

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™
The Mouse-Free Marion Project



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



Welcome

to the first issue of the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project Quarterly Newsletter for 2024

The MFM Project team has hit the ground running in the first quarter of 2024 and has been diligently progressing various aspects of the MFM Project. The mouse eradication operation planned for Marion Island necessitates close working relationships between all partners to give us the best chance of a successful mouse eradication intervention on the island. These partners are the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, BirdLife South Africa, South African Universities, independent scientific advisory groups, and funders. The MFM Project team has been relying on an “all

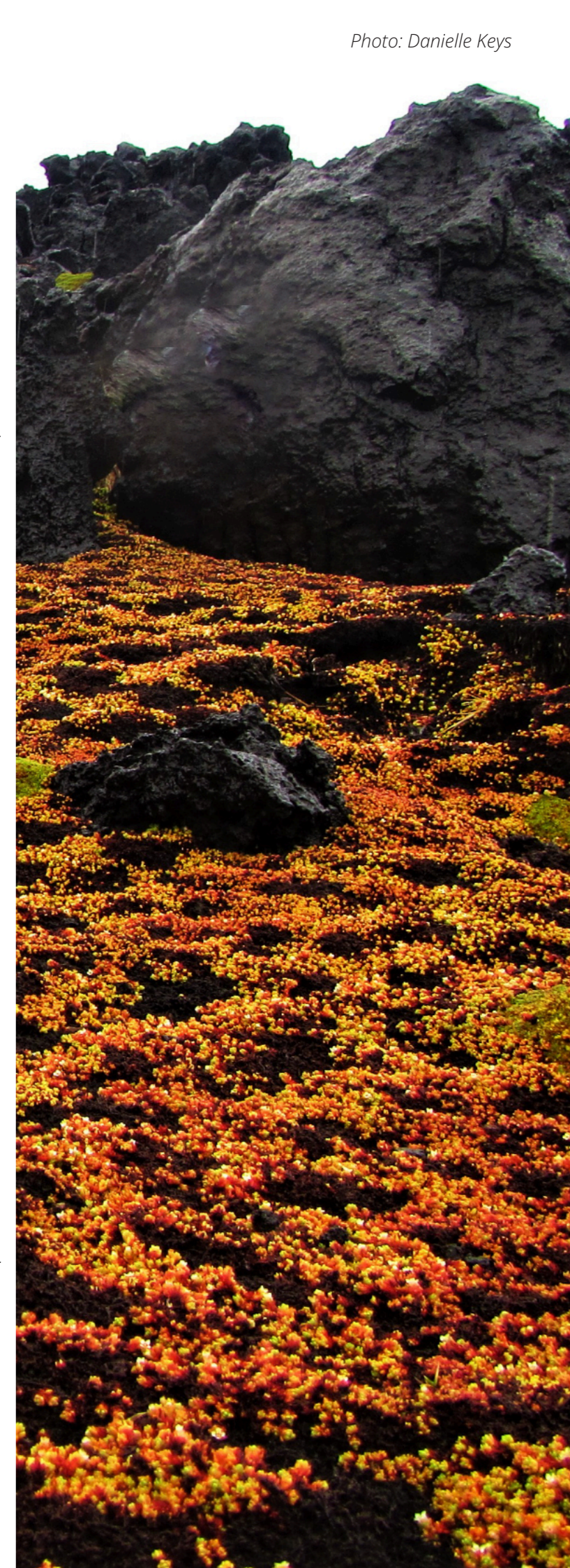
hands on deck” approach to coordinating and collaborating with partners to progress the planning of the highly complex eradication operation.

In late 2023, members of the MFM Project team participated in a three-day Mouse Eradication Workshop in Palmerston North, New Zealand. Dr Anton Wolfaardt (MFM Project Manager) and Keith Springer (MFM Operations Manager) joined 22 international experts on rodent eradications to discuss various hypotheses that have been put forward as to the possible reasons for recent mouse-eradication failures and what these might mean for future projects. Following this, Anton and Keith attended a meeting of the Island Eradication Advisory Group (IEAG) in New Zealand which provided a further

opportunity to discuss complex aspects of the eradication operation. The outcomes of the Mouse Eradication Workshop and the IEAG meeting contribute to ongoing project planning. These outcomes were incorporated in Keith’s presentation at the 31st Vertebrate Pest Conference held in Monterey California, in early March. **Keith writes more about the outcomes of these workshops and the conference on page 8.**

One of the more pressing tasks that the MFM Project team has been focused on recently is the planning and procurement for the relief voyage to Marion Island. The *S.A. Agulhas II* departed from Cape Town for Marion on the 15th April and the MFM Project Team has been planning fieldwork protocols, liaising with partner universities, and procuring the necessary supplies for the year on the island. To conduct the needed fieldwork at Marion Island, the project has appointed a new overwintering Research Assistant, Monique van Bers, who will join the M81 Overwintering Team, taking over from Camilla Smyth (M80 Research Assistant). Monique will be spending the next 13 months at Marion conducting important research that will feed into the knowledge base for the mouse eradication project planned for the island. **Read more about Monique and MFM Project’s plans for the 2024/2025 year on Marion Island on page 6.**

The MFM Project’s *Sponsor-a-Hectare* initiative has reached an important milestone by raising a quarter of its 30 million Rands target. The initiative has been supported by donors from 23 countries across the globe, including Sweden, Hong Kong, Panama and the Falkland Islands. Over 1 000 South Africans have supported the MFM Project, each donating at least R 1 000 towards the eradication. A South African donor has recently increased his support of the project to R 228 000! The team continues to identify and investigate mechanisms to secure the funding required to carry out this critical island restoration



project. [Read more about this milestone here.](#)

The MFM Project has a great opportunity to grow support for the project through fundraising and awareness campaigns. We recently received the news that the short promotional video about the MFM Project 'Saving Marion Island's Seabirds-The Conservation Campaign for Marion Island' is a finalist in the International Travel Film Festival in the documentary category. The film was produced by Culture Communications Collective, a UK based media agency. It features narration by Freshly Ground's Zolani Mahola and striking visuals courtesy of Marion Island researchers, Otto Whitehead, Stefan Schoombie, Janine Schoombie, Ben Dilley and David Hedding. The short film can be viewed [here](#).

There are many exciting things on the horizon for the MFM Project. We are thrilled to announce that the once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity to visit South Africa's Southern Ocean territory as part of BirdLife South Africa's *Flock to Marion* voyage will become a twice-in-a-lifetime opportunity as BirdLife South Africa has announced a 'Flock to Marion AGAIN! 2025' scheduled to set sail in early 2025. In 2022, the MFM Project was able to raise awareness and funding for the MFM Project through 'Flock to Marion' and we hope to build on this awareness in 2025. Encountering majestic Wandering Albatrosses in their natural habitat is an unforgettable and life-altering experience that we hope we can share with many of our supporters next January. **More information about joining 'Flock to Marion AGAIN! 2025'** can be found on the BirdLife South Africa website and on the *Flock to Marion AGAIN! 2025* [Facebook Group](#).

Robyn Adams
(MFM Communications Officer and Project Assistant)

HERE WE GO AGAIN!
A twice-in-a-lifetime voyage to the remote Southern Ocean

24 - 31 January 2025

Flock
The BirdLife South Africa Expedition to our Southern Ocean Islands
to Marion AGAIN! 2025

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings

FULL DETAILS TO BE ANNOUNCED SOON.

Below: Flock to Marion 2022 passengers show their support for the MFM Project. Photo: Michael Mason



We're Flocking to Marion... AGAIN!

BirdLife South Africa is Flocking to Marion once again! Get out your permanent marker and block off 24–31 January 2025.

Don't forget to tell your fellow 'Flockers' too, so they won't miss the boat as it sets sail for the glorious Southern Ocean in 10 months' time.

Booking for this incredible voyage is now open, and can be done by contacting the MSC Cruises call centre on +27 11 844 6073, or via the online booking portal at <https://msccruises.co.za/>.

View of the Marion Island research base taken from the S.A Agulhas II. Photo: Anton Wolfaardt



OUT OF OFFICE: at Marion Island

The MFM Project Manager and new MFM Project overwintering team member head to Marion Island as part of the annual relief voyage.

Every year around April-May, South Africa's research and supply vessel, the S.A. Agulhas II, makes its annual relief (takeover) voyage to sub-Antarctic Marion Island. The aim of the voyage is to relieve the overwintering team who have been living on the island for the previous year and resupply the island's research station. This month-long voyage is an important part of South African

sub-Antarctic researchers' calendars as it provides a valuable opportunity to conduct critical research on the island and to train and ensure knowledge exchange between outgoing and new incoming overwintering researchers.

This year, the MFM Project will once again be participating in the takeover voyage,



Above: Monique van Bers (left) and Anton Wolfaardt wait at East Pier to board the S.A Agulhas II for the annual relief voyage. Photo: Leigh Wolfaardt

with a new face joining the overwintering team. The MFM Project is excited to welcome Monique van Bers to the team as the MFM Project Research Assistant for the 2024/2025 season. Monique will be taking over from Camilla Smyth (2023/2024 Research Assistant) and will spend the next 13 months living and working on Marion Island. Dr Anton Wolfaardt (MFM Project Manager) will be joining Monique on the takeover voyage to oversee the smooth transition between the MFM Project Research Assistants and ensure that Monique is well-versed in the fieldwork protocols to be employed on Marion Island.



Above: Loading the S.A Agulhas II at East Pier in Cape Town. Photo: Robyn Adams

On why she is looking forward to going to Marion Island, Monique writes: "This has always been a dream of mine since I first heard about it in high school. I am excited because I will be actively involved in conservation efforts and helping to preserve the native species. I am also looking forward to the mental challenge of dealing with the unpredictable weather conditions on this remote island."

Monique, who completed her BSc Honours degree at the University of Pretoria, has spent considerable time conducting fieldwork in Kwa-Zulu-Natal and Lesotho and is excited to work in a very different environment. She writes "I am looking forward to the beautiful scenery. I am also thrilled to be part of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to conduct significant and groundbreaking research on Marion Island. But mostly, I can't wait to see the seals and penguins on the beaches, the killer whales in the bay, and the albatrosses dancing for their life-long partners."

We wish Monique all the very best for the year ahead. We firmly believe that this experience will be a life-changing one.

Robyn Adams

Communications Officer and Project Assistant



Planning for success:

The Mouse-Free Marion Project brings together experts at a Mouse-Eradication Workshop.

In November 2023, the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project initiated and co-organised a Mouse Eradication Workshop in Palmerston North, New Zealand. The workshop followed in the wake of the decision, made in late August 2023, that the MFM Project team would defer the operational year for the aerial baiting on Marion Island.

This decision was prompted by news that the mouse eradication project on Midway Atoll, in the North Pacific Ocean, had been unsuccessful. This followed on from the previous failure of the mouse eradication project on Gough Island, in the South Atlantic. On the face of it, these two islands had almost nothing in common, except that on both islands invasive house mice had in recent years starting preying upon seabirds, especially albatrosses.

What gave us cause for concern was that Marion Island is the third island where this behaviour has been documented. Until

these two eradication failures, mouse eradication projects in the previous 15 or so years since 2006 had mostly been successful, as indicated in Figure 1.

In deferring our operational year, we sought to learn more about the possible reasons for the failure of these two recent mouse eradications, and try to understand what factors might have played a part in the outcomes. We considered that both projects had been thoroughly planned and executed following generally agreed upon best practice principles for this work. So, we wondered if there were any identifiable reasons for the failures that we could learn from. At first glance, the only obvious aspect in common was that mice had turned to attacking seabirds as a means of obtaining the protein they needed to survive, especially as – at least on Marion – the invertebrate fauna upon which they had largely survived, had declined significantly in abundance.

To start the learning process, the MFM Project team initiated and co-organised a Mouse Eradication Workshop and invited some 30 experienced eradication practitioners from around the world to participate. The workshop was held in Palmerston North, New Zealand, in November 2023 with 24 people eventually able to participate, either on-line or in-person.

The purpose of the workshop was to achieve three goals:

1. A clear direction for trials and research to improve understanding of what went wrong.
2. Summarise information-gathering and mitigation actions to inform upcoming mouse eradications.
3. Given what we know now - what do we do next?

Over the course of three days, discussions revolved around several hypotheses that may have contributed to eradication failure on Midway and Gough. These centred around possible reasons as to why:

- a) mice could not eat bait (competition with non-target consumers, insufficient bait available/low encounter rates,

- what is the minimum time that bait must be available),
- b) mice would not eat bait (other more attractive natural food available, lacking in palatability, does the behaviour of mice surviving a first application change by the time of a second application when more bait would be available), and;
- c) whether there is an issue with toxicity (does toxin concentration degrade more than we think, should bait targeting mice use a higher concentration of toxin than bait targeting rats?).

These questions were all the more confounding given that the same techniques and baits had been used successfully in many mouse eradication projects on islands in recent decades, so it was important to try and identify what had changed, and whether the Midway and Gough failures were just coincidence, or whether new factors had emerged that we did not yet understand.

One topic of conversation was about whether some mice that preyed upon seabirds were habituated to seeking protein as a primary dietary source, and were perhaps not all were seeking out carbohydrate-based bait pellets. This led to discussions with bait manufacturers about whether the bait formulation can be altered to incorporate a protein component, and what implications this might have for both bait pellet characteristics (hardness, longevity, palatability) and the need for bait registration requirements.

Following shortly after the Mouse Eradication Workshop, MFM Project Manager, Anton Wolfaardt and Operations Manager, Keith Springer, attended a meeting of the

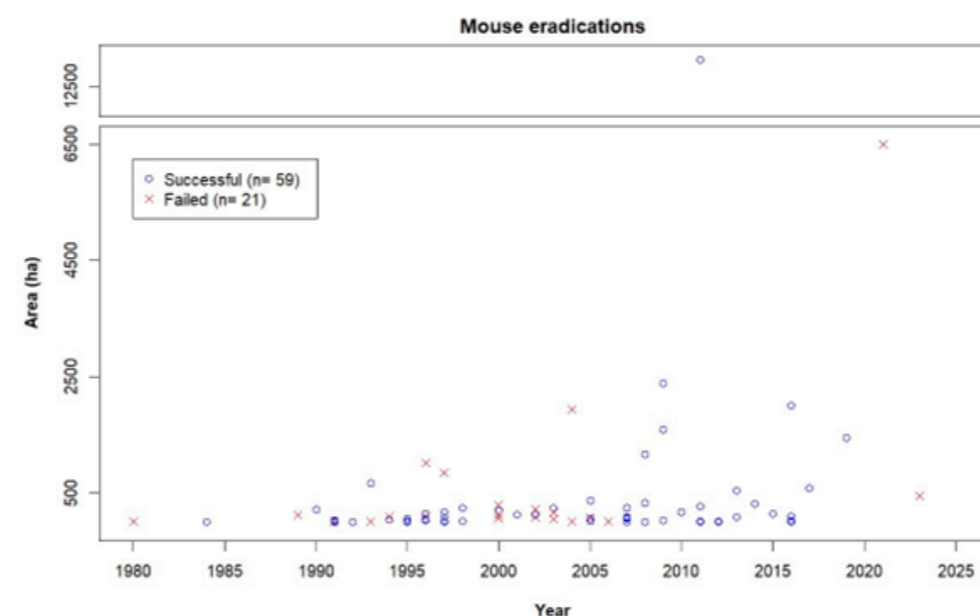


Figure 1 – Mouse eradication projects 1980 to 2023 (Araceli Samaniego)

Island Eradication Advisory Group (IEAG) in Invercargill, New Zealand.

The IEAG is a group of experienced eradication practitioners from the New Zealand Department of Conservation. Whereas their primary function is to provide technical advice and support for island eradications in New

Zealand, they will also, upon request, provide similar technical advice to eradication projects from outside New Zealand that seek their support, which the MFM Project had requested.

As many of the IEAG members had also attended the Mouse Eradication Workshop the previous week, fruitful discussions were held specifically about the MFM Project and the current baiting strategy considered, in light of the discussions around hypotheses held during the prior week. As a result of these discussions, the IEAG recommended inter alia that the MFM Project revisit the original project's Feasibility Study, conducted in 2015, and also prepare a Research Plan to consider what additional trials might be warranted, especially informed by the mouse eradication failures on Gough and Midway and subsequent hypotheses formed around these.

These initiatives are now underway, and following a call for Expressions of Interest, two international specialists with extensive eradication experience have been engaged to deliver these two documents.

Given that the issue of failed mouse eradications has global implications, a presentation was delivered at the 2024 Vertebrate Pest Conference in Monterey



Above: Keith Springer presenting at the Vertebrate Pest Conference, Monterey California, March 2024

California, in March 2024. The presentation focused on outlining the hypotheses discussed at the workshop and concentrated on some of the questions that were raised from those discussions, together with how to go about addressing them.

In pausing our operational planning to accommodate the Mouse Eradication Workshop and now the commencement of a Research Plan and Feasibility Study review, it became clear that we must also defer our planned operational year. This will allow us to design and implement the trials recommended in the Research Plan and to incorporate the results of those trials into our eradication strategy and operational planning. This approach is one that we believe will give us the best chance of delivering a successful mouse eradication on Marion Island, an opportunity that we consider will only be available once in the next few decades. Although the operational year has been deferred, planning work that is required to secure regulatory approvals and the critical work of raising the requisite funds are proceeding apace.

Keith Springer
Mouse-Free Marion Project Operations Manager





From left: John Cooper, MFM News Correspondent, Robyn Adams, MFM Communications Officer, Peter Harrison, Shirley Metz, Sue Tonin, MFM Assistant Project Manager, and Guy Preston, Vice-Chair, MFM Non-Profit Company; photograph by Eleanor Weideman



Left: Peter Harrison, Reason Nyengera, BirdLife South Africa's Albatross Task Force Project Manager and Shirley Metz with a framed photograph of a Wandering Albatross in flight that Peter had signed for BirdLife South Africa during the Flock to Marion 2022 voyage; photograph by John Cooper



Right: John Cooper, MFM Project News Correspondent, Peter Harrison and Shirley Metz in the African Penguin Boardroom with books donated by the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa; photograph by Robyn Adams

Patron Peter Harrison MBE visits the Mouse-Free Marion Project's Cape Town office

The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project took the opportunity to invite Peter Harrison MBE and his partner Shirley Metz during their visit to Cape Town late last month for afternoon tea at BirdLife South Africa's recently opened Cape Town headquarters in Claremont. The project has an office in the renovated Victorian house which serves as a meeting place for its widely scattered team. Peter is one of the project's six international Patrons and is the first to visit us "at home". He will be well known to many of the supporters of the MFM Project as a seabirder extraordinaire through his seabird identification books and his presence as a much-appreciated lecturer and guide aboard the Flock to

Marion 2022 voyage, and on the two previous Flocks at Sea voyages. Following introductions to both the MFM Project and BirdLife South Africa Seabird Conservation Programme staff present, Peter and Shirley were taken on a tour of the building where they admired the many donated artworks that fill the corridor walls and rooms, including the albatross posters that decorate the project's own office. We then moved to the comfortable lounge for tea and carrot cake, allowing everyone to become better acquainted and discuss the project (and seabird conservation in general) with the MFM Project's first-appointed Patron. Peter confirmed his support for the MFM Project and, based on

his first-hand experience of the recovery of South Georgia after its rodents were eradicated, he expected a similar recovery on Marion Island after its mice are gone. He also told us that he and his company, Apex Expeditions, are planning a trip to Taiwan in the next year or two, in an endeavour to see the Critically Endangered Chinese Crested Tern, one of the world's rarest seabirds with an adult population of not more than 50 individuals, and the only one of the 435 species he is yet to see!

The visit concluded in the boardroom (named after the Endangered African Penguin) where Peter and Shirley were presented with three books about Marion and Prince Edward Islands that had been kindly donated by their publisher, the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa. The project's News Correspondent, John Cooper, then took the opportunity to request Peter

to sign his personal copy of Peter's substantially revised second edition of his seabird identification guide, which brought back good memories of their visit together to both islands way back in April 1983. The MFM Project Team is most grateful to Peter and Shirley for giving up their last afternoon in Cape Town to visit us, and for all they are doing "behind the scenes" to help raise the essential funds required to eradicate Marion's House Mice that continue to attack and kill its beleaguered albatrosses and petrels.

With thanks to Ria Olivier, Principal Investigator, Antarctic Legacy of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, for the donated books.

John Cooper
News Correspondent, Mouse-Free Marion Project



Grey-headed Albatross, photo: Ben Dilley

Get involved and help make a Mouse-Free Marion possible!

- For more information on the Project, visit our website at mousefreemarion.org or contact us at: info@mousefreemarion.org
- To make a gift of any amount or support the project by sponsoring a hectare (or more) visit our website or contact: donations@mousefreemarion.org
- Stay up to date: follow us on Facebook (Mouse-Free Marion) and Instagram (@mousefreemarion) or sign up on our website to receive project news alerts

Cover Photo: Wandering Albatrosses, photo: Danielle Keys

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™

The Mouse-Free Marion Project



forestry, fisheries
& the environment

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

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a registered non-profit company (No. 2020/922433/08) in South Africa, established to eradicate invasive albatross-killing mice on Marion Island in the Southern Ocean. The project was initiated by BirdLife South Africa and the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment. Upon successful completion, the project will restore the critical breeding habitat of over two million seabirds, many globally threatened, and improve the island's resilience to a warming climate. For more information or to support the project please visit mousefreemarion.org