

ST. HELENA SUPPLEMENT

During the evening of the **14th April**, *Plancius* started the **1343 nautical mile voyage** to the island of **St. Helena**. It was to take the remaining hours of the 14th, plus five full days at sea. One thing was very noticeable, namely an almost complete absence of the larger **albatrosses** after we left **Tristan**. On the **15th**, I noted that an **Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross** was spotted, but no large **Tristans**. The **16th** was quiet – a few **Spectacled Petrels** appeared, together with a **Soft-plumaged**, and **White-**



bellied Storm Petrels. However, they were few and far between. A **Bulwer's Petrel** was seen on the **17th**, and 'sprays' of flying fish emerged from our bow wave (see left: photo by **Frank Grønningsaeter**). *Plancius* crossed the **Tropic of Capricorn** during dinner. On the **18th** – a cloudless day - I noted that a **Red-billed Tropic Bird** was seen, together with **White-bellied, Madeiran** and **Leach's Storm Petrels**. There was a very fine sunset, followed by a dazzling full moon.

Right: Now getting a nudge from the 20 knot SE Trade Winds, *Plancius* points NE on blue water towards **St. Helena** on the **17th**.

St. Helena hove into sight at 09.30hrs on the **19th April**. **Masked Boobies, White/Fairy Terns** and **Red-billed Tropic Birds** were observed on our approach to the anchorage off **Jamestown**.

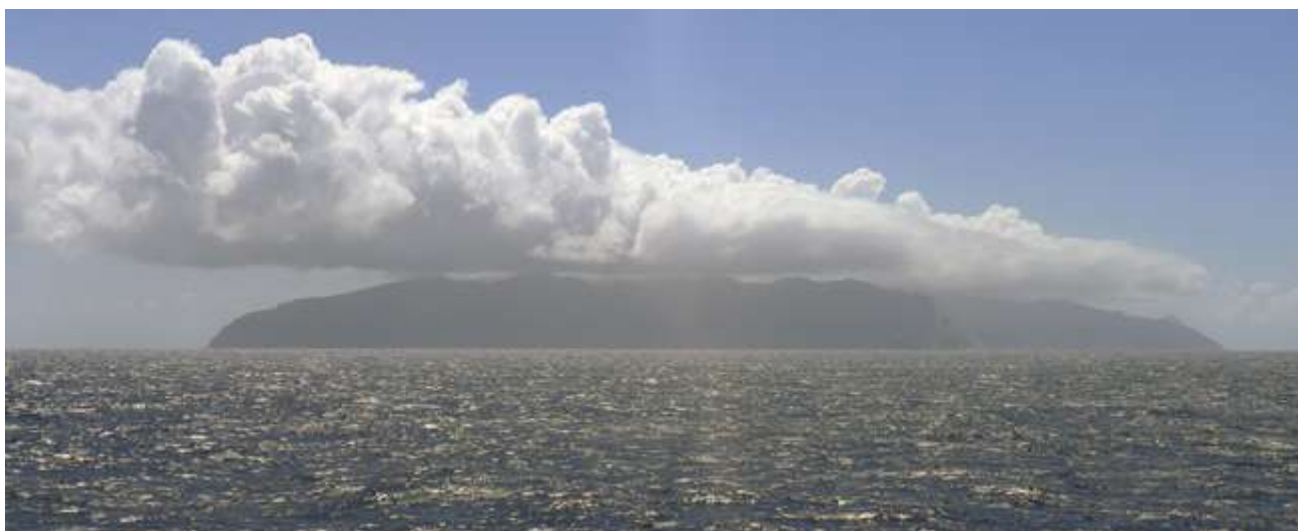
Below: An immature **Masked Booby** eyes us as it soars over the ship.





Left: A **Madeiran Storm Petrel** on our approach to the island.

Below: **St Helena**. The trailing cloud is caused by the lifting of the humid SE trade wind over the island. The air cools and the moisture condenses to form a long **cumulus** which brings welcome rain showers to the island which sits on the **African** side of the **mid- Atlantic Trench**.



At **5°43' S**, 1200 miles west of **Angola** and 1800 miles east of **Brazil**, the island is **sub-tropical**, being kept at a comfortable temperature by the Trade Winds. But suddenly, there was colour! Flowers like **Canna Lillies** that we certainly cannot grow outside at home were in bloom in the town. As befitted a place of exile for **Napoleon Bonaparte**, there were plenty of signs that the island was once heavily militarised (**above**).



Fairy Terns were flying around here and one was perched on one of the church's ledges. It is somewhat strange to see these enchanting seabirds fluttering around the tops of trees and diving into the canopies to sit on branches. They nest – if that is the right word – in trees. They build no nest but simply lay their eggs on bare branches.



Alas, many eggs come to grief in high winds and splatter onto the ground.

Right: An angelic **Fairy Tern** perched on the church. A pair or two apparently nest on the ledges. Although the terns are as white as the driven snow, their dark eyes are encircled by a narrow band of black feathers. Could this be an anti-glare arrangement? Without a doubt, in the fierce tropical light, their plumage is dazzling.



After a suitably cool libation in **Anne's Place**, I tackled the 699 steps of **Jacob's Ladder** which led up to a fort and provided a splendid view over **Jamestown** and the bay in which **Plancius** was anchored (**left**).

On the top, near some gun emplacements which overlooked the sea, a pair of **Peaceful Doves** were having a drink from a filthy looking drain. This species was introduced from **Australia**. The story of the island's land birds is an all too familiar one. Whatever was here before human settlement, only one remains – the **Wirebird**, which is an upland plover – of which more, later. The species currently on the island are all aliens. I saw two



more within the space of two minutes, a **Canary** and a small party of pretty little **St. Helena Waxbills**, an **Estrildid** finch from **Africa**. I also saw at various times **Common Mynahs**, **Fodies** – a weaver finch from **Madagascar**, the males of which are scarlet in the breeding season, and **Java Sparrows**. The view from the fort overlooking the sea was spectacular and, on the sheer cliffs on which the gun platforms were built, were nesting **Red-billed Tropic Birds**. They were well below me but the birds were sallying forth over the blue ocean and sweeping back often in twos and threes, calling excitedly.



Above: What a tail! A **Red-billed Tropic Bird** passing the cliff far below me. Those long streamers must be a bit of a drag and prevent the bird being very manoeuvrable. These seabirds tend to fly quite high over the sea with fast wing beats. They are strong fliers – see the **Ascension Island** supplement.

I retraced my footsteps down **Jacob's Ladder** and after once again, visiting **Anne's Place**, watched **Java Sparrows** gathering prior to roosting in the trees along the water front.

Right: Three out of a line of **Java Sparrows** sitting on a cable. These come from **SE Asia** and are common cage birds. I used to have a pair. The sexes are similar and they are not 'sparrows' but are closely related to the **Manikins**.



Below: A lovely, calm and balmy tropical sunset to conclude our first day on shore at **St Helena**.



20th April.

Weather: Fine. 27°C 1012 Mbs. A brisk SE wind was blowing.

The first tour to the seabird stacks to south of the island was run this morning. Run by **Graham Sim**, his passenger launch, **Gannet III**, came to pick us up at the gangway at 09.00hrs. While the birders 'bagged' the 'pointy end', most of us sat in the rear which was not quite so ideal when it came to seeing the wildlife and photographing it. We motored along the coast full of geological interest because of the various layers of volcanic effluvia which were in places folded, and dissected by steep sided valleys. The first real excitement was a large pod of **dolphins** which played around the boat for some time while the **Gannet III** circled them. Although they seemed to be about the same size as



Bottle-nosed, they were **Pantropical Spotted Dolphins**. They are not always very spotted but have characteristically white 'lips' and tip of the nose.

Below : A very small part of the large pod of **dolphins** that played around the launch.



Above: A **Pantropical Spotted Dolphin** shows its white 'lips' as it breaks the surface to breathe.



These dolphins were executing a lot of high leaps but catching them in mid air was hit and miss. I missed!



Although calm on this side of the island, the stacks that we are heading for are round the corner where the swell whipped up by the SE wind would make for a rather lively ride. Occasional **Red-billed Tropic Birds**, **Noddies** and **Masked Boobies** flew by.

Right: An immature **Masked Booby** makes a low pass over the launch, its yellowish eyes clearly focussed on us. They have a degree of binocular vision, all the better to focus on their fish prey.



Left: An adult soars overhead, its webbed feet drooping to act as air-brakes. **Note** that the under wing coverts are all white, unlike those of the pale-phase **Red-footed Booby** that we see in abundance when we reach **Ascension Island**.



Left: A **Red-billed Tropic Bird** wings its way towards the stacks where we are heading.

Below: Finally we reach the them. Surrounded by choppy blue water, these bastions of basalt have weathered in such a way as to provide plenty of ledges for seabirds to nest on. There was a plateau on top on which the **Masked Boobies** were nesting. They kept flying very high while we circled the stack.



Right: **Fairy Terns**, dazzling in the intense sunlight. There were many of these birds flying around us, calling loudly. They were often in pairs like this.





Above: A **Fairy Tern** momentarily hovers over our launch. It's a bird fit to fly with the angels!



Above: A **Brown Noddy**; the red hull of the launch is reflected on the underside of the far wing. Apart from these birds, there were large numbers of the smaller **Black Noddy**.



Left: The **noddies** were resting and/or nesting around the base of the stack like this. Here, there is a mixture of the two species although the glare from the guano makes it rather difficult to pick them out.

Right: Which is which? The foreground bird is a **Brown Noddy** – the others are **Black Noddies**I think!



Right: Black Noddies. Smaller with relatively longer bills, blacker plumage and with more white on the crowns than the milk chocolate coloured **Brown** species.



The **Noddies** are pantropical and the **Black** occurs in **Australia** where I have seen them nesting on **Heron Island**, on the **Great Barrier Reef**. There, they build flimsy nests in **Pisonia** trees, a species which depends upon birds to spread their seeds from island to island. The sticky, spikey seeds adhere to feathers. The problem arises when, occasionally, the plumage becomes so glued up that the birds cannot fly and starve to death, thus defeating the objective of the tree' adaptation.



Left: A couple of **Black Noddies** on a ledge encrusted with guano which has formed 'stalactites' around the edges.

Below: A **Brown Noddy** sweeps past the launch.



Left: A **Brown Noddy** with a pair of **Black Noddies**. I noticed that many of these birds were sun-bathing with the wings facing the sun partly stretched out, and usually the birds were staring straight at the sun itself – a posture typical of sun-bathing. Why they should have been doing this is a mystery. After all, their dark plumage must absorb the heat of the sun very effectively. Does the pale crown act as a reflector and help to keep the brain cool?

Apparently one **Sooty Tern** was spotted.

Right: This bird caused a flurry of excitement – a **Pomarine Skua** circling very high above the sea and a long way from its breeding range in the far north. They winter well south of the equator, doubtless harrying **Boobies** and **Noddies**, and **Arctic Terns** as they migrate through these latitudes.

We returned to **Jamestown** to dine at **Anne's Place** on a fine **Wahoo** steak and chips – an excellent tropical fish dish.



As I had missed out on the trip to see the **Wirebird** on the afternoon we arrived, I asked the island's 'Wirebird Man', **Eddie Duff** to take me to see them. **Lydia Artiola** accompanied me as she also had not signed up for the initial trip. Although a wader, this is the only endemic 'land' bird on the island. There are only about 2-400 of them left and they live on the open uplands of **St Helena** where they are the focus of an **RSPB** project to protect them from feral **Cats** and **Common Mynahs** – the latter species attacks the eggs. **Jamestown** displays the native bird and the endemic flower.

Eddie drove us across the luxuriantly vegetated centre of the island in his 4-wheel drive to the area where some of the **Wirebirds** nest. This was called **Deadwood Plain (right)**. Grazed by cattle to prevent the invasion of more shrubby vegetation which would spoil it for these rare birds, the area of rolling grassland stretched down to the edge of craggy cliffs of crumbling volcanic rock (**below**).



Small parties of **Common Mynahs** were hunting for insects and there were even a few **Cattle Egrets** which, I guess, would not be against taking the odd **Wirebird** chick. **Eddie** quickly pointed out some young **Wirebirds** running about the

grass. However, he was keen to show us a nest, which he duly found. The adult is a lanky plover – indeed, its name derives from the fact that it looks as though the body is mounted on thin 'wire-like' stilts. The nest that Eddie had in mind was a scrape on a bare patch of soil set amid a broken sward of **Hottentot Fig**. The bird was sitting on its eggs when we approached, but quickly ran off a few yards when we emerged from the car. Our guide challenged us to spot the eggs, but to no avail, the reason being that the bird quickly kicks soil over them when it leaves. Eddie gently uncovered the clutch of two – a normal size – to reveal how well the eggs are camouflaged without really needing



to be covered. Apparently, the shells are pale blue with dark spots when freshly laid but gradually become dark brown with black spots.

Left: Spot the **Wirebird** on its nest.

Below: The long-legged **Wirebird**.



Above: The eggs.



What interested me was that this unique little plover performed a broken-wing routine when it left its nest. The bird feigns an injury and shuffles along the ground which encourages potential nest robbers and predators to follow and thus be lured away from the precious nest. I managed to obtain a picture of the display, showing the splayed wings, spread tail and crouched posture (**right**). It is sometimes called the 'rodent run' display. Of course, once the adult realises its ploy has worked and the chicks and nest are safe, it takes off and lands where it can keep watch, if necessary, giving a repeat performance.



Later on, **Eddie** located a very young chick which crouched in response to our approach. It too was camouflaged.



So, here we have a bird, closely related to the **African Kitlitze Plover** that retains a full set of anti-predator behaviour. Admittedly, the birds have plenty of enemies in the form of birds and mammals but these are recent introductions. It is therefore unlikely that this behaviour has evolved to fool them. The conclusion has to be that this behaviour has been retained from the ancestral stock which originally

came to **St Helena** and was maintained by some kind of predation pressure from whatever was here at the time. Perhaps the island once had birds that preyed upon the plovers, their eggs and chicks. Whatever they were, they have long since gone – but now replaced by camp followers of man like the wretched **Norwegian Rat** and feral **Cats**. We were told that all domestic cats must be tagged and I believe neutered.



Left: A **Wirebird** and its chick.

Below: The **Wirebird** that we originally saw returns to its nest to settle onto its eggs.



Eddie took us to other locations, giving us the full four hour tour, during which we had a good view of a **Chukar Partridge**. Needless to say, it is a species introduced for sport.



Above: A **Chukar** – a species very much like the **Red-legged Partridge**, and **right,** a **Cattle Egret** looking somewhat more healthy than the exhausted bird that which aboard in **Antarctica!**



21st April. The morning was devoted to a historic tour of the island with especial reference to **Napoleon's** enforced stay and ultimate death in **1821**.



On the 15th October 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte arrived on the *Northumberland* to begin his exile on **St Helena**. After a few days, he stayed at **The Briars** before being transferred to **Longwood House**. He liked **The Briars** and one can see why. Although the grounds are now full of colourful and mature plants, the house has a commanding view over **Jamestown** towards the sea.



Above: A statue of the defeated Emperor in **The Briars**.

Right: A view of the garden.



The Briars and **Longwood** are now **French** property and are shrines to the famous prisoner.

Right: A view of the interior of the island. Being volcanic, the soil is rich in minerals. Nearly every plant is an alien, and many of them thoroughly undesirable, especially **Sisal**. Once the trade in their fibres collapsed, this species has spread across great swathes of the landscape and is difficult to eradicate.





Left: Napoleon's grave situated in a rather lovely, sylvan grove with tree frogs piping away; and his **death mask**. It was moulded two days after his death because no plaster of Paris could be found! His ashes have long since been removed to **France**. Despite accounts to the contrary, he probably died of stomach cancer, not arsenic poisoning.

Right: Longwood House where **Napoleon** spent his last years. It is full of memorabilia, his bed and lead bath. Fascinating.

We concluded the afternoon with a visit to the **Governor's House** with rolling lawns and **Giant Tortoises** – I think from **Aldabra**.



As the sun started to drift towards the western horizon, we sailed away from this attractive island with great billowing cumulus hovering over it. We embark on the 700 or so mile voyage to **Ascension Island** that will take a good three days.