



Looking back from Toru
to the Snares

COUNTING BIRDS IN THE SUB-ANTARCTIC

BY HENK HAAZEN, MASTER OF *RV TIAMA*

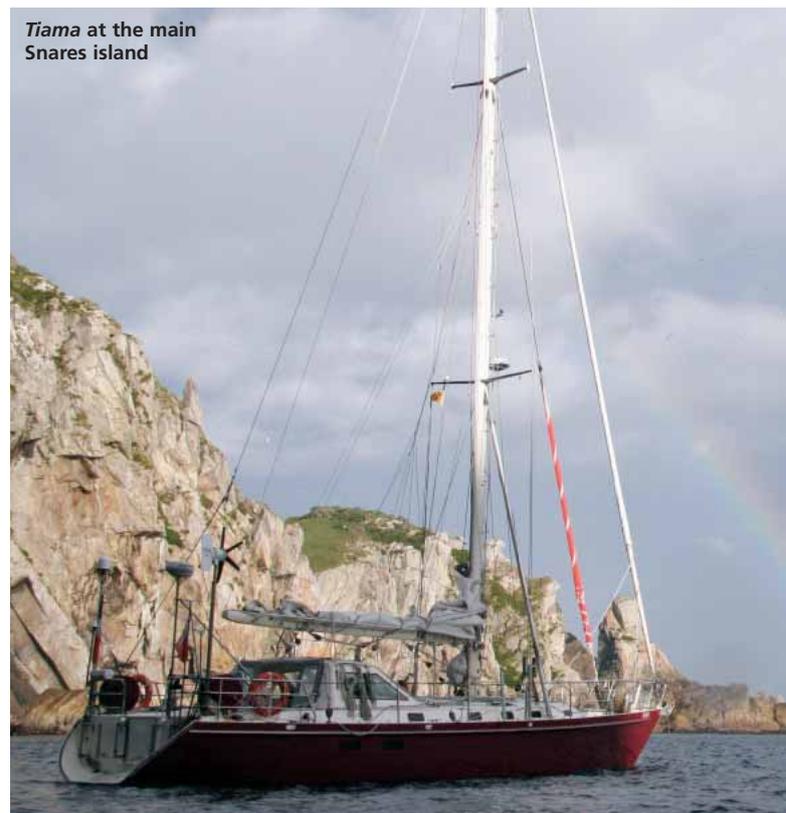
Salvin's Albatross Expedition 2008. A light hearted account of a voyage to one of the most remote corners of New Zealand.

We left the friendly port of Bluff on the last Sunday of September on *RV Tiama* and headed to a remote group of five islands which together, are known as the Western Chain. They lie about 3.5nm SW of the main Snares Islands

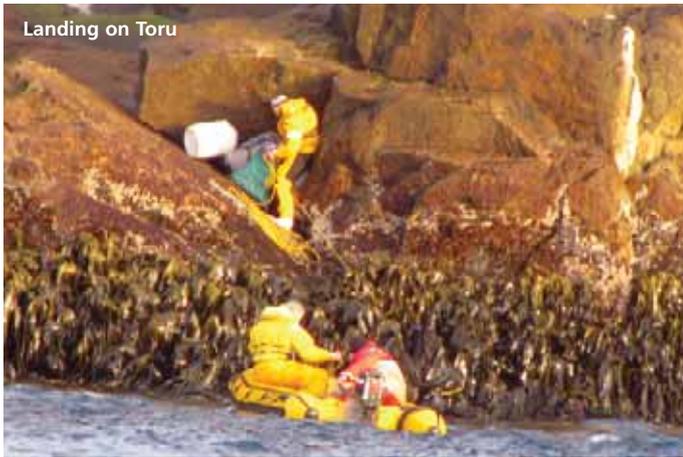
The prime objective of the 22 day expedition was to do a thorough survey of the Salvin's albatross population on these islands which are known numerically in Maori as, Tahi, Rua, Toru, Wha and Rima. The work included a complete population count, banding of adults to determine survival, and tracking of the birds to determine their at sea distribution and areas of potential overlap with fishing activity. This was the first year of a three year study, administered by the Minister of Fisheries, carried out by NIWA and coordinated by marine ecologist, Paul Sagar.

As well as the two people who were going to carry out the Salvin's work, we also had a team of four Department of Conservation (DOC) staff onboard who planned to stay ashore on North East Island, the main island of the Snares, to carry out a census of the Snares' crested penguin there, and on nearby Broughton Island. All together, this made for a full boat as *Tiama* is surveyed to carry eight people maximum.

We left a day earlier than planned to avoid some strong SW winds forecast for the near future. The voyage from Bluff to the Snares is about 120nm and takes us about 20 hours on average to get there. The trip was mostly uneventful although I did get caught out by a strong 60 knot gust rolling off the bitter end of SW Cape, Stewart Island, which managed to blow a rip in the main sail ►



Tiama at the main
Snares island



before we could get it down. So we had some sewing to do when we got to the Snares.

The team doing the hands-on work on the Salvin's albatross comprised two experienced people, Jeremy Carroll and Matt Charteris. Jeremy was, until recently, working as a DOC ranger for the New Zealand sub-Antarctic islands out of the Southern Islands office in Invercargill. He is a bit of a walking encyclopedia when it comes to the New Zealand sub-Antarctic, having led many an expedition there on previous occasions. Of late he has obtained an ILM maritime qualification, so he is of some use onboard as well. Matt has also misspent way too many summer seasons in the New Zealand sub-Antarctic and other offshore islands for DOC and other organisations, working on a large variety of birds and various other survey/study programmes. Both of these guys are handy to have around for a tough job, and this expedition had the potential to be exactly that.

The Salvin's albatross breed on two islands in the Western Chain, Toru and Rima. The only other population is breeding on the remote Bounty Islands. What these two island groups have in common is that they are very exposed, wind-swept rock outcrops in the Southern Ocean, almost devoid of vegetation other than lichens, tufts of grass and moss in a few sheltered corners. They seem an unlikely place to build your nest considering that there are much more sheltered and greener islands close by. Maybe the reason the birds breed here has to do with the fact that these places are so hard to reach for us mere humans without wings.

The only other expedition to camp on the islands and study the Salvin's albatrosses was in 1995. They arrived on Jerry Clark's boat *Totorore*. Previously, scientific parties had made day landings in 1984, 1976, 1972, 1964 and in 1947. So the place is not visited a lot and there is an obvious reason for that when you get up close. The islands are steep-sided, rising from the sea floor like walls, sticking 25 to 45 metres out of the water. They all lay in a SW to NW direction in line with the prevailing winds and swell, which march alongside them in an endless procession. The depths close in are still 40 to 70 metres, so anchoring is never really a possibility, even if the wind and sea state would allow it. September/October seemed to supply us with an unrelenting series of SW to Westerly near gales followed by a brief period of strong NW winds.

Given the relative small size of the islands and the minimal space available for a campsite, Matt and Jeremy opted to go as a tight little team of two rather than a larger group that would require more equipment to be hauled ashore and could have a bigger impact on the bird population. Both of them were keen to get on to the rock (as we ended up calling it) and get on with the work. We had a very clear brief from Paul Sagar before we left: don't take unnecessary risks trying to get ashore, personal and ship safety being paramount. He realised it might prove impossible to get ashore at all given, the time of year and the prevailing weather conditions. We all agreed

with Paul on this, especially since all members of the team were well past the age where one feels bullet proof.

It took seven days after arriving at the main Snares Island group before we considered it wise to give it a go getting ashore. During those seven days we went out to the Western Chain almost every other day to see what landing conditions were like in different wind directions/sea states. We were scouting for a good landing site, but none looked perfect. We figured out that in strong south westerly or westerly winds the swell made landing anywhere on the islands impossible, but a north westerly created a little lee on the eastern side of Toru and after a day the southerly swell went down somewhat, enough for it to be within safe workable levels. We also realised that there would always be a three to four metre residual surge running along side the best landing spot.

For the drop-off and pick-up Matt and Jeremy wore Musto dry suits with life jackets over the top of them, just in case they ended up in the water. Before setting off, we all agreed not to attempt a landing if any of us felt uncomfortable with the conditions. Matt got ashore first, stepping (leaping is a better word) off at the top of the surge. I then backed the inflatable quickly off the wall and we sent over a heaving line. Attached to this was a perforated fabric bucket fabricated onboard by *Tiama's* trusty crewmember Ross Watters, an old salt and a rigger to boot who knows about these old style marine things.

This flexible bucket was filled with the expedition's equipment and passed back and forth from dinghy to shore. It took three inflatable boatloads and two hours of work to get everything ashore. The team had to be prepared to stay ashore for at least three weeks in case the weather would not allow us to get them off again. Eating the bird population, even in an emergency, was not an option.

Once ashore, their first priority was to find a spot to put up their tents. The camping site they choose looked precarious from the seaward side, but in reality was safe enough although not very comfortable due to the non existence of any flat spots to erect the tents. They also stashed away emergency survival equipment in one of the shallow caves higher up. The islands are mostly granite. Driving a tent peg into the ground was not an option so they used rocks, lines and weights to keep the tents from flying away. The wind never really slowed below 20 knots for any length of time and was mostly well in excess of that.

Paul Sagar had allowed 21 days at the Snares to create an opportunity to work around the weather to get the team ashore, carry out the work and pick them back up. Although the actual work could be done in a shorter period if the opportunity was there.

We stayed in touch with the shore party via a daily (sometimes twice daily) radio schedule, relaying specific detailed weather information around the Snares which we received onboard via email from the Invercargill based weather forecaster Andy



The study area

Frazer (Forty Five South). One particularly cold southerly was accompanied by a severe hailstorm that left a thick layer of hailstones on deck. In the morning we had to admit to the shore party that we were thinking of them as we turned up our diesel heater onboard *Tiama* while they lay on the rocks huddled in sleeping bags.

As it was, they spent a total of seven days on Toru. They had to work long hours but managed to carry out the majority of the planned work. Some of this entailed banding birds, deploying electronic tracking equipment, recording band numbers from previously banded birds, and doing a census of breeding birds. They counted 828 breeding pairs on Toru and 279 pairs on Rima.

After those first seven days a weather window appeared to pick them up. Too good to miss really and once back onboard they were very happy with the warm and above all, level bunks on the good ship *Tiama*. During the next few days we went back several times to the Western Chain looking for an opportunity to land on Rima. Eventually the weather conditions allowed us to drop them off one morning and then pick them up again in the afternoon. This allowed them to conduct a full census of the albatross population on Rima.

The team also wanted to go ashore on some of the other islands in the group to do a census of other breeding sea birds, but in the end we had to give up on this as there was never an opportunity to do it safely.

While the survey team was on Toru, *Tiama* and her crew did some logistical support work for the DOC team back on North East Island, taking them to hard to reach coastal Snares crested penguin colonies. At night we would seek shelter on the coast of the main Snares Islands. The only small boat harbour is in Ho Ho Bay on the east coast of North East Island. It is a very tight little spot. The only way to stay there is to use lines ashore as there is not enough swinging room to be anchored. Ho Ho Bay is a good spot as long as it blows from the SW or west. As soon as it turns to the NW a swell starts wrapping around the north side of the Snares and rolls into the bay. It is ok in

there with winds up to about 35 knots NW, but when it gets over that the situation becomes uncomfortable.

We did find ourselves in exactly that uncomfortable position one night when a forecasted 35 knots NW came with a few 50 to 60 knot gusts in the middle of a black night, the sort of wind that makes it impossible to walk on deck without hanging onto some hardware.

Tiama's shorelines are three 100m coils of 29mm diameter polypropylene. They held us nicely in position that night although, when we coiled the lines up in the morning, they were very stiff and crackly. Obviously they had done most of a lifetime's work that night and were ready for early retirement. The skipper sprouted a few more grey hairs during the night as well.

You can find other anchorages of a sort around the coast of the triangular shaped North East Island, but there is always a swell running and if there is a stiff breeze, the wind seems to wrap right around the island wherever you go. The holding is amongst big boulders, the sort of boulders that trap anchors and wear the galvanising off the chain in no time.

So all in all, from a boating point of view it is not exactly paradise, but all of this is compensated somewhat by the amazing wildlife all around you. Somebody once claimed there are more seabirds in the Snares than the whole of the British Isles. This might be a bit of an exaggeration but at sunrise the Olearia forest comes alive with approximately 1.7 million pairs of Sooty Shearwaters (Titi) waking up and creating this amazing busy buzzing vibrating sound. It is the most incredible thing I have ever heard. Even when observing this from the boat you can almost touch the sound, it is that thick. Then the birds set off on their daily foraging trips in great clouds only to return to rest at sunset, blocking the light until they settle.

We left the Snares on October 16 and arrived back in Bluff the next day. We plan to return again next year to do it all over again and to see which birds are still alive out there and where they have flown in the meantime. For more on *Tiama* go to www.tiama.com



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