



# Drygalski Fjord, South Georgia - The Wildlife Highlight of my Life

by Mark Carmody

## Introduction

I was fortunate to spend three weeks travelling on the Southern Ocean aboard the M.V. *Sea Spirit* with Quark Expeditions from 18th November to 6th December 2014. We set sail from Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego to the Falkland Islands, then on to South Georgia and south to Antarctica, before heading back across the fabled Drake Passage.

The full trip itinerary, including a detailed route map, [is on the Quark Expeditions website here](#).

Landings at various sites generally comprised disembarking on a Zodiac (a semi-rigid inflatable with an outboard motor) and either zipping around an area (an inlet, a bay, the sea ice, icebergs) or landing on an island or the Antarctic continent. These were the most

**Pic. 1. Drygalski Fjord, South Georgia.**

The *Sea Spirit* can be seen to the right and one of the fast Zodiacs on the left.

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exciting, as it allowed one to get really up close and personal to some amazing wildlife.

## South Georgia

The six days we spent in and around South Georgia were something to behold. In fact, it was the wildlife highlight of my life thus far. I will never forget the experience. The seabirds arriving up to and around the island was incredible and the amount of mammals also increased. We started seeing whales and on a few mornings, just after the dawn, the horizon would be dotted with blows of Fin and Humpback Whales as far as the eye could see. On one morning, I counted over 30 Fin Whales and at least 25 Humpback Whales over a one-hour period. Magical! We also saw Blue Whale, Southern Right Whale and Southern Bottlenose Whale in this area.

## Salisbury Plain

South Georgia was also where we were exposed to thousands of Antarctic Fur Seals, Southern Elephant Seals and penguins. Lots and lots of penguins. We were very fortunate to have visited and landed on both Salisbury Plain and St. Andrew's

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**All pictures taken by Mark Carmody.**

[www.markcarmodyphotography.com](http://www.markcarmodyphotography.com)



Bay, made famous by Sir David Attenborough in his groundbreaking wildlife documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s. The former colony holds an estimated 60,000 pairs of King Penguins, while the latter holds an estimated 150,000 breeding pairs... over half a million King Penguins in all!

The noise, sight, smells and behaviour at these colonies were staggering. It was like nothing else I had ever seen. The musky odour of the Fur Seals mixed in with the more ammonia-heavy odour from the penguins made the air heavy with the smell of life. Brown Skuas and Snowy Sheathbills hovered around, while Giant Petrels were quick to avail of any scraps.

### Icebergs Ahead

However the highlight of the entire trip for me was the three-hour Zodiac tour around Dyr-galski Fjord, which is found along the south-east coast of South Georgia. The fjord is one mile wide at its mouth and seven miles long.

#### **Pic. 2. King Penguins.**

Just some of the King Penguin breeding colony on Salisbury Plain, South Georgia. The brown fluffy birds are unfledged chicks. King Penguins raise just one chick every two years or sometimes two chicks every three years.

#### **Pic. 3. Zodiac.**

One of *Sea Spirit's* fast Zodiacs. We were ferried between ship and shore on these rigid inflatable boats.

#### **Pic. 4. Antarctic Fur Seal.**

About 95% of the world population breeds on South Georgia.





It was the first time that most of the expedition crew had taken a Zodiac tour of the area, so they were very excited. We were not sure if it was going to be possible to access the Fjord as it has a tendency to be ice-bound from ice shed from the Risting Glacier, which sits at the end of the Fjord, and from sea-ice moving north from the Ross Ice-Shelf in the Antarctic.

My jaw dropped when the first icebergs came in to view. I had previously seen plenty of sea-ice in northern Japan during winter, together with frozen harbours, but I had never seen an iceberg before. This was epic and it made us conscious of how close we were getting to Antarctic waters. The wonderful richness and depth of the wildlife we had experienced so far on the voyage from Ushuaia to St. Andrew's Bay was suddenly usurped and replaced by the bleak and barren landscape that was southeast South Georgia, a place that was also under attack from a massive tabular iceberg. The scenery was changing all around us.

The birds continued to appear *en masse* and my first Chinstrap Penguins of the trip were seen porpoising out of the increasingly rougher seas, as Albatrosses swept along in total control, accompanied by Prions and Petrels.

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**Pic. 5. South Georgia Island.**

The bleak and barren landscape of South Georgia under attack from a Ross Ice-Shelf iceberg.

**Pic. 6. Black-browed Albatross.**

An adult bird.





**Pic. 7. Weddell Seal.**

These seals have the most southerly distribution of any mammal, with some found to almost 80° south!

**Pic. 8. Gentoo Penguin.**

Gentoo Penguins have a circumpolar distribution and are the third largest after Emperor and King Penguins.



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### **Drygalski Fjord**

Thankfully, as we entered Drygalski Fjord we were not met with pack ice and icebergs! Instead, we were greeted with the spectacle of the Fjord's snow-covered sheer cliffs. The almost perpendicular cliff faces along with the size and scale of the place was so difficult to grasp. Indeed, trying to portray this in images is even more difficult, something that was a common theme throughout the trip! The excitement in all was palpable, especially the expedition crew who were going to tour this area for the first time. The team was itching to get out on the water and have a look at the Risting Glacier, explore the nooks and crannies of the fjord, and just see what was out there

The water was not too rough but the air was freezing. Snow was constantly falling, albeit not too heavily. It really added to the scene and atmosphere though. Another aspect of the fjord was the colour of the water. It was the richest of blue, and most mineral-rich seawater I have ever seen.



**Pics. 9 - 12. Snow Petrels.**  
One of the most beautiful birds on the planet.



**Pic. 13. Antarctic Terns & Pintado Petrels.  
Pic. 14. Southern Royal Albatross.**

## **Danger Dave**

A handful of Gentoo Penguins were dotted around the edges of the fjord, looking lost and forlorn. Brown Skuas and Kelp Gulls quartered the skies looking for an easy meal. A handful of Antarctic Fur Seals were hauled up along the steep edges. But it was a few Weddell Seals, our first of the trip, which got the most attention. We casually drove around, seeing some more Weddell Seals, Brown Skuas and a couple of King Penguins, also looking a bit lost on the steep-sided shoreline. Dave ‘Danger Dave’ Riordan (our Zodiac driver and logistics manager, an American whose family originally came from Cork and Italy and a great guy) skilfully navigated the glacial ice in the water, being careful not to get too carried away as we sped over some brash ice. The sound of the ice off the base of the Zodiac was a bit unnerving, although it was great fun. South Georgian Shags also hung around the rocks and scree.

## **Snow Petrels**

What we did not expect to see as we pattered around on the Zodiacs was a feeding flock of about 40-50 Snow Petrels! This was a species of bird that embodies the spirit of what Antarctica is about. I was awestruck and my jaw just hit the floor. Dave brought us gently towards the feeding flock, carefully manoeuvring the Zodiac so the light was better for images, and slow enough not to startle the birds. Dave cut the engine so that we could listen to the sounds and calls of the birds. The quietness of the fjord and stillness of the air, mixed in with calls of the Snow Petrels



made for a wonderful moment. They were picking up morsels of food from the surface of the water, feeding with abandon. They were calling and bickering on the water, as well as roosting up on the brash ice that had broken off the Risting Glacier. They were truly mesmerising, the ivory white petrel sitting on the cobalt blue waters. I had thought that we might see a dozen or so of these birds for the entire trip, and then zipping past the ship in driving snow against a boiling sea, but to see so many together, up close and on calm waters, was breathtaking. I was speechless and made sure I took enough time to take the scene in and forget about taking photographs. It was a very special moment with a very special bird.

### **It's oh so quiet**

It was also so quiet. So eerily quiet. When the engine of the Zodiac was turned off, the quietness of the place was overwhelming. The snow kept falling and we were finally called to shore. It was time to leave one of the most beautiful places I have ever visited.

This was, hands down, the best and most moving of wildlife experiences on my trip to the Southern Ocean, if not my entire life so far.

**Mark Carmody,**  
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**Pic. 15. Pintado Petrel.**

**Pic. 16. Adélie Penguins.**

One of the most southerly dwelling of all birds.