



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



# QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

*Saving Marion Island's Seabirds:  
The Mouse-Free Marion Project*



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Welcome to the 14<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion Project* Quarterly Newsletter.

It's hard to believe how quickly 2025 is flying by! Just last month, we celebrated the Winter Solstice in the Southern Hemisphere on 21 June – a significant occasion for those working in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions. Known as Midwinter, it is widely celebrated at research stations across the region. This year, teams overwintering at South Africa's three bases in Antarctica and on Marion and Gough Islands held their traditional festivities, while the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa brought together members of the mainland South African Antarctic and islands community for a celebration in Franschoek.

Midwinter offers a meaningful moment to reflect on the progress made so far this year and to plan for what's ahead. As we enter the second half of the year, we look back on the important strides the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project* team has made in recent months – progress that brings us closer to securing a healthy, predator-free future for Marion Island.

In April and May, several MFM Project team members participated in the annual relief voyage to Marion Island. Our team carried out vital field work that is designed to help inform and fine-tune the eradication plan for the island's invasive House Mice. The team participating in the relief voyage included Keith Springer (MFM Project Operations Manager), Roelf Daling and Vonica Perold (overwintering MFM Project Field Assistants), Josh Kemp (Research Supervisor) and Otto Whitehead (Field Assistant/Cinematographer). They were joined by outgoing MFM Project Field Assistant, Monique van Bers). In this issue of the MFM Quarterly Newsletter, Keith Springer shares insights into their

month-long trip, highlighting key research activities that will help ensure a rodent-free Marion Island. Read more about the team's work on Marion on page 6.

Vonica Perold and Roelf Daling joined the MFM Project team in April as overwintering Field Assistants and will spend the 2025-26 period on the island as part of the 82<sup>nd</sup> overwintering team (M82). The pair have taken over from Monique van Bers, who has spent the last year on the island and has now returned home to mainland South Africa. Since the *S.A. Agulhas II* left the island for South Africa in May, the M82 team has been on their own at the island. The team members have continued exploring the island and are acquiring first-hand experience of all that this remarkable island has to offer. In this issue of the newsletter, Roelf shares more about what that first month on the island was like for him. Read more on page 12.

While our team on Marion Island has been making progress on the research required to ensure a successful eradication operation, the rest of the MFM Project team has been focused on other critical tasks, including raising the necessary funds to get the operation off the ground. In May, Anton Wolfaardt and Guy Preston travelled to Geneva, Switzerland, to participate in a special fundraising event expertly organised by Ms Britta Carpigo and her team at Mosaic Events. Dr Frederik Paulsen, a major supporter of the MFM Project and one of the Directors of the MFM Non-Profit Company, initiated, supported and co-hosted the event along with Caroline Scheufele (of the Swiss luxury watch and jewellery house, Chopard) and the Swiss Polar Foundation. The gala dinner titled "Saving Marion Island's Magical Seabirds" was well attended by over 160 people, including by the South African

Right above: The MFM Marion Island takeover team. Back from left: Otto Whitehead, Josh Kemp, Keith Springer, Vonica Perold and Roelf Daling. Photo by Monique van Bers (front).

Right below: Dr Anton Wolfaardt and Dr Frederik Paulsen after the event at the offices of Ferring International in Saint-Prex, Switzerland.



Ambassadors to Italy and Switzerland: Nosipho Jezile (MFM NPC Board Member) and Phaswana Moloto, respectively. Dr Paul Dalmeyer (who serves as an alternate for MFM NPC Board member, Dr Frederik Paulsen) also attended the event. Professor Tony Martin, who led the successful rodent eradication on South Georgia, spoke to the feasibility and the exceptional value of such initiatives. The gala dinner proved to be exceptionally successful and marked important progress towards our fundraising goal.

On 19 June, albatross enthusiasts around the world celebrated World Albatross Day (WAD) 2025, recognising the vital work being done for albatross conservation. The day marks the date in 2001 when the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) was signed. This year, ACAP designated the theme of WAD as "Effects of disease" to highlight the threats albatrosses are facing due to the current spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza across many Southern Ocean islands. The MFM Project celebrated the day by running a matching donations campaign throughout June. Thanks to two

The M82 Overwintering team on Marion Island celebrated Midwinter (right) as well as World Albatross Day 2025 (below).

generous matching donors, Charlie Pascoe and Cape Town Pelagics, we were able to match donations up to R110 000. Read more about the successful matching donation campaign on page 16.

Much like the albatross, the MFM Project team are more marathon runners than sprinters, a quality that will serve us well as we head into what promises to be an equally busy second half of the year. We're well-prepared for the challenges ahead and remain committed to advancing this vital endeavour.

**Robyn Adams, Communications Officer and Project Assistant**



# *Field Research on Marion Island: An update on the work completed during the 2025 relief voyage to the island*

Words and photographs by Keith Springer



Above: The team walking to their study site. Mouse-free Prince Edward Island in the distance.

Each year the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) undertakes a relief voyage to Marion Island, a South African Special Nature Reserve some 2,200 km south-east of Cape Town.

The annual voyage provides the only opportunity for scientific and maintenance staff to travel to the island. The annual over-wintering team is also relieved by a new team during the voyage.

Prior to the 2025 voyage, the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project* had commissioned a Research Plan to identify research needs that would inform the mouse eradication design and to outline trial methodology. Some of these trials were scheduled for 2025 and the annual relief voyage provided the only opportunity to conduct them.

Accordingly, we set about organising a group to participate in the voyage and conduct the first trials outlined in the Research Plan. Joining the team for the voyage south were the two newly-recruited

Field Assistants for the MFM Project – Roelf Daling and Vonica Perold; Josh Kemp, recruited to oversee the trial implementation; Otto Whitehead, Field Assistant/Cinematographer; and Keith Springer, MFM Project Operations Manager.

After completing the various voyage formalities, we boarded South Africa's modern polar resupply and research ship, the *RV S.A. Agulhas II* late on 17 April and departed Cape Town the following afternoon. Steaming south east in moderate sea conditions, we reached Marion Island five days later. There, weather conditions had deteriorated, so although we could see the base under overcast skies, it was too windy to be flown ashore by helicopter.

The following morning brought more of the same, but a lull in the wind later in the day saw everyone flown ashore to greet the welcoming over-wintering team members who were on the verge of completing their year on the island. Among them was Monique Van Bers, the 2024-25 MFM

Project Field Assistant, who joined the rest of the team to conduct the planned trials.

While waiting for our trial equipment and rodenticide bait to be flown ashore, Josh and Keith set off to the north to reconnoitre for a suitable site for a nine-hectare baiting trial. Once a site was found, behind Sealer's Beach and just south of Long Ridge, the next few days were spent marking out a grid over the 300 x 300 metre trial site.

The idea for this trial was to apply rodenticide bait over the nine hectares and then conduct intensive monitoring of mouse activity and bait uptake within a one-hectare area in the centre of the plot. A week after we arrived at Marion, our bait and equipment were flown ashore, enabling us to complete setting up the trial site with tracking tunnels and trail cameras. Following some practice at the hand-broadcasting bait technique conducted in the helicopter hangar (Monique won the 'Most Elegant Technique Award!'), we planned to wait out some forecast bad weather, and then start the baiting of the trial site.

Although it was snowing the following morning, which did not bode well, we put our faith in the weather forecast for it to clear in the afternoon, and we set off for the trial site mid-morning. The weather forecast was correct, so soon after midday we lined ourselves up along the start of the grid, bait buckets in hand, and set off in unison, advancing to a new throwing point every 25 metres, and spreading 750 g of bait from each point.

Following the bait distribution, we visited the trial site each day for seven days. We changed inked cards in the previously set tracking tunnels daily (the cardboard cards contain an ink patch in the centre, so that animals running through the tunnel cross the ink patch and leave their prints on the farther side of the card), monitored how much bait was left in each of the 26 bait monitoring plots (each 20 m<sup>2</sup>) and assessed the condition of the remaining bait. Every second day we changed the storage cards in the trail cameras.

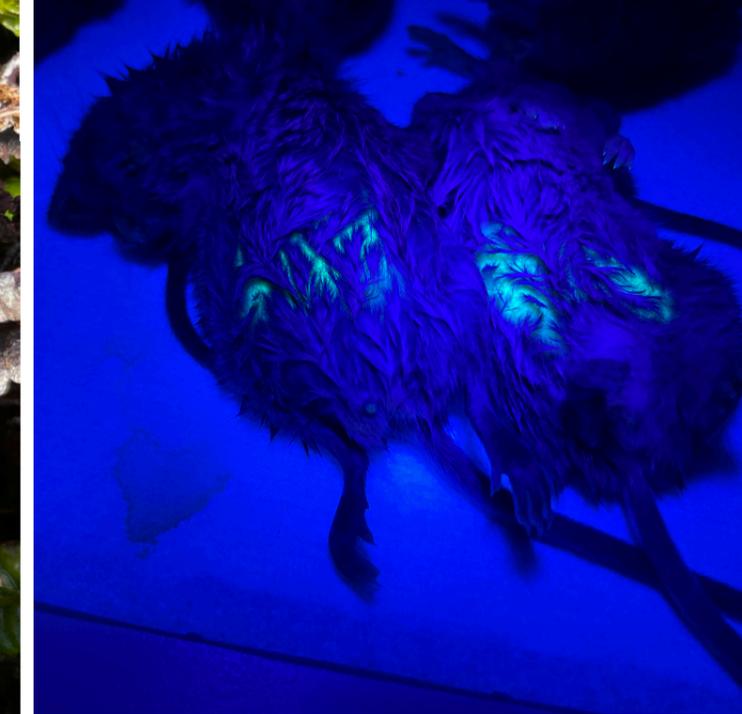
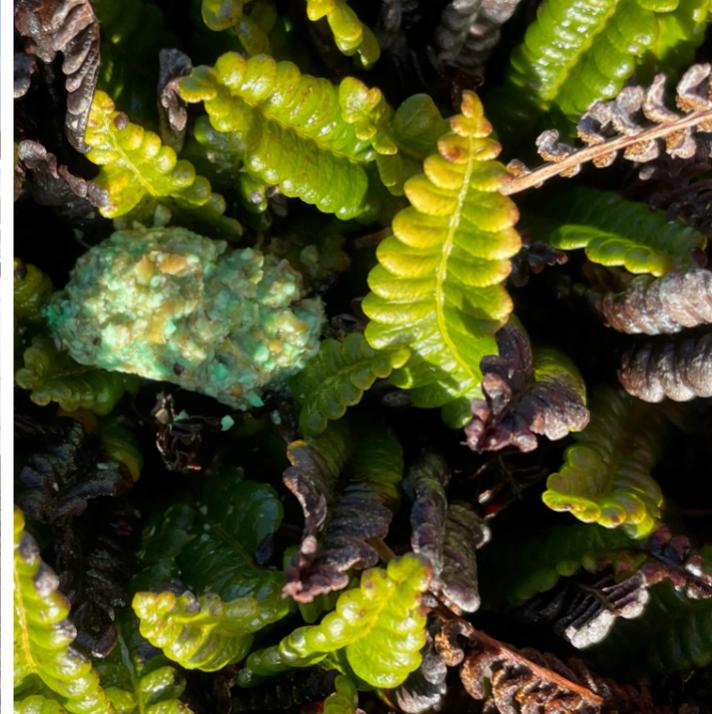
The monitoring enabled us to assess the level of mouse activity after the bait was spread. Bait uptake was high on the first night and dropped rapidly thereafter, although mouse activity never dropped to zero throughout the course of the trial. We attributed this to mice coming in from outside the trial area



*Above: A Skua flies above Josh Kemp as he sets up a study site with trail cameras to monitor mouse activity.*

*Right: Ink cards installed in tracking tunnels were also used to monitor mouse activity at the bait monitoring plots.*





Above left: A rodenticide bait pellet among Marion Island's vegetation.

Above right: The bait pellets are treated with a biomarker that fluoresces under UV light, this allows the team on the island to confirm that trapped mice had eaten bait.



Above: The team suiting up to begin hand sowing bait across their study site.  
Left: The team working in possibly the most picturesque environment.

To test whether all mice in the trial area were eating the bait, snap traps were set within the core hectare. Because the bait contained a biomarker that fluoresces under UV light, we were able to determine that all trapped mice had indeed been eating the bait.

boundary, although they had to cross at least 100 metres of baited ground to reach the core hectare. This is entirely feasible, because as mice died from consuming the toxic bait, their territories were available for exploitation by other mice from outside the trial area. Because death from the toxin can take several days, incoming mice are still able to travel across the landscape for a period of time.

After seven days of monitoring the trial plot, we rebaited the area. This time, we used a mixture of standard sized pellets, and a smaller bait designed specifically for mice. Our main interest here was to determine whether the small pellets (they are 5.5 mm in diameter, compared to 10 mm diameter for the standard bait) would retain their form in the wet, windy conditions experienced on Marion Island, and whether they would be more rapidly degraded by weathering and invertebrate activity.

As with the first period, we visited the trial site daily, a trip that was about an hour's walk from the base each way. The weather gave us constant variation – rain, hail showers, snowfalls, sunshine, rainbows and nearly always, the wind. We determined that the 5.5 mm bait pellets were not consumed rapidly by insects, and that although they became wet through sooner than did the larger standard pellets, they didn't disintegrate under weathering conditions experienced over the seven days of monitoring. Seven days is expected to be a sufficient time period for foraging mice to encounter and consume bait, so knowing that most pellets largely maintained their integrity was useful to know, as very few eradication operations have used this particular product. These results warrant further testing of this bait pellet size, to see how they handle being spread through a bait bucket spinner slung beneath a helicopter. We saw no evidence of birds being interested in bait pellets.

After the second seven-day monitoring period, our time on the island was nearly up. We had hoped to conduct similar, but smaller trials at about 760 metres above

sea level, in the polar desert habitat, but the delay in getting materials ashore meant that this wasn't possible. A formal ceremony to hand over the running of the base and the science programmes from the outgoing team (M81) to the incoming team (M82) was held, and a couple of days later we were flown back to the ship, ready to commence the voyage back to Durban, our port of arrival.

Although we couldn't complete our full work programme, we were able to establish a good start on implementing the trials outlined in the Research Plan. The results from the 2025 trials will inform the design for a larger, aerial-based trial that we want to undertake in 2027.

As well as conducting the trial throughout the relief period, team members also contributed to the resupply of field huts around the island, unloaded and sorted inbound and outbound cargo, undertook video monitoring of mouse attacks on albatross chicks at Grey-Headed Albatross Ridge and Monique inducted Von and Roelf into the work programme tasks they will undertake in the year ahead. ■



View from the top of Delta Kop with the tail end of a weather system that had passed.



Words and photographs by Roelf Daling, MFM Field Assistant on Marion Island

# My first month on Marion Island in one word...

Summarising one of the most incredible months of my life in a short article is like trying to fit a whole ocean into a teacup. But hey, I'll give it my best shot! I'll start by summarising it in only one word: *'Challenging'*.

Now, when someone says "challenging," it's like a trigger for pity. We automatically think something must be wrong and rush to offer our support. I totally get that it comes from a place of compassion, but here's the thing: we have this idea that life should be a breeze, and if it's not, there must be something wrong. Or let me put it this way: we tend to believe that when something's tough, it's not fun.

Well, let me tell you, the best experiences don't come from walking on eggshells and avoiding challenges. And I can assure you that when I summarise my first month on Marion Island as "challenging," it was every bit as enjoyable as it was tough!

In fact, that's why I decided to come here in the first place. I knew that the work would involve walking long distances, over rough terrain, carrying heavy packs, and never eating any fresh food. I knew that the island's remoteness would make any crisis feel even more dire, and that help would be over 2000 km away. But there was something else I knew, something so special, so special that you could bet your life on it. Are you ready for it?

**Every challenge carries within it the seed for positive change.**

Let me explain.

The first part. A challenge is anything that forces you to step outside your comfort zone, whether it's physically, mentally, or emotionally.

The second part. A seed is potential. It's like a match that can burn down a thousand trees. A seed also has specific conditions that need to be met for it to activate and release its potential. But once activated, nurtured,

Katedraal field hut during a snowfall.



and cultivated, it can bring about profound change in the world.

Every time you face a challenge, there are only three possible outcomes: you win, you lose, or you draw.

Losing can be easy. You just give up, feel defeated, and suffer the consequences. It's the worst feeling ever. Drawing is when you pass the burden onto someone else, and you don't have to deal with the consequences, but you also don't learn anything. Avoiding challenges is also a form of losing. But the real gold lies in the winning part, overcoming difficulties. You have to understand that these seeds only exist inside challenges, nowhere else. You

can't grow without facing things that challenge you, overcoming yourself and then germinating the seeds. That's why I'm here. Marion has given me multiple challenges and multiple chances to win, grow, and cultivate a habit to seek and conquer discomfort. It's been a journey of self-improvement whilst contributing to important conservation work that needs to be done.

The most enjoyable times have been after we've accomplished a major goal. Breathtaking views have only opened up to me after spending long hours in horrible weather. Deep relaxation and satisfaction only come after pushing hard to get the work done, no matter how you feel in the moment.

For instance, Marion is a sub-Antarctic island, and I knew it would be cold. Unlike most other science projects on Marion, our work requires us to spend significant time at higher altitudes in sub-alpine environments, and I lacked any alpine experience. It became particularly challenging when I began performing the first fine-motor-skill work in the mountains. The problem is, thick gloves aren't suitable for this work, so your fingers quickly go numb and throb with pain from the cold. It was a tough test, pushing me to my limits. However, I remembered about the seeds and how I could use them to become stronger and the hut in the polar desert has already become one of my favourite places on the island.

So, here's to always embracing challenges as stepping stones to growth and self-discovery, rather than obstacles. Let us not be deterred from pushing ourselves, finding strength within, and creating a fulfilling life. We should do so not only to discover our true selves but also to inspire others to do the same.

This way we can together bring about the much-needed positive change in this world. ■

Vonica Perold setting up multiple trail cameras, tracking tunnels and plot markers in preparation for a baiting trial.



*Roelf is no stranger to living and working on islands. He has previously spent two years working on Gough Island. He speaks about his time on Gough and the importance of eradicating invasive predators to protect native species in a video directed by Otto Whitehead. [CLICK HERE](#) to watch.*

# THANK YOU!

## That's Game, Set, Match!

A huge thank you to everyone who supported our World Albatross Day matching donations campaign this June!

Thanks to your incredible generosity, we've officially reached the cap on our matching funds!



## Game, set and matched! June's Double your Donation Campaign reaches its 220-ha target in record time

*The Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project* is continually looking for new and exciting ways to raise the necessary funds required to eradicate Marion Island's albatross-killing mice. By way of online committee meetings, WhatsApp messaging and face-to-face conversations fund-raising ideas are regularly discussed by the project team and, if adopted, implemented.

In January this year the whole project team went to sea on the second Flock to Marion voyage, raising 3.7 million Rands by holding two auctions and running a dawn-to-dusk Sponsor a Hectare desk over the five full days of the trip. We followed up this success with entering a 27-strong Mouse-Free Marion Cycling Team into the world's largest timed bike race around the Cape Peninsula, surpassing the team's R109 000 target and ending up sponsoring 131 hectares.

Last year, Project Manager, Anton Wolfaardt, took on an arduous mountain trail run and raised funds via an online appeal that sponsored 103 ha for the project.

The MFM Project team is pleased to announce that its latest fund-raising effort has been an undoubted success, like those that have gone before. World Albatross Day takes place every year on 19

June. To mark the day, commencing on 1 June and running for as long as funds lasted, all donations (including hectare sponsorships) received during the month were doubled through the generous support of Charlie Pascoe, a former Marion Island over-winterer (M43, 1986/87) now residing in Australia, and the seabird guiding company Cape Town Pelagics.

As early as 13 June, 31 donors had matched the sums contributed by Charlie Pascoe



*Right: Mark Tasker undertaking pre-eradication research at South Georgia. Photograph: Anton Wolfaardt.*

**This World Albatross Day 2025, help us in our mission to restore Marion Island's ecosystem and its remarkable biodiversity.**

Your support brings us closer to realising a future where albatrosses can thrive at Marion Island.

**DONATE** ❤️



© Stefan Schoombie

and Cape Town Pelagics, resulting in 220 hectares being sponsored. The campaign got off to a quick start with five hectares donated on day one. The largest donation of 25 ha was made by Scotland's Mark Tasker; he has thus been credited with 50 ha. This adds to the 25 ha he previously sponsored in 2021, moving him, with a new total of 75 ha, into the "Giant Petrel" category on the MFM Honour Roll.

The second-largest donation, of 12 ha, came from Ethan Shapiro of Create Change Realty, Boulder, Colorado, USA. His website says "We donate 50% of our company

profits to 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations and support other businesses doing similar work. Create Change Realty helps home buyers and sellers complete their real estate transactions in the least amount of time with the least amount of stress possible, generating thousands of dollars to support non-profits in the process." MFM Project supporter Holly Parsons had nominated the MFM Project to Ethan Shapiro, when making her own real estate transaction. Ethan had previously sponsored 15 ha, so his matched 24 ha brings his overall total to 39 ha, placing him in the honour roll's "Grey Petrel" category.

What's next? The MFM Project will have a fund-raising stand at the Global Birdfair in the UK this month. We are hoping to meet some generous sponsors!

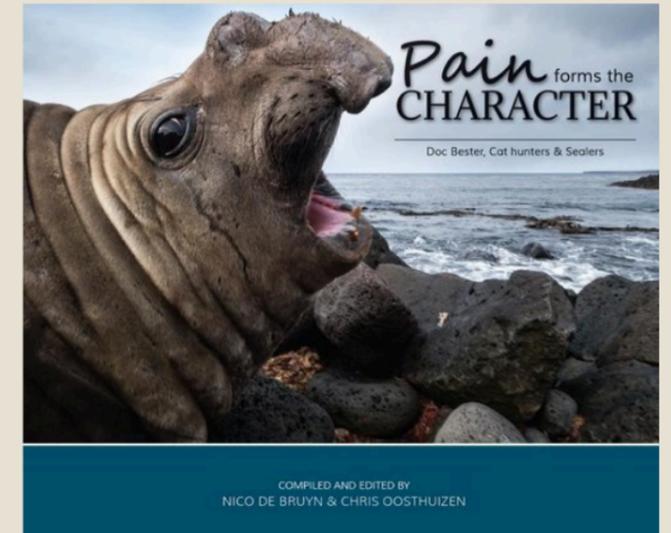
Thank you to everyone, especially Charlie Pascoe and Cape Town Pelagics, who supported our World Albatross Day matching donations campaign. Your incredible generosity ensured that we reached our target of matching funds in record time. Please continue to support us. Every hectare sponsored and donation received takes us one step closer to realising a mouse-free Marion Island.

*John Cooper, News Correspondent, Mouse-Free Marion Project*

# "PAIN FORMS THE CHARACTER"

NOW AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE

**Pain forms the Character: Doc Bester, Cat hunters & Sealers,** journeys through four decades of extraordinary wilderness adventure, tribulations and delights. Through first-hand accounts, it captures the nostalgia, and blood, sweat and tears of the "cat hunters" and "sealers" of Marion Island.



*Thanks to Prof. Nico de Bruyn and the Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme (MIMMP), this incredible book is now available to purchase directly from the MFM Project, with 75% of the proceeds going towards the restoration of Marion Island!*

**Books are only R500 each (excluding shipping).  
Contact us at [info@mousefreemarion.org](mailto:info@mousefreemarion.org) to purchase your copy**



Photo: Michelle Risi



*The base on Marion Island, photograph: Otto Whitehead*

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

- For more information on the Project, visit our website at [mousefreemarion.org](https://mousefreemarion.org) or contact us at: [info@mousefreemarion.org](mailto: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](mailto: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 Albatross; photograph: Otto Whitehead*

# 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](https://mousefreemarion.org)*