

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA NEWS



saving
MARION ISLAND'S
seabirds

OTTO WHITEHEAD

The Mouse-Free Marion Project

Marion Island, South Africa's only Special Nature Reserve, lies in the stormy Southern Ocean, about 2000 kilometres south-east of Cape Town. It is one of the world's most important seabird breeding sites, home to globally significant populations of albatrosses, petrels and penguins. Yet for more than two centuries, the island's ecosystem has been disrupted by an unwelcome intruder: the house mouse.

Accidentally introduced by sealers in the early 19th century, these adaptable and hardy invasive rodents have

ABOVE One of the Mouse-Free Marion Project's researchers walks past a Wandering Albatross chick on Marion Island.

survived Marion's harsh sub-Antarctic climate. Recently they have begun to attack and kill seabird chicks, and even adult albatrosses, inflicting gruesome and fatal wounds that have shocked scientists and conservationists. Without intervention, many of the island's seabird populations could disappear.

The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project, a partnership between the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and BirdLife South Africa, aims to eradicate the mice and restore the island's ecology and seabird populations. This ambitious, complex conservation initiative, the largest of its kind ever undertaken, represents a bold effort to safeguard one of the planet's great natural treasures.

Field work on a large scale

The 2025 field season on Marion marked an important milestone in the project's preparation phase: trials on an increased scale (four to nine hectares, in both polar desert and coastal habitats) using the rodenticide bait planned for the operation.

These trials confirmed that the bait is highly palatable and revealed valuable insights into seasonal variation in mouse numbers, behaviour and activity – information that is critical to refine the design of the full-scale operation. The field team also made progress in assessing and monitoring spatial and temporal variations in the abundance of mice across the island.

We are now planning an aerial baiting trial that is scheduled for 2027 and will



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cover 975 hectares. The team will use this trial to test every component of the eradication strategy, from helicopter operations and bait delivery systems to data collection and environmental monitoring. The plot's large size and repeatedly baited perimeter will mitigate the effects of mice moving in from outside the trial area. The data collected from the trial will inform the operational planning for the main eradication.

Navigating complexity & raising funds

The environmental and other authorisation processes required for a project of this size are complex and the MFM Project team is working its way through them. It continues to engage with the DFFE and other agencies to ensure that all the necessary legal and environmental safeguards are met.

Equally important are efforts to raise the large amount of funds required for such an extensive and complicated conservation enterprise, and we are encouraged by an increase in the momentum of international fundraising. In April 2025, a special gala dinner in Geneva, Switzerland, hosted by Dr Frederik Paulsen and Caroline Scheufele, united an exemplary mix of conservation leaders, donors and supporters. The event, featuring presentations by Dr Paulsen, Professor Tony Martin (leader of the South Georgia rodent eradication) and myself, showcased the urgency and promise of the MFM

Project. Significant media interest and new partnerships are helping to raise global awareness of Marion Island's seabird crisis.

In Tokyo in September, the project featured at an exclusive reception hosted by Ambassador Julia Longbottom and attended by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado, the Honorary President of BirdLife International. Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa, presented the project to guests, who were inspired by the story of the island's beleaguered seabirds and the global effort to restore their habitat. These events are helping to build an international community of donors and advocates who are united in aiming for a shared goal: to save Marion Island's seabirds.

Most recently, South African entrepreneur and philanthropist Mark Shuttleworth generously pledged US\$1-million to the project. This significant boost underscores both the imperative and the credibility of this initiative.

Partnership & perseverance

Behind every scientific trial and fundraising milestone lies a commitment to collaboration. The MFM Project combines expertise from across South Africa and the world, including researchers, helicopter pilots, bait specialists, island restoration experts and an ever-growing network of supporters.

ABOVE Left to right: Vonica Perold, Monique van Bers, Otto Whitehead, Roelf Daling and Joshua Kemp. This team conducted trials on a nine-hectare plot near Hoppies Hell on Marion Island during the 2025 relief voyage.

ABOVE, LEFT This Grey-headed Albatross chick on Marion Island has been attacked by a mouse.

No one organisation can tackle a project of this scale alone. The strength of the MFM Project lies in the collective expertise, shared purpose and determination of everyone involved.

A vision for recovery

With mice eradicated, Marion's seabird populations are expected to rebound dramatically. Similar projects elsewhere, including on South Georgia, Macquarie and Antipodes islands, have shown how spectacularly island ecosystems can recover once invasive species are removed.

For Marion Island, the goal is the restoration of the entire ecosystem. This is one of the most ambitious conservation undertakings in Africa's history. The challenges are immense, but so too are the determination and expertise of the people involved. With continued support, we can give Marion's seabirds, from the mighty Wandering Albatross to a tiny storm petrel, a future free from the threat of predation by mice.

DR ANTON WOLFAARDT, MOUSE-FREE MARION PROJECT MANAGER