

## Antarctica and Argentina

4-18 January 2020



During the 2019-2020 holiday break at Iowa State University I co-led (with Drs. Julie A. Blanchong and Peter T. Wolter) a Study Abroad trip to Antarctica. Our group of seven 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, plants, geology, and exploration of Antarctica. An initial challenge was finding a boat that met our travel dates. In previous years we had traveled during the first half of December, but wanted a later trip to avoid conflicts with final exams. Our initial top choices ended up being pulled for private charters, so the trip ended up in January and caused students to miss the first week of spring classes. Overall our travel went smoothly, and we are indebted to the CALs Study Abroad staff and Oceanwide Expeditions for making most of the arrangements. Our boat was the M/V Hondius, which carried 172 passengers and 70 crew members. The total navigated distance was >1,800 nautical miles by boat during the 11-day excursion. Some of the many trip highlights included seeing a nice diversity of wildlife (89 bird and 11 mammal species), making a total of ten landings (three were continental), viewing icebergs of many sizes, shapes, and colors, breathtaking views of mountains and glaciers, stops at several places of historical (exploration) significance, calm crossings of the Drake Passage both ways, and much more. It was a great trip!

**4-5 January**

These were our travel days to Argentina. We departed from Des Moines as planned at noon on 4 January. After connections in Atlanta and Buenos Aires (Argentina) we finally arrived at our destination in Ushuaia (Argentina) at 4 p.m. on 5 January. There we were met by a bus driver and taken to our hotel, De los Andes Hotel near the waterfront.

## **6 January**

Some of us took a short hike along the waterfront to look for wildlife and scenery before our day trip to Tierra del Fuego National Park (9:15 a.m. to 5 p.m.). On the Ushuaia walk we saw Coscoroba Swan, Least Seedsnipe, Brown-headed Gull, and Blackish Cinclodes. The park was wonderful and we had nice weather with just a few rain showers. We had a great guide (Coco), saw lots of birds including Great Grebe, both steamer-ducks, Andean Condor, Austral Parakeet, Magellanic Woodpecker, White-throated Treerunner, Patagonian Tyrant, Fire-eyed Diucon, and Black-chinned Siskin, a muskrat, and some mammal sign in addition to orchids, native beech forest, and much more. We made several short hikes along the Beagle Channel and in other habitats of the park. A great start to the trip!

## **7 January**

Today we stayed in town for shopping, more wildlife watching along the waterfront, and preparing for our cruise to Antarctica. I took a taxi to the landfill where I found White-throated Caracara and a Ringed Kingfisher. We boarded our boat, the M/V Hondius, at 4 p.m. and by 6 p.m. we were underway. We had great weather until mid-afternoon when it started raining, and the dreariness continued until dark. After getting settled in our cabins, a mandatory safety briefing, and dinner we had a little time to watch for wildlife in the Beagle Channel. We saw a couple of seals, a dolphin, Magellanic and Southern Rockhopper penguins, albatrosses, and much more before it got too dark to see around 9:30 p.m.

## **8-9 January**

The morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> found us crossing the Drake Passage in light seas, fog, and light rain. We made great progress throughout the day with a steady swell from the west (~3 meters, 15-20 second interval between crests), but late in the day the wind increased from the east causing confused seas. It calmed overnight and the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> was wonderful with light winds and generally calming seas. We saw lots of seabirds plus several groups of Fin Whales on the 8<sup>th</sup>, while on the 9<sup>th</sup> seabird numbers decreased but we saw more Fin and Humpback whales. By mid-afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup> we were close to the South Shetland Islands and passed through the Nelson Strait where we saw many Humpback Whales and a couple of Mink Whales. Amazingly, at 4 p.m. we were able to make a landing at Robert Point on Robert Island! We learned that this was just the second time in Oceanwide history that a landing was made on the second day of the Drake Passage. At Robert Point we saw many Gentoo and Chinstrap penguins, Antarctic Shag, Antarctic Tern, and Snowy Sheathbills plus several groups of Southern Elephant Seals. It was a wonderful landing and was followed by a short zodiac cruise in the surrounding waters.



Clockwise from top left: Long-tailed Meadowlark, South American Snipe, Black-crowned Night-Heron, two views from Tierra del Fuego National Park, and Southern Lapwing.

## **10 January**

Today we began with a zodiac cruise followed by a landing at Walker Bay on Livingston Island. During the cruise we saw lots of birds, many Southern Elephant Seals including a young pup (called a “weaner” by our guide), and some great scenery that included Antarctic Hairgrass and several lichens. After lunch we cruised a short distance to Deception Island, where we navigated through the scenic Neptune’s Bellows to enter the old crater. We then anchored just inside the bellows and landed at Whaler’s Bay, took a nice hike up to the crater rim, and then did a zodiac cruise through the bellows and along the outer shoreline. The highlight of the cruise was seeing a large number of porpoising penguins near a colony, and then quickly finding a large Leopard Seal that was apparently hunting them. It was a really neat experience! We departed Deception Island right before dinner and had smooth water for the evening.

## **11 January**

Overnight we steamed for Orne Harbor, where we arrived just before breakfast. We encountered significantly more ice than in the South Shetland Islands, including lots of brash ice and a few large bergs. Our morning activity began with a zodiac cruise around Orne Harbor where we saw Crabeater and Weddell seals resting on ice, many birds including good numbers of Chinstrap and Gentoo penguins, and then right before landing we came upon a Leopard Seal near a penguin colony, presumably looking for lunch. At the landing we made a nice hike to the saddle of a nearby ridge with good views of the bay. We then steamed a short distance to Orne Island, the site of our afternoon landing. Along the way we saw several loafing Humpback Whales. At the landing we made a short hike to several small Gentoo Penguin colonies and enjoyed scenic views of the harbor. This was followed by an awesome zodiac cruise around the harbor area. We saw a Leopard Seal loafing on a small iceberg, then a Weddell Seal, and finally an out-of-place Southern Elephant Seal. We then got word of some cooperative Humpback Whales nearby. It was a mother with a calf, and the calf was very curious and swam under our boat a couple of times and breached very close several more times with its mother. An awesome experience! While cruising south in the Bransfield Strait during dinner a group of Orcas was sighted. It was a widely dispersed group of at least 24 individuals and we had great looks at them. A short time later a second group of 10+ was sighted, and then later yet a third group of 14+ individuals! We also saw several more Humpback Whales. The evening light was also spectacular. What a way to end the day!

## **12 January**

This morning we arrived at the north entrance to the Lemaire Channel around 7:45 a.m. after passing through the southern end of Gerlache Strait. We saw a lot more ice today, including many larger bergs. During our slow motoring we saw many Humpback Whales (some were quite close) and a few Weddell Seals plus the usual seabirds including our first nesting Adélie Penguins. Our morning landing was at Petermann Island, but our group did the zodiac cruise first. The cruise offered stunning up-close looks at many feeding and vocalizing Humpback Whales, many within 100 meters. We stopped the boat a couple of times and just drifted among the many small groups. It was a surreal experience. After lunch we boated a short distance to



Clockwise from top left: Antarctic Prion, Gray-headed Albatross, Chinstrap Penguin, Weddell Seal, Southern Elephant Seal pup, and Antarctic Tern.

Port Charcot where we landed and did a nice hike up to a monument with a great view of the surrounding sea. We also saw nesting Gentoo Penguins plus a few Adélie Penguins. Afterwards we took a nice zodiac cruise in the surrounding icebergs (named The Graveyard because the shallow waters ground so many of them) and were dazzled by the unreal blue colors in some of them. We also found several loafing Crabeater and Weddell seals and a few penguins. Dinner tonight was an Antarctic barbeque on the ship deck – steak, pork, chicken, brats, baked potato, corn on the cob, and much more. Another fantastic day!

### **13 January**

In the morning we awoke to a slow sail through the Gerlache Strait on our way to Paradise Bay. The scenery here was stunning – massive glaciers, calm waters to see the reflections, and lots of icebergs and brash ice. At Paradise Bay the landing was a Chilean base (Brown Base) where we enjoyed a steep hike up to an overlook, and then slid back downhill. On our zodiac cruise our boat quickly found an unusually curious and cooperative Gentoo Penguin perched on a small ice floe. We were able to approach to within a few meters for great photographs. The bird would eventually leave a floe, only to reappear on another a short distance away and we repeated this process several times. Soon after we found a large Leopard Seal on a small ice floe that was quite cooperative. As we were taking photos a lone Gentoo Penguin rocketed out of the water and landed a meter or so from the seal's head – both were quite surprised! The penguin immediately returned to the water, but repeated the show a few seconds later. It was lucky not to be eaten. We also enjoyed close looks at Weddell Seals, Humpback Whales, and nesting Antarctic Shags. During lunch we steamed a short distance to Neko Harbor for the afternoon. Here we began with a zodiac cruise where we saw more stunning icebergs, listened to the most active glacier in Antarctica grumble and calve, enjoyed a small waterfall, and had more great wildlife experiences. A highlight was finding two Humpback Whales and having them surface just a few meters in front of the boat and slowly swim away! Amazing. We also saw our first Snow Petrel, hundreds of Southern Fulmars, and a cooperative Weddell Seal. At the landing we hiked up to a nice overlook where we could see the entire bay. We also had time to watch several Gentoo Penguin colonies, which is always enjoyable. From here we headed towards Danco Island via the Gerlache Strait, intending to drop off some campers for the night. It was raining, so the camping excursion was cancelled, but we still enjoyed many Humpback Whale sightings, plus brief looks at a couple of Minke Whales. Another fantastic day in Antarctica!

### **14 January**

This was our final day in Antarctica. Our morning landing site was Danco Island. We made our way to near the top (which was closed) for great views of the surrounding glaciers and bays. There were many nesting Gentoo Penguins in the area plus a few other seabirds including several curious Snowy Sheathbills. After the hike we took a short zodiac cruise to see ice and scenery. During the cruise we encountered a Leopard Seal and many cooperative Weddell Seals, all loafing on small icebergs. We then returned to the landing site where most of the passengers enjoyed a polar ice bath (“swim”), which lasted perhaps 10 minutes for the entire group. During lunch we learned that it would not be possible to make a second “bonus” landing in the



Clockwise from top left: Orne Harbor, Antarctic Fur Seal, Orcas, Weddell Seal, Leopard Seal, and Crabeater Seal.



Peale's Dolphins

afternoon, which had been a slim possibility. So, we immediately began steaming up the Gerlache Strait, then into the strait west of the Melchior Islands, and finally passed to the west of the South Shetland Islands and into the Drake Passage during the evening hours.

### **15-16 January**

Now it was time to cross back across the Drake Passage to Ushuaia. The trip began very well with calm seas and gentle swells, plus lots of fog, on the 16<sup>th</sup>. By late afternoon the winds had picked up a bit, but were still modest. Wildlife quite scarce with a few individuals of four albatross species, White-chinned Petrel, Blue Petrel, Antarctic Prion, and Wilson's Storm-Petrel throughout the day. We also saw a couple of small groups of penguins, one of which was Chinstrap Penguins. In the afternoon we saw a small group of Hourglass Dolphins; no other mammals were seen. Overnight the seas and winds picked up a little and by dawn we had a gentle swell from the southwest and brisk surface winds. There were now a lot more birds, including Royal (both Northern and Southern forms), Wandering, Gray-headed, and Black-browed albatrosses, both giant petrels, Sooty Shearwater, and much more. Towards mid-day we were in the shelter of Cape Horn and the seas calmed considerably. About this time, we saw several small groups of Peale's Dolphins, some riding the bow and actively jumping out of the water. We also encountered many small groups of Magellanic Penguins. At 7 p.m. our pilot came on board and we continued our navigation up the Beagle Channel. We docked in Ushuaia around 11:30 p.m.

### **17-18 January**

These were our travel days back to the U.S. We departed the M/V Hondius at 8:45 a.m. and immediately took a bus to the airport. Check-in went smoothly, but our flight to Buenos Aires (stopping briefly in Calafate) was delayed 2 hours. Our transfer in Buenos Aires went smoothly and we departed for Atlanta on time and arrived there at 5:40 a.m. A powerful winter storm was passing through Iowa with blizzard warnings, but despite the scare our flight to Des Moines arrived early, the drive back to Ames was fine, and we arrived there at 1 p.m.

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**BIRDS (89 species)**

Coscoroba Swan  
Kelp Goose  
Ashy-headed Goose  
Flying Steamer-Duck  
Flightless Steamer-Duck  
Crested Duck  
Silver Teal  
Red Shoveler  
White-cheeked Pintail  
Yellow-billed Pintail  
Great Grebe  
Rock Pigeon  
Picazuro Pigeon  
Eared Dove  
Snowy Sheathbill  
Blackish Oystercatcher  
Southern Lapwing  
Least Seedsnipe  
South American Snipe  
South Polar Skua  
Brown Skua  
Brown-headed Gull  
Dolphin Gull  
Kelp Gull  
South American Tern  
Antarctic Tern  
Adélie Penguin  
Gentoo Penguin  
Chinstrap Penguin  
Magellanic Penguin  
Southern Rockhopper  
Penguin

Gray-headed Albatross  
Black-browed Albatross  
Light-mantled Albatross  
Southern Royal Albatross  
Northern Royal Albatross  
Wandering Albatross  
Wilson's Storm-Petrel  
Southern Giant Petrel  
Northern Giant Petrel  
Southern Fulmar  
Antarctic Petrel  
Cape Petrel  
Snow Petrel  
Kerguelen Petrel  
Blue Petrel  
Fairy Prion  
Antarctic Prion  
Slender-billed Prion  
White-chinned Petrel  
Sooty Shearwater  
Common Diving-Petrel  
Magellanic Diving-Petrel  
Neotropic Cormorant  
Antarctic Shag  
Magellanic Cormorant  
Imperial Cormorant  
Black-crowned Night-  
Heron  
Buff-necked Ibis  
Andean Condor  
Turkey Vulture  
Black-chested Buzzard-  
Eagle

Ringed Kingfisher  
Magellanic Woodpecker  
White-throated Caracara  
Crested Caracara  
Chimango Caracara  
Austral Parakeet  
Common Miner  
White-throated Treerunner  
Blackish Conclodes  
Buff-winged Cinclodes  
Thorn-tailed Rayadito  
Tufted Tit-Tyrant  
White-crested Elaenia  
Fire-eyed Diucon  
Patagonian Tyrant  
Southern Martin  
Chilean Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
House Wren  
Chalk-browed  
Mockingbird  
Austral Thrush  
House Sparrow  
Correndera Pipit  
Black-chinned Siskin  
Long-tailed Meadowlark  
Patagonian Sierra Finch  
Rufous-collared Sparrow

**MAMMALS (11 species)**

Orca  
Fin Whale  
Humpback Whale  
Minke Whale

Hourglass Dolphin

Peale's Dolphin

Southern Elephant Seal

Weddell Seal

Crabeater Seal

Leopard Seal

Antarctic Fur Seal