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## The wandering star: Conservationist Stanley Johnson goes in search of the albatross

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Saw my first albatross on 12 January 1984. It was a day I shall never forget. I had been invited by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) to join their research and supply vessel, the John Biscoe, as it made its annual visit to the series of research stations which Britain maintains in the Antarctic.

We had left Punta Arenas, the most southerly town in Chile, to head south across the fearsome Drake Passage, which separates the tip of the South American continent – Cape Horn – from the Antarctic Peninsula.

It had been a bumpy crossing, to say the least. As the Biscoe left the relative shelter of the Magellan Straits, we encountered mountainous seas and gale-force winds. My own personal survival technique was to tie myself to a chair, anchor the chair firmly to some immovable object, and then sit quite still, with my eyes firmly fixed on the wildly gyrating horizon.

On the morning of the fourth day I ventured out on deck to discover that the sea was much calmer, resulting, I imagined, from the drop in temperature as we steamed ever further south. Though it was still the Antarctic "summer", you could see bits of ice in the water – "bergy bits", the Biscoe crew called them – and even the occasional iceberg.

Around 10 o'clock that morning, with the binoculars glued to my eyes, I saw for the first time dead ahead of us the towering white cliffs of Antarctica. As the John Biscoe approached – we were heading for our first landfall at BAS's Faraday station on Galindez Island – those white cliffs grew taller and taller until the ship was, literally, dwarfed by huge walls of ice.

The Antarctic sea birds seemed to sense that this was a special occasion – for us, at least – because they were out in force. Cape pigeons, otherwise known as pintado petrels – white with black markings on the wings – skimmed across the surface of the water. Then, further astern, sweeping in wide arcs into the wind, before rising and banking to turn, I saw a pair of Black-browed albatrosses.

For me, that first sight of those magnificent birds was a truly uplifting moment. The albatross sings to the soul. No wonder it has for centuries been the source of inspiration and the stuff of legend. As a child I learned by heart, as so many of my generation did, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and as I stood there on the frosty deck I found myself reciting whole chunks of verse learned in my prep-school days on wet Sunday afternoons.

"The ice was here, the ice was there,

The ice was all around:

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,

Like noises in a swound!

At length did cross an Albatross,  
Through the fog it came;  
As if it had been a Christian soul,  
We hailed it in God's name."

Those birds stayed with us more than an hour, sometimes far out to sea, sometimes swooping close to the stern of the ship. The Black-browed albatross is not the largest albatross; that honour belongs to the Southern Royal species. But with its wingspan that can extend to almost three metres, it still seemed to me to be dramatically large. Once, one of the birds passed almost directly overhead, and even without the binoculars I could see the bright orange-yellow bill and the black shadowing round the eye which gives that particular species its name.

That was the first but not the last occasion on that voyage when I saw albatrosses. My notes record that I observed on various occasions several different species: including Grey-headed, Sooty, Yellow-nosed and Wandering albatrosses.

I think I got a special kick out of seeing the Wandering albatrosses. Part of the reason was the wonderful Latin name the taxonomists have given the bird: *Diomedea exulans*. Exultant! That is exactly the right image. Partly, it was the sheer size of the animal. The wingspan of the Wandering albatross lies between 2.5 and 3.5 metres and its body length is almost 1.5 metres. In some parts of the world, whole families occupy rooms not much bigger than that!

As the John Biscoe finally headed north again at the end of our tour of Britain's Antarctic bases, a wanderer stayed with us virtually the whole day. I wrote in my notes: "The day turned into a murky evening, but in the mist I could see the Wandering albatross I had first spotted that morning. It was still with us, a magnificent sight, swooping around the ship just above the water, then soaring away from us with two beats of its giant wings. I wondered how long it would stay with us and whether it enjoyed flying as much as I enjoyed watching it."

I was fortunate on my first trip to Antarctica in 1984 to have been able to visit Bird Island, near South Georgia, home to some of the most significant albatross colonies in the world. BAS has a base on Bird Island – so Peter Prince, then the station commander, came over to the Biscoe in a Zodiac boat, and took us ashore. As we came in through the kelp-beds the fur seals were poking their heads up like otters or little dogs begging.

We climbed the hill and headed west across the island. Our guide for the day was one of the Bird Island scientists, a young man called Ben Osborne. "The albatrosses hatch now and up till the end of March," I recorded him telling us. "The adult bird weighs about 10 kilos, but its chicks can go up to 16 or 17. They put on so much weight that they become great swollen balls of fat. Add Bird Island and South Georgia together and you've got maybe 10 per cent of the whole world population of Wandering albatross." About half the world's Grey-headed albatrosses also breed on South Georgia. We saw many of them that day.

To stand there on that grey, blowy day looking across the plateau at the great mass of nesting albatrosses was one of the high points of my first Antarctic trip. I have seldom in my life felt more privileged than at that moment when I was able to observe, literally, thousands of those great white birds on their nests, almost mythical creatures which seemed not the least bit disturbed by our presence. This was their world, not ours.

Some of the birds weren't nesting, but strutting around singly or in groups, sometimes spreading their wings and lifting their heads, as they engaged in courtship rituals.

"Over there," said Osborne, "is a display group. There are some males and females who simply don't seem to pair up. They go along in an unmarried state for quite a long time. Display is all part of the pairing-up business when they're ready for it. The youngest breeding birds are about nine and they live till well over 40."

Our guide caught a Wanderer with a long pole with a crook on the end and held it by the beak to demonstrate the bird's extraordinary wingspan. "Ten to 12 feet for a big male," he told us. "White tail feathers. The older they get, the whiter they get. Look at the tubes, the nostrils at either side. The giant petrel has its tube on top."

By then we had more or less reached the most westerly point of Bird Island. This must surely be, I thought, one of the most amazing places on earth. Wherever I looked I could see the great birds, perched on their nests amid the tussock grass or displaying on the green sward of the plateau. It was a mind-blowing sight.

Almost a quarter of a century later, I had the chance recently to go back to the Antarctic Peninsula, this time as a tourist on board a well-appointed cruise ship, the Antarctic Dream. Remembering my earlier experiences, I spent hours on deck, or in front of the plate-glass windows of the observation lounge, looking out for the first exhilarating sight of an albatross on the wing.

The first part of our journey followed much the same route as we had taken in the John Biscoe, except that we set out from the Argentinian port of Ushuaia, instead of Chilean Punta Arenas. And for once the Drake Passage was relatively calm. But even though, this time round, I was able to concentrate without being distracted by sea-sickness, the sad truth is that things have changed – and I did not see a single albatross until the very last day of our voyage when, as we made our way back up the Beagle Channel, a lone bird started to follow the ship, banking and swooping and gliding over the grey waters.

I did not on this occasion have a chance to revisit the great albatross breeding colonies in South Georgia, Bird Island or the Falklands. But I did have a chance to talk to experts, both on board the Antarctic Dream and subsequently in the UK. The consensus view seemed to be that, yes, there were far fewer albatrosses around and that worldwide, several if not most species of albatross were endangered and some even threatened with extinction.

The good news is that the level of international concern for the plight of the albatross is rising rapidly. Several of the people I spoke to suggested that if I really wanted to find out what was going on I should head to Hobart, capital of the Australian island of Tasmania.

"That's where this story is playing out," my old friend Rob Hepworth told me. Hepworth is the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention on Migratory Species. The Convention encourages the setting up of special arrangements for the conservation of various threatened species. In that context, an international Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (Acap) had recently been signed and ratified by more than a dozen states with interests in the Southern oceans.

So I headed for Hobart and, the day after my arrival, went to Acap's office in Salamanca Square. Warren Papworth, a 50-year-old Australian who serves as Acap's Executive Secretary, reviewed that global status of albatross populations for me. "There are 19 albatross species currently listed by ACAP, 15 of which are classified as threatened with extinction," he told me. "Four species are currently recognised as 'critically endangered', five are 'endangered', six are 'vulnerable' and four are 'near-threatened'."

We were joined by Dr Rosemary Gales, a marine scientist working for the Tasmanian department of Primary Industries and Water, who serves as Convenor of Acap's Status and Trends Working Group. "Albatrosses are among the most threatened species of birds in the world," she told me, flashing up a series of slides to make the point. I learned that as long ago as 1993, Dr Gales had reviewed the global status of albatross populations and the factors affecting them. She had concluded that mortality associated with commercial fishing operations had become the most serious threat facing these birds.

The key issue then was "Albatross bycatch", in which the birds are caught by longlines targeting tuna, toothfish and other species. More recently, trawl fisheries have also been identified as a major threat, the birds being attracted by discarded fish and offal only to be caught on trawl cables and drowned.

If I learned that morning about the gravity of the situation in conservation terms, I also learned about the important steps being taken to address the problem. "Above all, we have to work with the fisheries management organisations," Papworth told me. So much depends on the willingness of the fisheries to cooperate. In the case of trawl fisheries, as for the longline fisheries, there are technical solutions, which can make a huge difference to the survival of albatrosses and other sea birds. If the fishing vessel, for example, can arrange its affairs so that it separates the discard phase from the catch phase, the number of birds clustering round the stern of the fishing vessel and becoming entangled in the warps can be dramatically reduced.

While I was in Tasmania, I also talked to Graham Robertson, who works for the Australian government's Antarctic division and who for some years has been a leading figure in the effort to develop "mitigation" measures. As far as the longline fisheries are concerned, they revolve around the way in which the hooks are baited, the rate at which the line sinks, and the effectiveness of counter-measures, such as "tori" streamers which are designed to deter birds.

Graham Robertson believed that as far as sea-bed (or "demersal") fisheries were concerned, important progress had been made, at least within the framework of the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). This is a treaty with teeth. Mitigation measures can be mandated and enforced, although the problem of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing remains. Another problem is that albatrosses range far and wide, and certainly into latitudes where CCAMLR does not run. That is why the work of Acap and its ability, actual or potential, to influence fisheries-management organisations is so vital.

Apart from Acap, CCAMLR and the Australian Antarctic division, there is another major Hobart-based plank in the international effort to save the albatross: the Albatross Task Force (ATF), set up under Birdlife International's seabird programme. I had dinner one night with its co-ordinator, Ben Sullivan, who told me that one of the Task Force's main objectives is to increase the number of observers on fishing vessels. "The long-term solution," he said, "is not to discharge offal when you're trawling. We try to put our people on board the boats themselves. Actually, we don't call ourselves observers, we call ourselves instructors. We are two years into the programme now. We try to work with the fishing industry, but we need the support of government too."

As it happened Sullivan was leaving Hobart the next day to fly to London to attend a reception Prince Charles was hosting at Clarence House. He paid tribute to the part Prince Charles had played in launching the Task Force in 2006 – and hoped that its members would be having a special meeting with Prince Charles before the reception. They certainly deserved it, I reflected.

The day after my meeting with Sullivan, I was browsing in a Hobart bookshop when I came across a magnificent new illustrated book for which Prince Charles had written a moving introduction: "I remember so well when I was in the Royal Navy," he wrote, "standing on the deck of a fast-moving warship in one of the Southern oceans, watching an albatross maintaining perfect position alongside for hour after hour, and apparently day after day. It is a sight I will never forget, and I find it unthinkable that we could extinguish them for ever, never to be resurrected. But unless action is taken, that is exactly what will happen."

As Sullivan put it to me: "We have made huge progress as far as the demersal long-line fishery is concerned within the CCAMLR area. But there is still a long way to go in implementing it outside the CCAMLR's Antarctic catchment area."

Even if you do solve the problems associated with fisheries – and it's a big "if" – there are still the other threats to deal with. Gough Island, for example, a United Kingdom Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic, is home to the Tristan albatross. This species is now critically endangered, not by fishing, but by "supermice". These are ordinary house mice which arrived on the island on sailing ships decades ago, and have developed into monster rodents which burrow into the albatrosses' nests and eat the hapless chicks while they are still alive.

Since Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office is directly responsible for Gough Island, one can only hope someone puts a note on David Milliband's desk with an urgent sticker on it saying: Action this day!

The Waved albatross in the Galapagos is also critically endangered. A couple of years ago I had a chance to visit Española island and spent a magical morning watching the birds there. This is the only viable population of Waved albatross in the world and, of course, it is one of the main attractions in the extraordinary Galapagos Archipelago. I can't help feeling that the ever-growing number of visitors to the island, however well-regulated they may be, must inevitably be having an impact.

Probably no other bird ranges so far and wide as the albatross, yet its nesting areas are few and far between, mostly on small sub-Antarctic islands. The problems of predation and disturbance can be very real.

During my time in Hobart, I also met Dr Heidi Auman, a remarkable young woman who, before coming to Australia to work with Acap, had spent seven years on Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean. She showed us a series of slides, demonstrating the horrendous accumulation of plastic debris in the ocean and its impact on marine life.

The world's largest colony of Laysan albatrosses, she explained, is to be found on Midway. "The adult birds ingest the plastic accidentally while feeding out at sea, then regurgitate it to feed the chicks. The chicks can feel full, but they can be slowly starving to death."

At a meeting of the UN Convention on Migratory Species held in Rome last winter, when I was planning my trip to Tasmania, I met Barry Baker, an Australian wildlife expert who works with Acap. "But will I actually get to see some albatrosses if I come to Hobart?" I asked.

I was ready to go to Tasmania to talk about albatrosses, but I wanted to meet some too! I didn't want just to speak to people in offices. I wanted to get out on the water, to catch once again the majesty of the bird in flight.

I had done my homework. I knew that there were important albatross breeding colonies on at least three small islands off the coast of Tasmania. "What about Pedra Branca and Mewstone? Can't I get there from Hobart?"

"We could get you out there in a boat all right or even a small plane," Barry replied. "You could go round the islands but you wouldn't be able to land. Even if it was physically possible, and that would depend on how rough the sea was, I don't think the authorities would allow it."

Of course, I understood what Barry was saying. Pedra Branca and Mewstone islands, off the southern coast of Tasmania, together with Albatross Island, off Tasmania's northeastern tip, are home to the whole world population of the Shy albatross. Around 12,000 pairs nest on those rocky surfaces. They have enough to contend with as it is without having to deal with curious visitors.

In the event, I was able to get my "fix" before I finally left Tasmania. On two consecutive days, the boat guide Robert Pennicott took me out on the Southern Ocean in one of his high-speed vessels first developed for the New Zealand navy. The first day we set out from Bruny Island, and the second from Tasman Island. Knowing my interest in seeing albatrosses, in whatever shape or form, Robert ensured that we headed out on to the high seas as well as hugging the coast with its dramatic towering cliffs.

On both days, seals, dolphins, sea-eagles and gannets were among the many marine species on show. And, yes, on both days we saw albatrosses too: both Shy albatrosses, their breeding ground close at hand, and Buller's albatrosses, whose breeding ground is in New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands. Yet again I was transfixed by the sheer beauty of these birds as they skimmed and soared, swooped and banked above the waves.

Pennicott's vessels have powerful engines. I suspect they could hit 50 or 60mph if they tried. Once, just for the hell of it, he turned up the throttle and, for a moment, we drew alongside one of the great birds as it dipped down towards the crest of a wave. Then it nonchalantly gave a slow beat of its wings and accelerated away from us into the distance. We didn't stand a hope of catching up with it ... even if we had wanted to.

The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels is at [www.acap.aq](http://www.acap.aq); the United Nations Environment Programme's Convention on Migratory Species is at [www.cms.int](http://www.cms.int).