy Point after ice conditions prevented us from landing at Port Lockroy. The landing was great and included a large Gentoo Penguin colony, many Brown Skuas, three Weddell Seals, and assorted other birdlife. The last zodiac returned to the vessel at 7:15 p.m. and we were underway in Newmayer Channel soon thereafter. Dinner was a wonderful buffet with free drinks! After dinner we had a short briefing



Clockwise from top left: Snow Petrel, Crabeater Seal, Chinstrap Penguin, Orcas, and Brown Skua.

about plans for tomorrow and then everyone was free. A couple of us returned to deck to enjoy the sunlit scenery, many Snow Petrels, and a Humpback Whale that we almost ran over with the boat! [Partly to mostly cloudy, temperature 30-35°F, winds SSE 0-5 mph, intermittent light to moderate snow in the afternoon]

12 December

On Monday (12 Dec) we cruised down Bransfield Strait towards the southernmost point of our trip – Lemaire Channel. The expedition leader said it was risky because no ship this year had yet passed through the channel because it was blocked by some very large icebergs. The cruise down was through lots of ice where we saw many birds plus good numbers of Weddell and Crabeater seals and a single Humpback Whale. Unfortunately, we found that situation unchanged. On our way down the channel we spotted a large group of 15+ Orcas that were super cooperative with some of them approaching and swimming directly underneath the boat! What spectacular animals. Before lunch we took a short zodiac cruise to the south end of Lemaire Channel and saw the blocking icebergs up close. After lunch we headed north towards a planned landing at Port Lockroy, but unfortunately ice and wind conditions made the landing unsafe. So we boated around the point and landed at Dorian Bay and Damoy Point where we visited a large Gentoo Penguin colony. After the landing we began heading north. [Cloudy, temperature 31-33°F, winds WSW 0-10 mph]

13 December

On Tuesday (13 Dec) we crossed Gerlache Strait in the early morning and saw 20+ Humpback Whales and a nice assortment of seabirds that included many porpoising Chinstrap Penguins. We entered Deception Island through Neptune's Bellows at 8:30 a.m. and found conditions inside the crater to be extremely windy. Unfortunately, we were unable to make our planned landing at Whaler's Bay where we were scheduled to swim. After waiting an hour for the winds to calm (they didn't) we took a short boat cruise around the inside of the crater and exited the island at 11:30 a.m. From here we headed up Bransfield Strait and detoured into English Channel (Discovery Bay) to look for wildlife. It was extremely windy and we only saw a few birds. We then continued northeast, passed through Nelson Strait, and entered the Drake Passage towards home. The highlight was yet another group of Orcas (Type B) that we saw well into the passage, along with a nice assortment of the common seabirds. [Cloudy, temperature 32-37°F, wind WSW 0-5 mph]

14 December

Our last 2 days were spent crossing the Drake Passage en route back to Ushuaia. The crossing started calm, got a little rough Wednesday night, but calmed again for the last day. Overall, it was a very smooth ride. I spent most of my time looking for seabirds and didn't really see a lot of numbers or diversity until we were within ~100 miles of Patagonia. The albatrosses were especially fun to photograph. And with that I'll end the 2016 Antarctica adventure! [Partly to mostly cloudy, temperature 32-34°F, winds NNW 5-15 mph increasing during the day, light intermittent rain and snow in the afternoon]

15 December

This morning we awoke to substantially rougher seas that had increased overnight. Before breakfast I looked for wildlife and saw quite a few albatrosses of four species plus White-chinned Petrel. Breakfast was the usual buffet at 8 a.m. After breakfast I continued to look for wildlife and we saw 2 probable Sei Whales plus Southern Rockhopper (2 singles) and Magellanic (many adults with juveniles) penguins and the usual assortment of seabirds. At 11 a.m. the boat stopped to wait for another captain to guide us through the Beagle Channel (it is the law). Because we had arrived here much earlier than expected we waited until nearly midnight for our escort. Lunch at 12:30 p.m. consisted of calamari, roast duck with rice, and a fruit kabob drizzled with chocolate for dessert. The afternoon and evening were busy in preparation for our arrival in Ushuaia. At 4 p.m. we met for an hour to go over the disembarkation procedure and see a summary of the trip. The staff had put together a nice video of the trip, complete with music, as well as text documents showing our trip route and summarizing the daily itinerary. We then cleared our accounts at the bar and gift shop and met again at 7 p.m. for the presentation of certificates verifying our landing on continental Antarctica. Each person was recognized individually and most greeted each of the scientific staff one-on-one, so it took more than an hour! We then went straight to dinner at 8 p.m. (baked king crab, filet mignon, and ice cream with a fruit sauce for dessert). Afterwards we returned to the lounge for a party that lasted into the early morning hours, complete with lots of dancing. [Partly cloudy, wind NNW 5-10 mph, temperature 37-47°F]

16 December

We awoke early this morning to finish packing and clean out our rooms, ate an early breakfast (the usual buffet) at 7 a.m., and departed the boat for the last time at 8:30 a.m. The biggest mishap of the entire trip occurred when a debarking elderly passenger fell off the gangway into the water between the ship and dock! Luckily, he was quickly pulled out without any serious injury. A driver was there to meet us and hold our luggage until 11:30 a.m. when our group met on the Ushuaia waterfront for the ride to the airport. All flights home went smoothly. In Des Moines, the weather was a mess with blizzard conditions and the drive back to Ames took much longer than usual.

For more information, please contact: Stephen J. Dinsmore, Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, 339 Science Hall II, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011; E-mail: cootjr@iastate.edu



BIRDS (83 species)

Black-necked Swan

Upland Goose

Kelp Goose

Ashy-headed Goose

Flying Steamerduck

Flightless Steamerduck

Crested Duck

Yellow-billed Pintail

Silver Teal

Chiloe Wigeon

Red Shoveler

Great Grebe

Gentoo Penguin

Adelie Penguin

Chinstrap Penguin

Southern Rockhopper
Penguin

Magellanic Penguin

Wandering Albatross

Northern Royal Albatross

Southern Royal Albatross

Black-browed Albatross

Light-mantled Albatross

Gray-headed Albatross

Northern Giant Petrel

Southern Giant Petrel

Southern Fulmar

Sooty Shearwater

Cape Petrel

Antarctic Petrel

White-chinned Petrel

Snow Petrel

Blue Petrel

Wilson's Storm-Petrel

Black-bellied Storm-Petrel

Slender-billed Prion

Antarctic Prion

Magellanic Diving-Petrel

Common Diving-Petrel

Neotropic Cormorant

Antarctic Shag

Rock Shag

King Cormorant

Black-crowned Night-
Heron

Buff-necked Ibis

Turkey Vulture

Andean Condor

Crested Caracara

Chimango Caracara

Southern Lapwing

Magellanic Plover

Blackish Oystercatcher

Magellanic Oystercatcher

Sanderling

Ruddy Turnstone

Snowy Sheathbill

Brown Skua

South Polar Skua

Kelp Gull

Dolphin Gull

South American Tern

Antarctic Tern

Arctic Tern

Rock Pigeon

Picazuro Pigeon

Eared Dove

Austral Parakeet

Common Miner

Short-billed Miner

Dark-bellied Cinclodes

Thorn-tailed Rayadito

White-crested Elaenia

Tufted Tit-tyrant

Southern Martin

Chilean Swallow

House Wren

Austral Thrush

Chalk-browed
Mockingbird

Correndora Pipit

European Starling

Patagonian Sierra-Finch

Rufous-collared Sparrow

House Sparrow

Yellow-bridled Finch

MAMMALS (8 Species)

Orca

Fin Whale

Humpback Whale

Minke Whale

Hourglass Dolphin

Weddell Seal

Crabeater Seal

Leopard Seal