

The Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and Antarctica Jan 1 – Jan 22, 2025 | Trip Report | by John Carlson



With Naturalist Journeys Guide John Carlson and participants Steve, Phil, Amnon, Kate, Kris, Monte, Emily, John, Deanna, and Brian



Sat. Jan. 4th. Ushuaia, Argentina and onboard the *Hondius*

We all gathered the first morning and loaded our luggage and ourselves into our tour van for the day. After we dropped off our luggage to be loaded on the ship, we headed into nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park with Esteban Daniels, our local guide. We enjoyed a number of stops and short hikes at various locations in the park and got to see a number of species we would have otherwise not observed on the trip including three Magellanic Woodpeckers, a highlight for all of us. We also heard, and got distant looks at, an Austral Pygmy Owl, had a couple of Andean Condors fly overhead, and watched a group of Austral Parakeets fly past. On our way back to Ushuaia, we stopped at the mouth of the Rio Pipo and found a small group of White-rumped Sandpipers foraging in the rocky shoreline and observed Dolphin Gulls gathering mussels and then flying up and



dropping them back on the rocks to crack the shells open so the gulls could eat them. We then headed back into town and were dropped off at our ship the *Hondius* late in the afternoon. After boarding the ship and finding our rooms and luggage, we cast off from the pier, went through our orientation lectures and safety drills, had our first dinner onboard, and became familiar with the layout of the ship as we transited the Beagle Channel and headed towards the Falkland Islands.

Sun., Jan. 5th. At Sea to the Falklands.

Our first morning at sea was clear and pretty calm and we started to learn the seabirds that would accompany us for many days at sea. We got good looks at the White-chinned Petrels, Great Shearwaters, and Southern Giant Petrels. We also got introduced to the challenges of trying to identify prions at sea! We managed to find a few Slender-billed Prions to go along with the more numerous Antarctic Prions after looking at our photos. We were also able to see our first Pintado or Cape Petrel. Our clear skies gave way to foggy conditions for most of the afternoon and it became harder to see and identify any birds.

Mon., Jan. 6th. Falkland Islands

The morning found us cruising through the Inshore waters of the Falkland Islands on our way to Carcass Island. Our morning landing occurred at Dyke Bay where upon walking up the landing beach we immediately encountered the endemic, mouse-like Cobb's Wren foraging around the wrack and tussock grass at the shoreline. A couple of Magellanic Oystercatchers hollered at us from the beach and a pile of downy, but well grown Falkland Steamer Ducks and their mother were huddled a short distance from our landing spot. We made the hike across the spit to Leopard Beach and along the way we were entertained with the variety of birds we encountered – Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins, a furtive Magellanic Snipe, Upland Geese, White bridled Finches, and Brown Skuas. While on Leopard Beach we were treated to more Magellanic Penguins and Falklands Steamer Ducks in the surf while Commerson's Dolphins foraged just offshore. After enjoying the beach, we embarked on a long walk back to the small settlement through the sheep pastures along the shoreline. Along the way we found some Southern Elephant Seals lounging on the rocks along with a Black-crowned Night Heron and our first Striated Caracara. We arrived at the settlement just in time to catch some of the treats provided to us by the locals and catch a few more good looks at the Striated Caracaras hanging around the buildings.



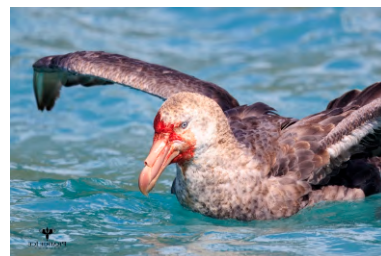
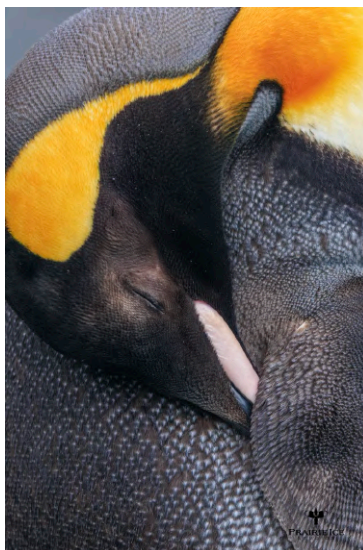
While we had lunch onboard the *Hondius*, the ship ventured to Saunders Island at “The Neck.” We jumped in the zodiacs for our afternoon excursion (at pattern we would repeat for much of the rest of the trip) and arrived at the landing beach. After gathering the group on the beach, we made a beeline to the opposite shore and climbed the hill to the Black-browed Albatross and Southern Rockhopper Penguin colonies to ensure we were able to fully enjoy these unique opportunities for the trip. We then slowly back towards the landing beach and observed the small group of breeding King Penguins, along with many breeding Magellanic Penguins and Gentoo Penguins. Brown Skuas, Kelp Gulls, and Dolphin Gulls were present as well. Before departing back to the ship, we visited the local gift shop – a collection of souvenirs displayed in the back of a land rover on the beach and sold by the island owners.

Tues., Jan. 7th. Stanley, Falkland Islands and At Sea

We passed through The Narrows and entered into Stanley Harbor to visit the capitol of the Falkland Islands for our first and only landing of the day. We snagged a ride to town in our zodiac shuttle and each of us made the best of our last connection with civilization and did some shopping, sight-seeing, internet connecting, and birding. We found our only non-native bird species of our trip in Stanley - the ubiquitous House Sparrow, but also observed more Austral Thrushes, Blackish Oystercatchers, and Falkland Steamer Ducks along the shore in town. Our shuttle took us back to the ship for lunch and we made our way back through The Narrows and started our journey to South Georgia. The winds picked up a bit as we headed out to sea towards the island of South Georgia. Our usual accompaniment of seabirds including Black-browed Albatrosses, Antarctic Prions, and Wilson’s Storm Petrels were with us for the afternoon, and we also picked up our first Soft-plumaged Petrels.

Wed., Jan 8th and Jan 9th. At Sea

Our journey to South Georgia continued for these two days. We continued to work on prion identification, and we got good looks at most of the seabirds we have observed so far. There were many White-chinned Petrels and Soft-plumaged Petrels around the ship, and we had a couple of Southern Royal Albatross and one Snowy Albatross (that we initially thought might be a much rarer Atipodean Albatross) hang around the ship long enough to give good views. We also found our first Gray-headed and Light Mantled Albatrosses. Southern Giant Petrels continued to be consistent companions to our voyage. A lone Brown Skua cruised by and our first Black-bellied Storm Petrels were observed. A couple of Orcas were also observed but moved past rather quickly.



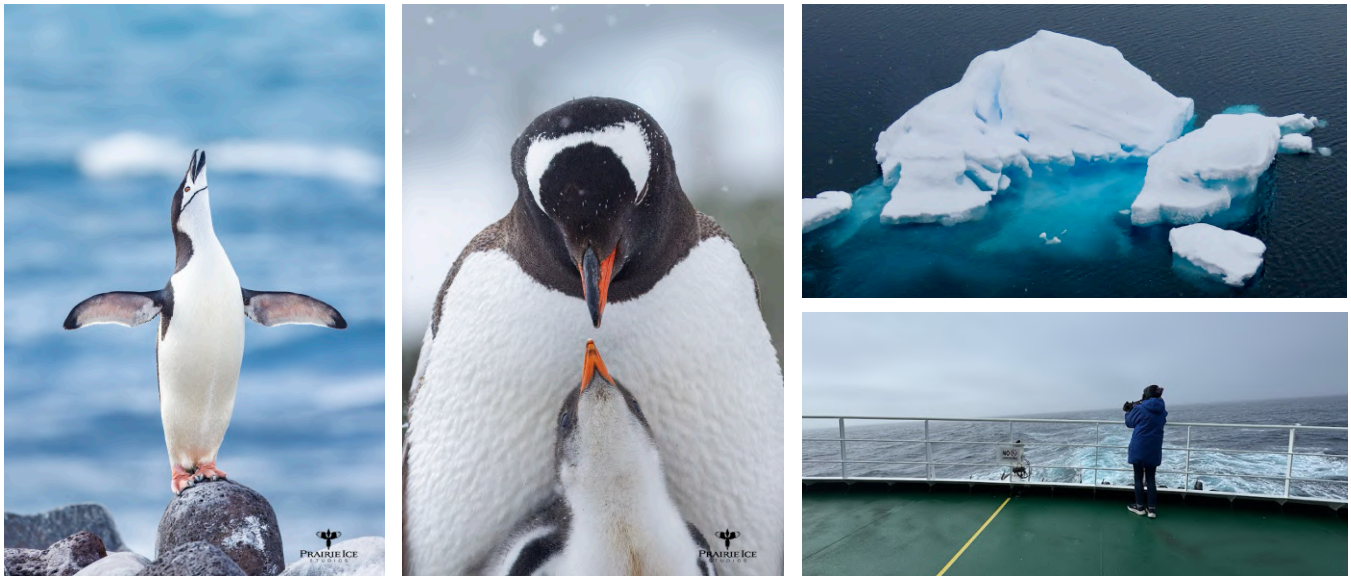
Fri. Jan 10th. South Georgia

The morning found us off the coast of South Georgia at closing in on the entrance to Cumberland Bay and the former whaling station of Grytviken. Grytviken is the administrative capital of the island, and we needed to have biosecurity completed here before we could make any additional landings. Once we were cleared, we made our landing at the old whaling base and were able to tour the restored industrial whaling site which included the Grytviken church and informative museum along with the remains of the whale processing machinery. South Georgia Pintails were found wandering around the site and Antarctic Terns foraged in the surf while pods of Southern Elephant Seals wallowed in the uplands. Antarctic Fur Seals, mostly young adults and pups were scattered everywhere. We made our way to the nearby cemetery for a visit to the final resting place of Sir Ernest Shackleton to offer a toast of Scotch to “The Boss” before heading back to the *Hondius*.

During our lunch we headed south along the coast to Saint Andrew’s Bay, home of the largest King Penguin colony in the world. We landed at the far side of the beach after a zodiac cruise along the shoreline of the penguin colony where we were able to watch many King Penguins coming into land and swimming and bathing in the surf. We were also able to get a good perspective on the size of this massive colony. We had hoped to be able to cross the meltwater stream to get to an overlook of the colony, but we were unable to due to the strength of the current. We still got to see thousands of King Penguins though! We also got to watch young male Elephant Seals practicing the jousting skills they would need to perfect later in life as well as many Antarctic Fur Seals with Southern and Northern Giant Petrels resting on the beach. Our first few Snowy Sheathbills foraged among the penguins and seals.

Sat., Jan 11th. South Georgia

Fortuna Bay was our morning destination. We visited another King Penguin colony here and we were able to get to the edge of this colony - no meltwater streams to cross today. Along the walk we observed more South Georgia Pintails flying across the valley and observed more Antarctic Fur Seals and Southern Elephant Seals. We observed our first, but not last, Snow Petrel of the trip as we made our way to our afternoon location along with many Macaroni and King Penguins in the waters. Our afternoon location was Hercules Bay, a relatively small, high walled bay with a tall waterfall at the head. We didn’t do a landing here but spent the afternoon in the zodiacs cruising around the bay. The highlight was a large Macaroni Penguin colony that we were able to



observe from the water. We got to watch many of them coming into the bay and land on the rocks at the base of the colony while others descended from the colony and headed out to sea. We also saw more Snowy Sheathbills and a family of Kelp Gulls on the rocks along the bay. Our evening dinner was a barbecue on the deck of the ship where we enjoyed the stunning scenery with our dinner.

Sun. Jan 12th, 13th, 14th - At Sea

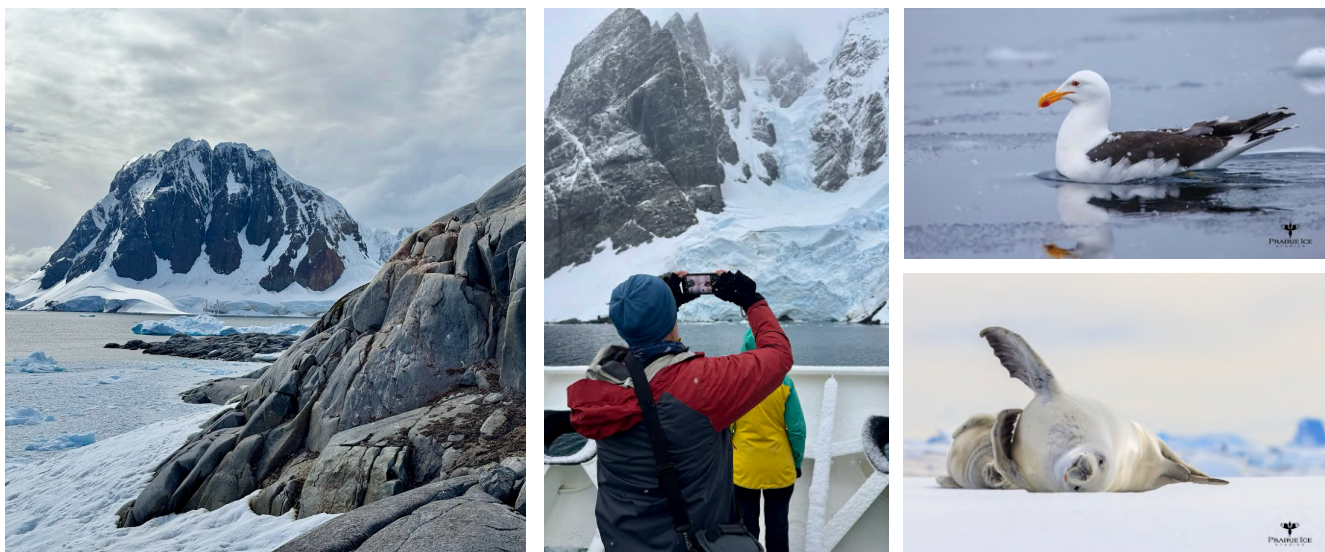
With the weather forecast for South Georgia looking rather ominous, the expedition team opted to try to minimize impacts to our trip by leaving South Georgia a bit earlier than we had originally planned and optimize our time on the Antarctic Peninsula. As we made our way south the weather caught up with us. Although some of us were able to be up and about during the storm, many of us were waiting out the storm in our rooms so our birding activities were less than normal. Our “usual” at sea seabirds - prions, Blue Petrels, and Cape Petrels rode out the storm with us.

Wed. Jan 15th - Antarctic Peninsula

After a long stretch of days at sea we made our first landing on the Antarctic Peninsula at Penguin Island just off the much larger King George Island. Penguin Island is a small dormant volcanic island with a very distinct center cone. We landed near a large Chinstrap Penguin colony, and we got to spend some quality time with the newest addition to our list of penguin colonies we visited. The silvery Chinstrap chicks were pretty obvious in the colony, and we got to watch the adults doing their “ecstatic” display where they point their bill straight into the air while slowly flapping their flippers back and forth and making a piercing screechy call. We also managed to find our first Adelie Penguin lounging on the beach with a small group of Chinstraps. There were many Brown Skuas in the area and one of them was even sporting a satellite transmitter from a research project. Southern Giant Petrels were quite numerous and one pure white individual was very striking. Some of the group made the journey to the rim of the volcanic cone in the middle of the island. It was a very nice day to begin the Antarctic Peninsula portion of our trip.

Thurs. Jan 16th - Antarctic Peninsula

Thursday morning was a bit snowy, windy, and cold. We got to feel Antarctica today. Our first stop was D’Hainaut Island in Mikkelson Harbour, home to a few hundred breeding Gentoo Penguins. The approach to the



landing spot is notorious for being difficult to navigate in the Zodiacs but our driver managed to avoid most of the rocks. Once we landed onshore, we were able to walk around the island and observe many Gentoo Penguin chicks in the colonies on our way over the island to a small Argentine refuge hut. There was also a gaggle of Snowy Sheathbills on the island, and we finally got good looks at this unique bird. One of our groups even took advantage of the offer to do the polar plunge at this landing and he joined the penguins in the cold water for a brief swim! The rest of us took a Zodiac tour of the bay surrounding D'Hainaut Island where we got to see some Antarctic Terns foraging against the glacial walls surrounding the bay. After dinner and quick evening recap, we ventured out again for a very anticipated landing - an opportunity to set foot on the continent itself. But before we landed, we did another Zodiac tour amongst the icebergs and pack ice where we found a few Snow Petrels, Kelp Gulls, and South Polar Skuas feeding on some massive krill swarms we could see just under the surface of the water. The continental landing site at Meusnier Point was a fun stop for us. Lots of pictures were taken with an Antarctic flag and we too advantage of the opportunity to walk around the point and enjoy the stunning scenery in the gentle snow fall.

Fri. Jan 17th - Antarctic Peninsula

Friday was special. We woke early to marvel at the scenery of the LeMaire Channel, a stunning narrow fiord with towering rocky cliffs draped in glaciers and snow on either side. South Polar Skuas and Kelp Gulls escorted us through the channel. At the far side of the channel was our next stop - Port Charcot and the final resting place for many huge icebergs grounded in the relatively shallow water. We enjoyed another Zodiac cruise amongst the icebergs with one Leopard Seal peering at us from the water and a number of Humpback Whales actively foraging in the waters around us. We then landed on Booth Island and made our way to another large Gentoo Penguin colony as the lingering clouds slowly departed revealing a massive wall of rocky peaks and glaciers behind the colony. We also were able to enjoy our second Adelie Penguin observation - one nest with an adult and chick amongst all the Gentoos. There was a constant stream of Gentoos heading back and forth from their colonies to their landing site. We also got to see a couple more Leopard Seals lounging on ice flows. Our afternoon was spent doing a Zodiac cruise in an area south of Booth Island along the Antarctic Peninsula known as Cape Tuxen. This was our Adelie Penguin highlight of the trip. Good observations of Adelie Penguins are getting harder to come by on the Antarctic Peninsula as their populations decline, but we were able to enjoy great observations from the boats of many birds in the water, on icebergs, and at their nests on small offshore islands we were able to bring the Zodiacs right next too. Perhaps the most exciting observation was a young Adelie that had been hatched last year and was noticeable because its chin was white. Birds over a year old have



a completely black chin. Many Crabeater Seals were also found lounging on the icebergs and ice floes in the area and more Humpback Whales were foraging near us. After returning to the ship, we gathered for our evening briefing with the Expedition Leader where he announced that the Captain and Expedition Team had decided to do something very few trips get to do - head south to cross the Antarctic Circle! The ship pointed south and we were off.

Sat. Jan 18th - Antarctic Peninsula

We had another early morning wake up call so that we could celebrate the crossing of the Antarctic Circle with a small ceremony and lots of pictures with the staff. It was the start of another spectacular day full of ice in Crystal Sound at the northern end of Adelaide Island. This spot made us feel like we were really in Antarctica. We spent a good part of the rest of the day in the Zodiacs cruising around all shapes and sizes of floating ice. From huge, towering icebergs to flat remnants of last year's sea ice, we got to experience it all. Some small bergs were an impossible blue of dense water-carved ice. Pure white Snow Petrels surrounded us the entire day and most of the flat ice floes were littered with lounging Crabeater Seals. We even got to witness a pod of Orcas (B1 type) swim past us a short distance away. On our way back to the ship we pulled our Zodiac up on a small flat ice floe and we were able to get out and walk around a bit. After returning to the ship, we started heading back north with many Snow Petrels gliding past. One Wandering Albatross even made an appearance, a rather rare sighting this far south.

Sun Jan 19th - Antarctic Peninsula

Our last stop in Antarctica was in a small bay on the northern side of Anvers Island called Laperouse Bay. The morning was spent in the Zodiacs cruising through the pack ice lining the southern part of the bay. The Snow Petrels put on another show for us this morning and we watched them swooping across the jumbled ice and around the scattered icebergs. We even found about 40 of them taking a bath in the fresh water on the surface near all the melting ice. We also had wonderful looks at a small Leopard Seal lounging on a small ice floe. The Humpback Whales were also actively feeding in the bay, and we were able to observe many of them up close as they surfaced and dove around our Zodiacs. After noon we began our departure from Antarctica and headed north past towering icebergs surrounded by thousands of Southern Fulmars with ice-covered mountains as a backdrop. It was a fitting scene to close out our time in Antarctica.



Mon. Jan 20th and 21st - At sea

The notorious Drake Passage took mercy on us. We enjoyed rather calm waters for our crossing - perhaps we had already payed our toll to the Southern Ocean during our crossing from South Georgia to the Antarctic Peninsula. We were joined by our now familiar seabirds as we headed north, Southern Giant Petrels, those hard to identify prions, White-chinned Petrels and Blue Petrels. We even managed to get looks at a few Diving Petrels we identified as Magellanic Diving Petrels. It was exciting to see a few of the larger Southern Royal Albatrosses again too. As we got further north, we began to pick up the species like Sooty Shearwaters and Great Shearwaters we first observed when we first boarded the ship and set out on this journey. We sailed past Cape Horn amidst large flocks of Black-browed Albatross. One pod of Dusky Dolphins gave us a good show as we entered the mouth of the Beagle Channel and headed towards Ushuaia during the night.

Wed. Jan 22nd - Ushuaia, Argentina

Sometime in the early morning the *Hondius* tied up at the pier in Ushuaia. We gathered one last time for breakfast before leaving our home for the last three weeks. Amidst the Kelp and Dolphin Gulls hanging around the pier, each of us went out separate ways to begin our journeys back to our homes.

Photos: Group (John Carlson - JC), Adelie Penguin (JC), Whale Fluke (JC), Albatross (JC), Magellanic Woodpecker (Kristen DelMonte - KD), Tufted Tit Tyrant (KD), Crested Caracara (KD), Sierra Finch (KD), On Board! (KD), Port Stanley Christ Church Cathedral (KD), Zodiac ride (KD), King Penguin (JC), Albatross (JC), South Georgia Shag (Deanna Mac Phail - DP), Penguin (JC), Penguin (JC), At Sea (JC), Charlotte Bay Point Meusnier (KD), Gull (JC), Scenic (JC), Seal (JC), Adélie penguin (JC), Whale Fluke (JC), Leopard Seal? (JC), Scenic (JC),