



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

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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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


BirdLife
SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings



**forestry, fisheries
& the environment**

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

Welcome to the 18th issue of the MFM Project Quarterly Newsletter and the second issue for 2026

As winter in South Africa wanes, we reflect on a productive first half of the year for the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project*, both on the island and here on the mainland.

Since 2022, the MFM Project has maintained a continuous research presence on Marion Island, steadily closing the priority knowledge gaps that will refine our eradication strategy. This year the annual relief voyage was rescheduled: the 2025/26 overwintering team returned to South Africa in May 2026, and the incoming (2026/27) team's deployment was deferred until the island's fuel supply could be secured, amid the sharp rise in global fuel costs and constrained supply following recent events in the Middle East.

Rather than lose momentum, we made the most of the time based on the mainland, with both the 2025/26 and 2026/27 Field Assistants working through various mouse trapping and weather datasets gathered over the past few years, turning seasons of field observations and monitoring into the evidence base underpinning our planning. With the fuel now procured, the incoming Field Assistants for 2026/2027, Santjie du Toit and Lola Singo, will depart for Marion in early August 2026, together with MFM Assistant Project Manager, Sue Tonin, and Vonica Perold, one of our two previous Field Assistants, to resume our research work on the island for the remainder of the overwintering period. Vonica will introduce Lola and Santjie to the many important details of mousework and life on Marion Island.

The wider project has carried on throughout, and we are progressing with the various contracts and approvals needed for the upcoming aerial baiting trial scheduled for April-May 2027. We have also been working even further afield than

Colours of Marion island,
photograph: Stefan Schoombie

Marion Island by partnering with the New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC) to investigate the characteristics of a smaller bait pellet designed to improve encounter rates in baiting operations. In this edition of the newsletter, MFM Operations Manager, Keith Springer, writes about our collaboration with the DOC and how we're working with global eradication experts to incorporate lessons learned into practice. Read more about the work we have been doing to refine our eradication strategy and the upcoming work taking place on Marion Island on page 6.

On the fundraising front, the MFM Project team has made valuable progress in ensuring that international MFM Project supporters can now more easily access overseas tax relief. We're excited to announce that the MFM Project has become an official nonprofit partner of GlobalGiving, the first and largest worldwide fundraising community for nonprofits. This makes it easy and safe for supporters to donate to our work saving Marion Island's seabirds, while providing tax benefits to donors in the

Below: Mark Anderson, CEO BirdLife South Africa, Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado and South Africa's Acting Ambassador to Japan, Her Excellency Annelize Schroeder.



United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). Read more about this news [here](#).

While our partnership with GlobalGiving assists taxpayers in the UK and the USA, we remain partnered with the Caring for Conservation Fund to provide tax relief for donors in Germany. German donors who would like to support the project and receive a tax receipt should email Donations@mousefreemarion.org for more information.

Although the MFM Project is based in South Africa, we are committed to increasing the profile of the project internationally and have had several opportunities in the last few months to engage possible overseas donors. One such event was the Annual CEO Dinner hosted at the South African Embassy in Tokyo, Japan. In June, BirdLife South Africa CEO and MFM Board Member, Mark D. Anderson, represented the MFM Project and visited Japan to attend the event and engage with several Japanese media outlets. The dinner was hosted by Acting Ambassador Ms

Annelize Schroeder and attended by 30 corporate leaders and Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado, Honorary President of BirdLife International, who also spoke at the event in support of the project. These types of events are critical in increasing the profile of the project and serve as important introductions to prospective donors.

Locally, several passionate MFM supporters have been going above and beyond to spread awareness of the need to save

Below: Courtney Hundermark holds up a Dwarf Beaked Snake Dipsina multimaculata he found near Prince Albert, Western Cape, South Africa in April 2023, photograph: Berkeley Lumb



Marion Island's seabirds. Recently, Courtney Hundermark started an appeal to raise R10 000 for the project by running the Skukuza Half Marathon in South Africa's Kruger National Park, while 14-year-old Romario Valentine remains committed to assisting the project with his appeal to raise R30 000 for three seabird conservation organisations. You can support Courtney's appeal [here](#) and help Romario reach his goal [here](#).

On the 19th of June we celebrated World Albatross Day (WAD) with this year's theme being 'Habitat Restoration'. The day serves to celebrate albatrosses across the world while highlighting the threats facing their survival. Eradicating invasive predators from islands is one way in which seabird breeding habitats can be restored. Over the month of June, we spread the message about WAD online and through engagements with MFM Project supporters.

Looking ahead, we plan to continue to increase awareness of the project and are in the process of preparing for the South African Bird Fair, set to take place on 5 September at the Pretoria National Botanical Garden. The MFM Project will be represented with a stand and will provide a presentation. This year, Monique van Bers, who was previously a MFM Field Assistant on Marion Island during 2024/2025, will provide a presentation describing her year on the island.

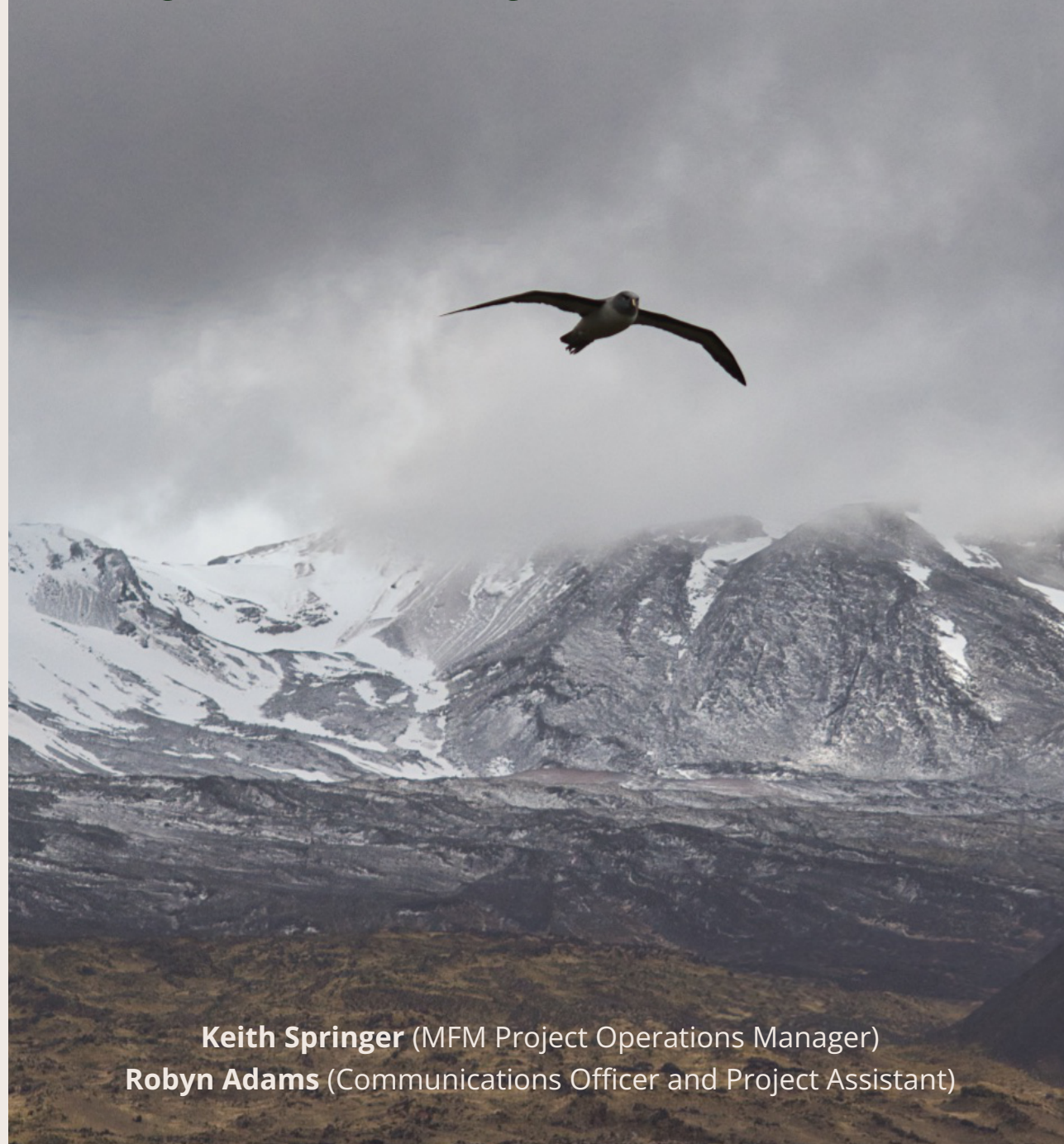
None of this work would be possible without the continued support of our donors, partners and volunteers. As we head into the second half of 2026, we look forward to sharing positive outcomes from project planning and hope to see many of you at the Bird Fair in September. Thank you for being part of this journey to restore Marion Island and its seabirds.

Robyn Adams

MFM Communications Officer and Project Assistant

Habitat Restoration

Building on success through international cooperation



Keith Springer (MFM Project Operations Manager)

Robyn Adams (Communications Officer and Project Assistant)

Photograph: Roelf Daling

Invasive predators are silencing seabird islands. When nests are empty and burrows abandoned, a vital habitat becomes an echo of the vibrant ecosystem it once was.

On the 19th of June 2026, we celebrated World Albatross Day under the theme "Habitat Restoration". The theme is based on the simple idea that eradicating invasive species can remove a major threat to native species that may otherwise face extinction. The rebounding in native plants, birds and other animals has been seen time and time again, on restored islands across the world.

On Australia's Macquarie Island, the removal of feral cats, European Rabbits, Black Rats and House Mice led to an incredible rebound in life. Active Blue Petrel burrows were once again found on coastal headlands during the first summer after the eradication operation removed rodents. Pintado Petrels returned to breed, while populations of Soft-plumaged Petrels, diving petrels and Sooty Shearwaters began to re-establish themselves.

The South Georgia Heritage Trust achieved a similar outcome on the United Kingdom's South Georgia Island in the South Atlantic. The eradication of Norway Rats helped ensure the return of South Georgia Pipits, South Georgia Pintails, and numerous burrowing- and storm-petrel species.

On Australia's Lord Howe Island, the breeding success of Black-winged Petrels increased dramatically from as little as 2.5% to 67% within one year of the removal of rodents. Similarly, the abundance of other bird species and endemic invertebrates on Lord Howe has

increased by orders of magnitude since 2019, including the endemic Lord Howe Woodhen, which has increased in population from fewer than 500 to more than 2,200 individuals. In another success since the rodents were eradicated, the Masked Booby is now breeding on the main island for the first time in several decades.



Above: Endemic South Georgia Pipits were downlisted from Near Threatened to Least Concern following the successful rodent eradication on South Georgia. Photograph: Graham Wells.

Below: Bad weather hampers the rodent eradication on South Georgia



2004



2014

Above: The remarkable recovery of vegetation on Macquarie Island after the Macquarie Island Pest Eradication Project removed rabbits in 2011. Photograph: Keith Springer. Read more about other successful island eradications [here](#).

But while eradication of invasive mammals has a proven track record on hundreds of islands, Marion Island is not necessarily a simple repeat of the process. Recent eradication failures at Gough Island in the South Atlantic and Midway Atoll in the Pacific were a sobering reminder that even well-implemented plans don't automatically result in success. That is exactly why our team is working with global experts in island eradication to refine our strategy and incorporate lessons learned into practice.

International cooperation ensures that no island is left behind

The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project is not the only large sub-Antarctic island with eradication plans currently underway. In New Zealand, the Department of Conservation (DOC) is progressing the Maukahuka Project, which aims to eradicate House Mice, feral pigs and feral cats from Auckland Island. At some 46,000 hectares, this island is more than 50% larger than Marion Island's 30,000 hectares.

Some of the planning issues that both projects face centre on the aerial baiting regime that targets mouse eradication.

While almost all previous mouse eradication projects have used a standard-sized rodent bait, recent thinking has sought to understand whether encounter rates might be influential in eradication success. This refers to the likelihood that every individual mouse will encounter bait pellets during its foraging and consume enough of them to ingest a lethal dose of the toxin.

Rather than improving encounter rates by increasing the application rate of a standard-sized bait pellet, which comes with a commensurate increase in costs to buy, transport and spread additional bait, a collaboration with the DOC is exploring the characteristics of a smaller bait pellet – at about 1 gram - which is half the weight of the 2 gram pellet usually used in rodent eradication operations.

Key characteristics of the bait pellets relate to their distribution from a spreader bucket slung beneath a helicopter. This method of dispersal means that bait pellets are subject to mechanical force when flung through a rotating spinner and are also influenced by the strength and direction of



Above: Bait bucket trials in New Zealand are exploring the characteristic of bait pellets when distributed from bait buckets through spinners.

the wind as they fall to the ground. In addition, the pellets need to be distributed evenly across the width of the bait swath when sown. Pellets also need to remain intact for several days so that they are available for consumption. This is achieved through pellet hardness (from compaction during manufacture) as minimal wax is used for waterproofing, as is commonly used in commercially available bait blocks.

Earlier trials using a 0.6 gram bait that was narrower (5.5 mm diameter) than a standard bait (10 mm) showed that these lighter pellets that had a greater length to diameter ratio were prone to shattering more when distributed through the spinner. They were also more prone to drifting in the wind, as well as having a narrower swath width. These disadvantages ruled out operational use of this size of pellet for the MFM Project.

The MFM Project's collaboration with the DOC therefore investigated a bait pellet with the same diameter as standard bait pellets, but shorter (14 mm vs 20 mm). Nominally, this means that in every kilogram of bait, there are 714 bait pellets,

instead of 500 standard pellets per kg. If spread at the same nominal rate, there are nearly 40% more bait pellets on the ground for mice to encounter. These smaller bait pellets appeared to perform well in helicopter trials, with an even distribution, little bait shatter and a similar swath width to the standard bait.

To investigate this principle further, additional helicopter trials are planned using an even shorter bait pellet – this one at 10 mm diameter and 10 mm long and weighing one gram – effectively a

'square' shape (although the pellets are cylindrical). If these trials prove successful, this would deliver twice the number of bait pellets per kilogram of bait spread, compared with standard bait.

The findings of these recent and forthcoming helicopter trials with different baits in New Zealand will provide valuable information for both the MFM and the Maukahuka projects, in determining the preferred option for their respective aerial baiting operations to remove mice from these large sub-Antarctic islands.

How we are working on Marion Island to refine our eradication strategy

In previous newsletters, we have reported on the work we have been doing on Marion Island since 2023 to refine our eradication strategy. MFM Project Field Assistants have consistently been monitoring weather conditions, and conducting bait availability and exclosure plot trials. Researchers have also been undertaking ecological monitoring work to provide baseline information against which the ecological outcomes of the eradication operation can be assessed. In 2025, we undertook a

hand-baiting trial with the aim of determining bait uptake at specific sites on Marion Island (read more about this work in the 14th issue of the Quarterly MFM Newsletter).

We plan on scaling up this work in 2027 by conducting a larger bait trial on the island. This work will be completed during the annual relief voyage to the island and will help us understand how a novel bait pellet configuration performs in Marion Island conditions. This trial will cover an area of 1,050 ha and will extend inland from the coast by 7 km. This will enable us to evaluate bait uptake in all of the different habitats present on Marion Island, from the coast up to and including the polar desert. After each of the two bait applications, team members will monitor bait plots to determine the rate of bait uptake and the rate of bait degradation.

A future worth protecting

It's in our name, "*Saving Marion Island's Seabirds*", but Marion Island is more than just birds. Mice have disrupted the

ecosystem from the bottom up. After all, what is an ecosystem without insects and plants?

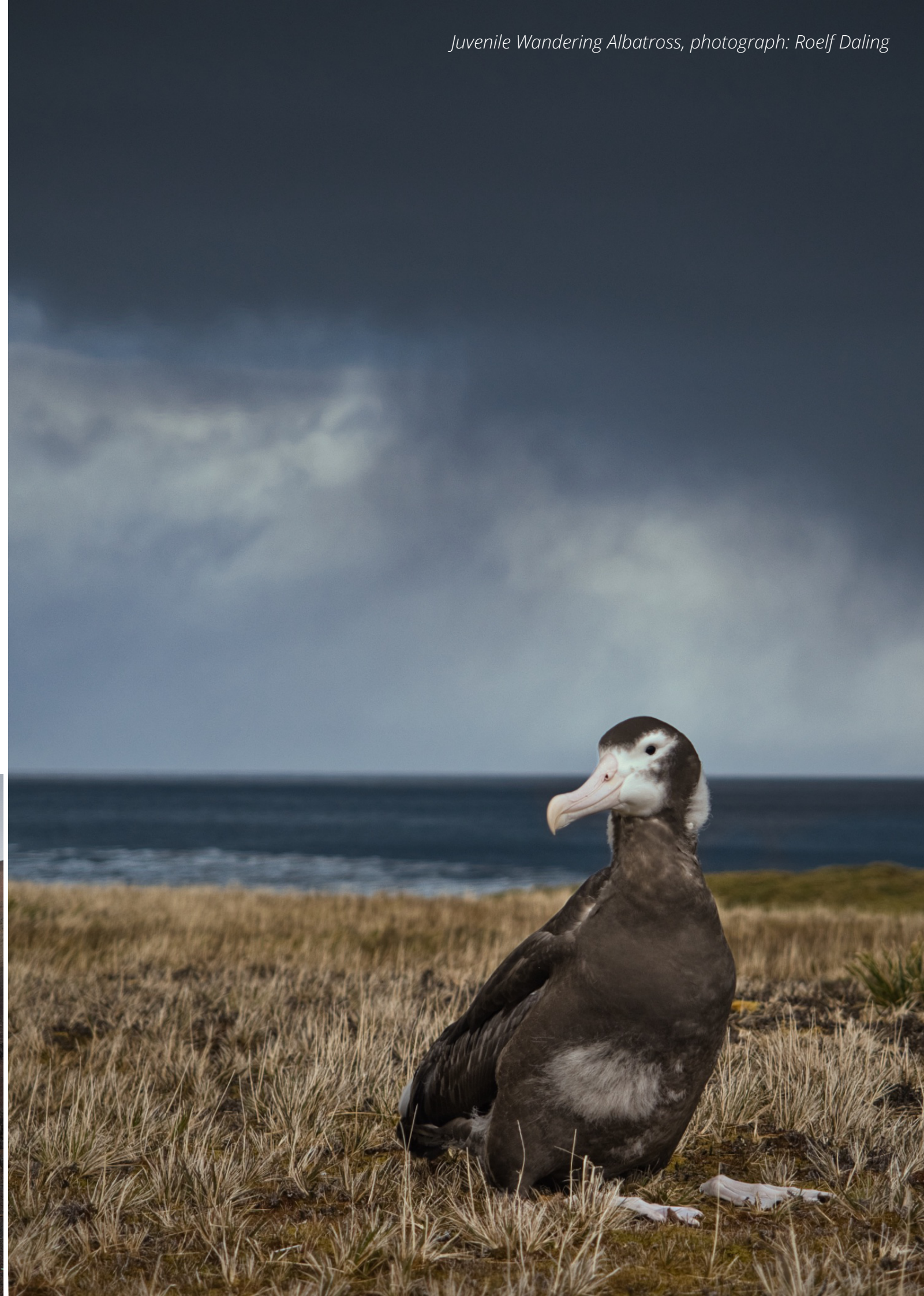
On a rare research trip in 2023 to Prince Edward Island, Marion Island's rodent-free neighbour, researchers were astounded at the abundance of insects and vegetation. Marion is a stark contrast, as mice have decimated plants, particularly *Azorella* cushions, and reduced insect populations so drastically that spotting a rare, endemic flightless moth would be far more unusual than spotting an albatross. Prince Edward Island is the ideal we're striving for. There, thriving insect populations keep Black-faced Sheathbills fat and well-fed. The ground vibrates with the calls of burrowing petrels, and the sky is filled with albatrosses coming in to land.

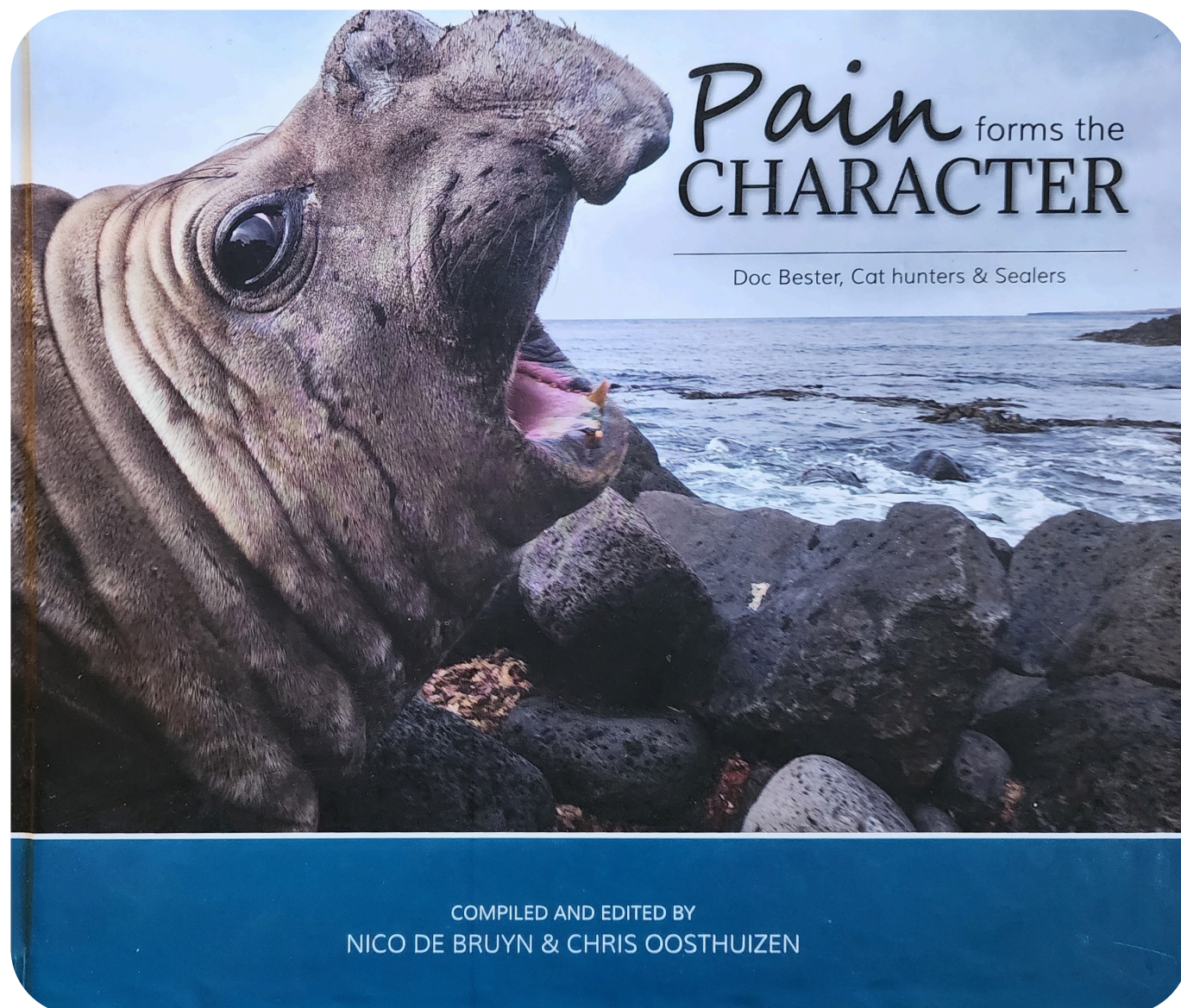
This is what we're working towards. An entire ecosystem restored. The many steps we are taking now to ensure the success of the eradication operation will deliver a lasting benefit to Marion Island and return a compromised ecosystem back to life.

Below: Vonica Perold (MFM Field Assistant 2025/2026) hand sows bait pellets as part of the investigations to determine bait uptake at specific sites on Marion Island, photograph: Roelf Daling



Juvenile Wandering Albatross, photograph: Roelf Daling





COFFEE, CONVERSATION & CONSERVATION

The *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project* is strengthened by a growing network of passionate supporters who are united by a shared commitment to restoring Marion Island's unique ecosystem. Every donation, conversation, shared social media post, and act of generosity help bring us closer to our goal: eradicating the invasive mice which are undermining the integrity of the entire island. We are truly grateful for the

enthusiasm and support we continue to receive from people across South Africa and around the world. It is inspiring to see so many individuals and businesses willing to go the extra mile to help spread the word and make a lasting difference.

One wonderful example of this support comes from [Prof. Nico de Bruyn](#) and the Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme, who has generously made available copies



Sunset
Books

of the book he co-authored, *Pain forms the character*, to help raise funds for the MFM Project. Through personal stories and vivid recollections, the book takes readers on a journey to Marion Island, offering a fascinating glimpse into the challenges, camaraderie, and unforgettable experiences of living and working on one of the world's most remote islands. The book is dedicated to [Prof. Marthán Bester](#), whose vision, determination, and leadership were instrumental in the successful eradication of feral cats from Marion Island – a landmark conservation achievement completed over a span of approximately 20 years, confirmed successful in 1991.

We are equally grateful to [Sunset Books](#) in Strand, Western Cape, for partnering with us by selling these donated books in support of the project. Sunset Books, an independent bookstore, is a welcoming space where readers, authors, and the local community come together to celebrate stories and ideas. We sincerely appreciate their enthusiasm for the project and their willingness to help us share the remarkable story of Marion Island with a wider audience.

If you are in the area, we'd love you to join us at Sunset Books on Saturday, 22 August 2026 from 11h00 to 12h00, for a special morning celebrating Marion Island and its remarkable conservation story. The bookstore owner will host an informal interview exploring *Pain forms the character*, the rich history of Marion Island, and the people whose dedication has helped shape its conservation legacy. Seats for the event will be limited, so booking will be essential. Booking details and more information will be shared on both the MFM Project and Sunset Books social media pages closer to the time.

Whether you're already a supporter of the MFM Project or simply curious to learn more about this extraordinary sub-Antarctic island, we hope you'll join us for an enjoyable morning of stories, conversation, and conservation. Every book purchased helps support the MFM Project and brings us one step closer to protecting Marion Island's unique biodiversity for generations to come.

Liezl Pretorius,
MFM Project Research & Reporting Officer

SOUTH AFRICAN birdfair

Brought to you by BirdLife South Africa in partnership with



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BOOKINGS OPEN!



Saturday, 5 September 2026



09h00-16h30

Birding Walks begin from
06:00 - booking required



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Workshops**



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Talks**



Kids' Activities

What to expect:



**Dedicated educational
activities for
fledgling birders**

**Birding walks and live
bird-ringing
demonstrations**



**Exhibits from the best in
optics, photography,
Natural History books...**

and much more birding fun!



Photograph: Roelf Daling

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 Albatross chick; photograph: Roelf Daling

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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