

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 23rd October 2023

BirdLife South Africa joins global island conservation initiative to save internationally important seabirds at risk from non-native rodents on Marion Island

Conservation powerhouse BirdLife South Africa has joined the Island-Ocean Connection Challenge (IOCC) – a global initiative aiming to restore, rewild and protect islands, oceans and communities – to support its work to save internationally significant albatross populations at risk from invasive house mice.

Through BirdLife South Africa, Marion Island - a remote and windswept refuge halfway between Cape Town and Antarctica, and the largest of the two Prince Edward Islands – now joins this important conservation movement. The Mouse-Free Marion Project was established by BirdLife South Africa and the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment to restore Marion Island's natural ecosystem and biodiversity, and reclaim this globally significant island as a sanctuary for seabirds.

Marion Island is home to a quarter of the world's Wandering Albatrosses which are currently threatened, along with 27 other seabird species. Marion Island was, and should be, a haven for wildlife, but invasive house mice accidentally introduced by sealers in the early-1800s have devastated the island's invertebrates and plants, and the resultant food shortage has driven the mice to now prey on seabirds.

The IOCC aims to restore and rewild 40 globally significant islands worldwide by 2030, from sub-Antarctic islands like Marion Island to tropical islands bursting with colourful marine life and coral. Restoring islands by removing invasive species is repeatedly proven to be one of the most impactful ways to restore biodiversity and island ecosystems. There have been more than 1,000 successful island invasive species eradications worldwide resulting in long-term benefits, including increased seabirds, landbirds and native plants, recovery of natural ecosystem functions, protected and thriving reefs, and a more climate-resilient island.

Mark D. Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, BirdLife South Africa explains: "Islands are biodiversity hotspots and therefore provide a crucial focus of global conservation efforts. We have joined the IOCC to add impetus to international action restoring islands by tackling the important environmental issue of invasive alien species. Marion Island is home to two million seabirds, including four species of albatrosses and a range of other species including petrels, prions and penguins, several of which are threatened with extinction. It is vital that we remove the invasive mice, as otherwise Wandering Albatrosses – arguably the most iconic of the ocean-wandering seabirds – and the majority of Marion Island's globally important seabirds, could become locally extinct."

“Rodent-free islands offer a glimmer of hope in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss. Successful eradications have shown that islands can recover to their former ecological condition in a relatively short time. Joining the IOCC will raise awareness of the current risk posed to Marion Island, and the urgency needed to prevent the worst-case scenario from happening. We are delighted to have joined this important worldwide initiative and, by being part of it, look to make a step-change in protecting Marion Island’s biodiversity forever.”



*Wandering Albatross on Marion Island (L) and Marion Island’s coastline (R). Credit Otto Whitehead.
[High-res versions, and other images, are available]*

Dr Anton Wolfaardt, Mouse-Free Marion Project Manager, adds: “Put simply, if we can remove invasive mice from Marion Island we can address once and for all one of the significant threats that the island’s seabirds face, and thus facilitate a favourable conservation future for this globally important island and its magnificent seabirds. Rather than containing or mitigating the threat, we solve it. Although the seabird populations on Marion Island are being increasingly impacted by mice, we have an opportunity to intervene to remove that threat, and allow the seabird populations to recover naturally without the need for species reintroduction programmes.”

“The global importance of the seabird populations on Marion Island cannot be overstated, so we must do everything in our power to protect them. Becoming part of the IOCC will help us achieve this goal and contribute to global biodiversity objectives.”

Dr Penny Becker, Vice President Conservation at Island Conservation, a co-founder of the Island-Ocean Connection Challenge (IOCC) says: “Indigenous knowledge, combined with emerging science, shows us that everything is connected. Restoring and rewilding islands is not just an act of conservation; it is one of our most powerful defences building resiliency against climate change. By nurturing these ecosystems, we build stronger environments and help biodiversity hotspots like Marion Island to recover.”

Ben Goldsmith, Chair - Conservation Collective, “Eradicating invasive species from islands offers perhaps the greatest bang for your buck in nature restoration. Once freed of invasive rats, goats, or – in this case – invasive mice, the recovery of nature on these islands is just extraordinary to see. Moreover, restoring island ecosystems has a huge healing effect on the surrounding ocean too.”

The Mouse-Free Marion Project enjoys global support from five Patrons committing to save seabird populations on Marion Island: His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, renowned conservationist and ornithologist Peter Harrison MBE, Japanese broadcaster Christel Takigawa, South African businesswoman and entrepreneur Gloria Serobe, and Antarctic scientist and conservationist Professor Steven Chown. Each will be working to highlight the urgent need to protect Marion Island

and its seabirds in their respective countries and sectors, helping the Mouse-Free Marion Project go from strength to strength.

At 30,000 hectares, the removal of invasive house mice from Marion Island will be the largest rodent eradication project in the world to be undertaken in a single operation. The Mouse-Free Marion Project is also supported by BirdLife International, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other conservation organisations.

To watch a short film about this globally important initiative, and to find out more about the Mouse-Free Marion Project, visit <https://mousefreemarion.org/about-the-project/>

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Notes to editors

For further information, to arrange interviews or receive high-res images, please contact the Culture Communications Collective or BirdLife South Africa on:

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Available to interview

- **Mark D. Anderson**, CEO of BirdLife South Africa
- **Dr Anton Wolfaardt**, Mouse-Free Marion Project Manager

About the Mouse-Free Marion Non-Profit Company

The Mouse-Free Marion Non-Profit Company (MFM NPC) is a special purpose vehicle that has been set up by BirdLife South Africa to execute their responsibilities under the Memorandum of Understanding with the Republic of South Africa's Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, to facilitate the implementation of the project. It has a Board made up of individuals with considerable experience in the field of Non-Profits, environmental programmes and business.

About BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in more than 115 countries and territories worldwide.

More information at www.birdlife.org.za

About the Prince Edward Islands

The islands are 2,100 kilometres from Cape Town and a South African territory. The island group was declared a Special Nature Reserve in 1995 in order to enhance protection of its flora and fauna. The Prince Edward Island group is designated as Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, and is surrounded by a large Marine Protected Area that includes all territorial waters and large parts of the Exclusive Economic Zone.

More detail on the delivery of Mouse-Free Marion

The project has launched a fundraising campaign to raise funds for the delivery of the project as outlined below:

- **MARINE AND AIR TRANSPORTATION** – The South African polar supply and research vessel owned by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, *S.A. Agulhas II*, will provide transportation to and from Marion Island for personnel, bait, aircraft, equipment, and supplies. Marion Island is remote – approximately 2100 km from Cape Town, South Africa and without an airfield.
- **BAIT** – A specially formulated rodenticide bait used on over 600 successful invasive species eradications on islands around the world will be manufactured and shipped to Marion Island for this purpose.
- **PERSONNEL** - Skilled and experienced pilots, GPS specialists, financial, administrative and permitting specialists, a ground team of technicians and practitioners to load bait buckets, and a marine support team on the *S.A. Agulhas II* are critical to support the operation.
- **EQUIPMENT AND FUEL** – Specialized bait buckets are needed for each helicopter to deliver the bait. Items such as GPS and satellite communications equipment, aviation fuel, and protective clothing and equipment for the crew will facilitate the operation.
- **MONITORING** – Monitoring to ensure success will be undertaken using best practice methods both immediately after the operation but also as part of a robust biosecurity plan.
- **BIOSECURITY** – Ongoing implementation of a robust biosecurity regime to help prevent any further introductions will protect the rodent-free status of the island following the eradication.

About the Island Ocean Connection Challenge (IOCC)

- The Island-Ocean Connection Challenge is a global initiative dedicated to the holistic restoration of at least 40 globally significant island ecosystems, from ridge-to-reef. By partnering with communities, conservation organizations, funders, and researchers, the IOCC aims to scale island restoration and rewilding efforts. Through collaboration, we strive to benefit biodiversity, climate resilience, and the well-being of island communities.
- To learn more about the IOCC and our mission, please visit www.jointheiocc.org.