

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™

The Mouse-Free Marion Project



forestry, fisheries
& the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

PRESS RELEASE

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World's largest mouse eradication project launched

The 'Mouse-Free Marion' Project will save the iconic Wandering Albatross and other seabirds, with support of new Patron, His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh

The UK launch of the new Mouse-Free Marion Project took place at the South African High Commission in London on 20 March 2023.

At 30,000 hectares - the equivalent of over 42,000 football pitches – removing non-native house mice from Marion Island in the sub-Antarctic will be the world's largest invasive rodent eradication project to take place in a single operation. The Mouse-Free Marion Project builds on the methods and experience gained in similar projects around the world. Removing mice from Marion Island to protect its threatened plants and animals – and indeed the entire ecosystem – is an urgent conservation intervention.

Marion Island is a jewel in South Africa's island crown and is part of the Prince Edward Islands, lying about 2,200 km south-east of Cape Town, in the southern Indian Ocean. Marion Island is wild and beautiful and is home to globally-important seabird populations, including a quarter of the world's Wandering Albatrosses, millions of other seabirds, seals, and other biodiversity, some of which is found nowhere else in the world, such as the Marion flightless moth.



Wandering Albatross on Marion Island, one of the many globally important species being decimated by non-native house mice. Credit Otto Whitehead. [High-res versions, and other images, are available]

This ambitious project aims to remove non-native house mice which now are endangering the long-term survival of the seabirds and other native species of this sub-Antarctic Island. Left unchecked, the mice are predicted to cause the local extinction of 19 of the 28 species of breeding seabirds currently found on Marion Island, some within the next 30 years.

In the early 19th century Marion Island was visited by sealers who targeted the abundant marine mammals of the island and, during these visits, accidentally introduced non-native mice onto the island. A warmer and drier climate over the last 30 years has contributed to an increase in the mouse population. These rodents have devastated the island's invertebrates and plants and the resultant food shortage has driven the mice to find alternative sources of food, which they have found by preying on seabirds.

The mice are eating chicks and even adults of both surface-nesting and burrowing seabirds. The scale and intensity of these attacks is increasing and, without intervention, many species, including the iconic Wandering Albatross, are expected to become locally extinct.

That is why after several years of planning and preparation, this hugely complex and vitally important project will commence operations in the southern hemisphere winter of 2025. A fleet of helicopters will be brought by sea from South Africa across the 'Roaring Forties' - the notoriously strong westerly winds found in the Southern Ocean. The helicopters will be used to spread rodenticide bait from underslung bait buckets in overlapping swathes across the entire island. This is the only method that has proven successful in eradicating rodents from large islands, such as South Georgia.

Keith Springer, Mouse-Free Marion Operations Manager and veteran of a number of similar projects said: "The need is urgent and clear for Marion Island's globally-important seabirds which include the iconic Wandering Albatross, other albatrosses, petrels and prions. Without immediate action their continuing existence on the island will be compromised. While the removal of mice from Marion Island brings clear benefits to the birds and other animal and plant species that live there, the value of this conservation intervention reaches far beyond the island's shoreline. Marion Island's seabirds are members of a regional seabird community innately connected to the functioning and health of the sub-Antarctic region."

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a partnership between the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa, which established the Mouse-Free Marion Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) to help facilitate the implementation of the eradication project. It is also supported by BirdLife International, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other conservation organisations.

Mark D. Anderson, Chief Executive of BirdLife South Africa said "The project has received considerable support from leading institutions and organisations both in South Africa and internationally, building on the expertise acquired from over 600 invasive species eradication projects from islands around the world.

“BirdLife South Africa is fully supportive of this project as removing mice from Marion Island will help secure the ecological integrity of this important sub-Antarctic island as well as the future for the millions of birds who live there. But it means much more than that, as it will leave a significant and lasting conservation legacy even beyond saving iconic seabirds as it will restore an important island ecosystem.”

Barbara Creecy, Minister of South Africa’s Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment said “Very few South Africans have visited, or will ever get a chance to visit, the country’s sub-Antarctic Marion Island. Yet hundreds are making their donations towards eradicating the island’s albatross-killing mice via the Mouse-Free Marion Project. The project is a partnership between the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa. As Minister of the Department, I wish it every success and urge you to support it in any way you can!”

At an event in London hosted by the South Africa High Commission on 20 March 2023, the partnership was delighted to announce that His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh has agreed to be a Patron of the project. The event also brought together some major funders who have generously given their support to this important project.

To find out more about the Mouse-Free Marion Project and how to support this globally important initiative, visit www.mousefreemarion.org

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Notes to editors

For further information, to arrange interviews or receive high-res images, please contact the Culture Communications Collective on:

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Available to interview

- **Keith Springer**, Mouse-Free Marion Operations Manager (attending the event in the UK)
- **Mark D. Anderson**, CEO of BirdLife South Africa (attending the event in the UK)
- **Anton Wolfaardt**, Mouse-Free Marion Project Manager (based in South Africa, not at the event but available for interview)

About the Mouse-Free Marion Non-Profit Company

The Mouse-Free Marion Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) is a special purpose vehicle that has been set up by BirdLife South Africa to execute their responsibilities under the Memorandum of Understanding with the Republic of South Africa’s Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, to facilitate the implementation of the project. It has a Board made up of individuals with considerable experience in the field of Non-Profits, environmental programmes and business.

About BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in more than 115 countries and territories worldwide.

More information at www.birdlife.org.za

About the Prince Edward Islands

The islands are 2,100 kilometres from Cape Town and a South African territory. The island group was declared a Special Nature Reserve in 1995 in order to enhance protection of its flora and fauna. The Prince Edward Island group is designated as Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, and is surrounded by a large Marine Protected Area that includes all territorial waters and large parts of the Exclusive Economic Zone.

More detail on the delivery of Mouse-Free Marion

The project has launched a fundraising campaign to raise funds for the delivery of the project as outlined below:

- **MARINE AND AIR TRANSPORTATION** – The support vessel *S.A. Agulhas II* will provide transportation to Marion Island for personnel, bait, aircraft, equipment, and supplies. Marion Island is remote – approximately 2100 km from Cape Town, South Africa and without an airfield.
- **BAIT** – A specialized cereal bait used on over 600 successful island invasive species eradications around the world will be shipped to Marion Island for this purpose.
- **PERSONNEL** - Skilled and experienced pilots, GPS specialists, financial, administrative and permitting specialists, a ground team of technicians to load bait buckets, and a marine support team on the *S.A. Agulhas II* are critical to support the operation.
- **EQUIPMENT AND FUEL** – Specialized bait buckets are needed for each helicopter to deliver the bait. Items such as GPS and satellite communications equipment, aviation fuel, and protective clothing and equipment for the crew will facilitate the operation.
- **MONITORING** – Monitoring to ensure success will be undertaken using cameras, traps, and specially trained dogs both immediately after the operation but also as part of a robust biosecurity plan.