

ANTARCTICA, SOUTH GEORGIA, AND THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

22 January 2024 - 9 February 2024

In February 2021 I had planned a trip to Antarctica with South Georgia and the Falkland islands to celebrate one of my “monumental age” birthdays. However we all know where that went and I had put that trip back on the shelf with the Covid lockdown. Fast forward to last year when my travel buddy, Deb Bradley, told me she was planning on going with her partner Chris. I decided to invite myself along with my partner Steven. Her friend, Mathew Roper, joined us and took the lead in finding us a ship with a good itinerary.

Mathew found an 18 night trip with Albatros Expeditions aboard the Ocean Victory. An Australian company called Swoop was used to do all the booking.

A couple things about travel there before I get into the trip itself.

I had been to Antarctica before, but in November. My main mammal goal was to see my favorite seal, a Leopard Seal. But in November most penguins were sitting on eggs or had young chicks that were not in the water. Leopard Seals, being ambush predators, prefer catching easier targets, so they were not hanging out around the penguin colonies as much as they do later in the season. Plenty of people do see the species in November and one seal was seen on my entire November expedition, but not by me. So I figured going in the start of the year, later in the season would mean more Leopard seals (which spoiler alert it did). I also saw many more whales and dolphins than I did on the first trip, but not as many Crabeater Seals or Weddell Seals as I did on the first trip as they prefer the ice to haul out on. Going during this time also means you will not see the large harems with bulls, of Antarctic Fur Seals and Southern Elephant Seals on South Georgia. Instead you will be rewarded with a ridiculous number of curious fur seal pups and “weiner” Elephant seals (a

nick name given to the newly weaned pups after they are deserted by their mothers).

For landings, you can only have 100 people out at one time in Antarctica. On this trip there were 171 passengers. I was initially very hesitant about this as for all my polar trips it was on smaller ships. However, when possible the trip did try to have half the group on land, and the other half doing Zodiac cruises. Many of my best mammal sightings were on zodiacs. There were times however that one group would have to stay onboard while the other group was out. Luckily, I seemed to be in the group with some of the better sightings, but there were some guests that were agitated (and let everyone know it) that they were missing things.

Covid is not the only virus that caused a disturbance to my trip. H5N1, highly pathogenic avian influenza, also called the “bird flu” was present in South Georgia during my trip. The majority of the sites with the famous huge gatherings of wildlife were closed to landings because of this. It also was not just the birds that were falling victim to the virus when I was there, but seals. One famous King Penguin colony spot called Fortuna Bay was opened the day before we got there. However, when the guides went out to scout the area we could not land after they counted 74 dead seal pups on the section of beach alone that we were supposed to be at. One of the two spots we were able to land on, I saw at least a dozen dead adult seals at the end of the beach and laying in the Tussac grass. At the time of me writing this, I just read King Penguins, Gentoo Penguins and some Albatross are testing positive on South Georgia. The virus has not been detected as of me writing this on the Antarctic peninsula itself, but I think it will be a matter of time. If this does happen, landings for an unknown amount of time will be stopped. But, besides not seeing the huge numbers of baby King Penguins except through my binoculars, I did see an astounding amount of wildlife on South Georgia (more on that later). This also meant we had to have our clothing and backpacks cleaned twice by the crew, and we had to disinfect our boots every time we came back on the boat. It also meant we could not sit, kneel or crouch on the ground, anywhere that we went. My dream of being squashed by 1-2 Elephant Seal weiners as I had watched countless times on YouTube was shot down.

Regarding a cost thing. It is not a cheap trip, period, However if you have plenty of time, one thing I saw people do on both my trips (the first being young backpackers, the second retired individuals) is wait in Ushuaia, Argentina where most of the ships leave until a deal comes in. Boats do not want to sail with empty cabins, so they offer amazing discounted rates last minute. I was told there really wasn't any way to predict any of this, and one just had to just have some patience.

I also recommend because of weather, and pretty quick flight changes by Aerolinas Argentina, which services the flights to Ushuaia from Buenos Aires, that you should come to Argentina at least two days before your trip starts. The airline has the habit of cancelling flights and changing flight times quickly. Driving to Ushuaia if flights were cancelled would take about 36 hours I was told and would include a ferry crossing and going in and out of Chile.

One final thing about any polar trip is giving an itinerary of what spots you get to visit changes every day based on weather. For this trip our boat kept changing spots, even hours before ,as we raced in front of an immense brewing storm. Every day during our briefing we were shown the location of the ship in reference to how close the storm was to hitting us.

I will be sharing some penguin photos. Honorary mammals in my opinion.

Ok onto the trip.

Day 1 - Involved all the formalities of checking into the boat, getting onto the boat, then having an evening sailing into the Beagle Channel heading south.

Day 2 - All day sailing in the Drake Passage. The passage that connects the Southwestern portion of the Atlantic Ocean to the Southeastern portion of the Pacific Ocean is well known for either being a smooth ride (nicknamed the Drake Lake), or just the opposite. The collision of cold



water from the south to warm water from the north, with a nice touch of harsh winds and occasional heavy storms makes this part of any voyage south not pleasant for anyone prone to sea sickness. While I did not experience the horrific effects of going through it like I did on my first trip where furniture in my room was getting lifted and thrown around, this time it was “just enough” to keep me bed bound most of the day into the next morning. Hourglass dolphins were called out at one point during the day as being seen. Matt was able to get a few shots of them next to the boat.

Day 3 - My sleeping in a bit, combined with the effects of the previous day meant I again missed Hourglass Dolphins in the morning and some Long - Finned Pilot Whales. Mid day we also had a briefing and were introduced to one of the ships passengers Alistair Feathergill. Alistair was one of the

producers for the BBC that had helped with such shows as Frozen Planet with Sir David Attenborough. He provided us with videos and entertaining back stories about David and about the making of that program as well as several others. By the afternoon we made it to Deception Island for our first landing. Deception Island is one of the current two live volcanoes that you can sail a ship into. After sailing through Neptune's Bellows we were taken into a sheltered area called Whaler's Bay. As the name implies, this was a huge whaling station that still has some of the man made remains, as well as the remains of a British research base that had to be abandoned in 1969 during an eruption. We were told on a clear day you can see the bay floor littered with bones from unlucky whales. We were able to land and take a walk along the beach. A few Chinstrap and Gentoo penguins were there, as well as some people seeing a lone Antarctic Fur Seal in the water. After the landing we left and headed south along the Bransfield Strait towards the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Day 4 - we sailed through the Gerlache Strait south. This would be the first sightings of Humpback Whales for the trip. Some next to the boat, some sleeping in the water and some breaching. I saw one sleeping in the water with huge rake mark scars on its back most likely from Orcas. In fact I saw so many Humpbacks on this trip that I joked that I set eyes on all of them in the Southern Ocean.





Our first landing spot was Danco Island. Named after a Belgian scientist Emile Danco, the spot has a sizable Gentoo Penguin rookery. We were split into a landing group and a zodiac cruising group. I was in the landing group first. As I exited the zodiac onto land, I asked the expedition leader Phil to let me know if anyone was seeing a leopard seal. I took the time to look in the water around the beach and after seeing nothing, climbed upwards on a very icy path to the main parts of the rookery. After making my way down, Deb came running towards me, very excited, asking if I had heard the radio call that there was a leopard seal seen. People from my group were already lined up for their turn on a zodiac cruise and it took all my willpower to not shove my way to the front to get in the water. When I was close to boarding I asked Phil “in the water or hauled out????????!!!!!!!” And was then told the seal was hauled out. Phil told our driver to take us to the ice with the seal first. But to my surprise it was



not just one Leopard Seal hauled out, but two on the ice and a smaller individual in the water! The smaller one then hauled out next to a much larger female so we watched three leopard seals in close proximity. After





taking what seemed like a thousand pictures, we then went on a cruise in the ice and found a fourth Leopard Seal hauled out! All in all the perfect cruise. We also saw an Antarctic Minke Whale during the cruising.



After this perfect morning we headed to a spot called Sadler Point in Wilhelmina Bay for a zodiac cruise. The bay was filled with ice up against a large glacier. The bay was also filled with numerous Humpback whales,



some surfacing right next to the zodiacs. We also saw three Crabeater Seals hauled out on the ice.

Day 5 - We started the day pulling into Cierva Cove for what was supposed to be a zodiac cruise. An Antarctic research station was at the cove and I woke up to seeing the bright red buildings from my balcony. Some passengers saw Weddell Seals on ice in the cove. However, rough weather behind us started bringing down thick snow so the ship abandoned this idea and instead we went to a place that no ship usually visits called the Brequet Glacier. Passengers were able to do a “polar plunge” in the water facing the glacier.

For the afternoon we had planned to go to Hydrurga Rocks, a Chinstrap Penguin and Antarctic Shag rookery. However again, the storm behind us scrapped this plan and instead we went through the very narrow Grand Passage and stopped in front of Murray Island. From there we did a zodiac cruise in the ice around the island. We had amazing encounters with





bubble feeding Humpback whales, some so close I could almost touch them, and saw another Crabeater Seal on ice.

Day 6 -

We headed further north along the west coast of the peninsula and stopped for a morning Zodiac Cruise on Spert Island. Located in the Palmer Archipelago, this for me was one of the more beautiful scenery spots. Rock sea caves and interweaving inlets of rocks and ice, followed by stunning icebergs were around the island. We did a zodiac cruise weaving in and out of the before mentioned areas. I also saw my only



Antarctic Fur Seal bulls of the trip, looking down at us from a rocky outcrop in disapproval.



Anyone who goes to Antarctica wants to actually set foot on the continent itself. However this is not always easily done as most of the coastline is covered in ice or is up against mountains or glaciers. But after five hours of boat travel north we stopped in an area called Linblad Cove and took turns going onto a small area of exposed rock on the peninsula itself. Some people on the ship (including all male members of my team) saw what they thought was a Leopard Seal with a blood spot on some ice. We also took turns taking zodiac cruises around the cove and saw Humpback Whales, Long-Finned Pilot Whales, and staff thought they saw Annoux Beaked Whales. My boat did try to look for the Leopard Seal but could not find it.

After coming back onto the ship we went to dinner. The table my group sat at was graced by the presence of a large window facing the water. Each night at dinner I would look out and occasionally see Humpback Whales by the boat. But this night, a different marine mammal would catch my attention. Right at the end of dinner, I turned and looked outside and saw the characteristic huge black fin of the greatest marine predator on earth breaking the surface, followed by shorter fins of his pod members. Maybe it was the free wine at dinner, maybe it was because I had not seen one in years, maybe because they are just that fabulous, that I jumped straight up from the table and started yelling ORCA, ORCA, ORCA, to the tables around me (disclaimer I usually do not yell this excited when I see something and I was inside were the Orcas did not have to be directly subjected to my excitement level). This caused quite the excitement as people were scrambling to get views out the dining room windows. At about the same time, the Orcas were seen by the crew and an announcement was made over the intercom. Luckily the pod was very



curious and once our boat stopped, they proceeded to swim around it several times. Based on the location we were in and the appearance, these were Antarctic B2 type Orcas which prefer penguin on the menu.



Day 7 -

Because of all the landing closures on South Georgia due to the bird flu, the crew decided to let us spend one more day in the Antarctic peninsula. In the morning our ship sailed through the Antarctic Sound towards Paulet Island. Named after British Captain Lord George Paulet who sailed in this area on an antarctic expedition from 1839-1843, this island is home to a massive Adelie Penguin colony and rookery. Over 100,000 were estimated to be present along with their down covered chicks, and chicks from the previous year. Thousands of Adelies were also in the water and along the chunks of ice surrounding the island. After my last visit to Antarctica they became my favorite bird on the planet and all the antics on the island from adults being chased by hungry chicks to rock stealing for nests did not disappoint. The smell on the island was also quite impressive, never having been around that many penguins before at once. My group first did a zodiac cruise around the ice. We saw a lone Leopard Seal hauled out, then watched as a very brave Adelie jumped out on the same patch of ice. Our zodiac driver told us that once the chicks start going into the water in a few weeks the number of Leopard Seals there would be astounding. He said he has never seen so many as he has around this rookery. There was







also some Weddell Seals and Antarctic Fur Seals hauled out on the end of the beach. After spending our hour on land we headed back to the boat.

We were supposed to next head towards Joinville Island, but the storm we were trying to avoid got the better of us and we changed direction to head to the Danger Islands. Almost concealed by large icebergs, these islands were named by British polar explorer James Ross in 1842 when he almost ran into them. Along the way we saw another pod of B2 Orcas that looked





like they were hunting, Weddell Seals, Crabeater Seals and again more Humpback whales.

Once we got to the islands, the ships crew found a large solid ice flow. We then took turns landing and walking on the ice. After this we did a zodiac cruise around the ice. We started seeing Humpback whales, then some more, then even more. Then all of a sudden an oil slick was in the water and we were surrounded by at least 1000 Adelie Penguins in the water hunting krill. They were of course joined by the whales who were diving,





lunge feeding and bubble net feeding around us. The sounds they were making as they were surfacing right next to the zodiacs is something I will never forget. Hands down my favorite Humpback Whale experience ever.

Day 8 - We headed north on our way to South Georgia and stopped along the way at Elephant Island. Along the way Humpback whales and female Elephant Seals were seen. We did a brief stop with the ship in front of Port Wild, where Ernest Shackleton's, a famous Antarctic Explorer, crew stayed while awaiting rescue after a doomed Antarctic voyage. We then left and again headed north. Along the way Fin Whales were seen.

Day 9 - All day in the Southern Ocean. We did classes and rested, and during our pm briefing 10-20 Fin Whales next to the boat distracted us.



Day 10 - In the morning we did biosecurity briefings for South Georgia and watched videos on how they had eradicated the feral rodent and reindeer populations on the island. In the afternoon we finally made it to South Georgia. We did a ship sailing in Drygalski Fjord to the Risting Glacier. Along the way we saw multiple Antarctic Fur Seals in the water.

That evening we also had to start to close all the window blinds at night everywhere on the ship to help prevent bird strike on the windows, something that was mandatory on South Georgia.

Day 11 - we sailed to the previous whaling station of Grytviken. Established in 1904 by the Norwegians, the station was still actively processing slaughtered whales until 1965. The station now serves as a tourist destination with a small church, post office and museum as well as having some of the old processing equipment and buildings present. Ernest Shackleton is also buried here, however his grave site is currently off limits due to the bird flu. When we landed we were “greeted” by at least 20 curious Antarctic Fur seal pups along the waters edge. The station was covered in pups, an occasional female, and it also had a small colony of molting King Penguins. Almost wiped to extinction because of the fur trade, about 90 percent of the Antarctic Fur Seal population breeds on South Georgia. The end of the station also had a small haul out of Southern Elephant seal weiners.



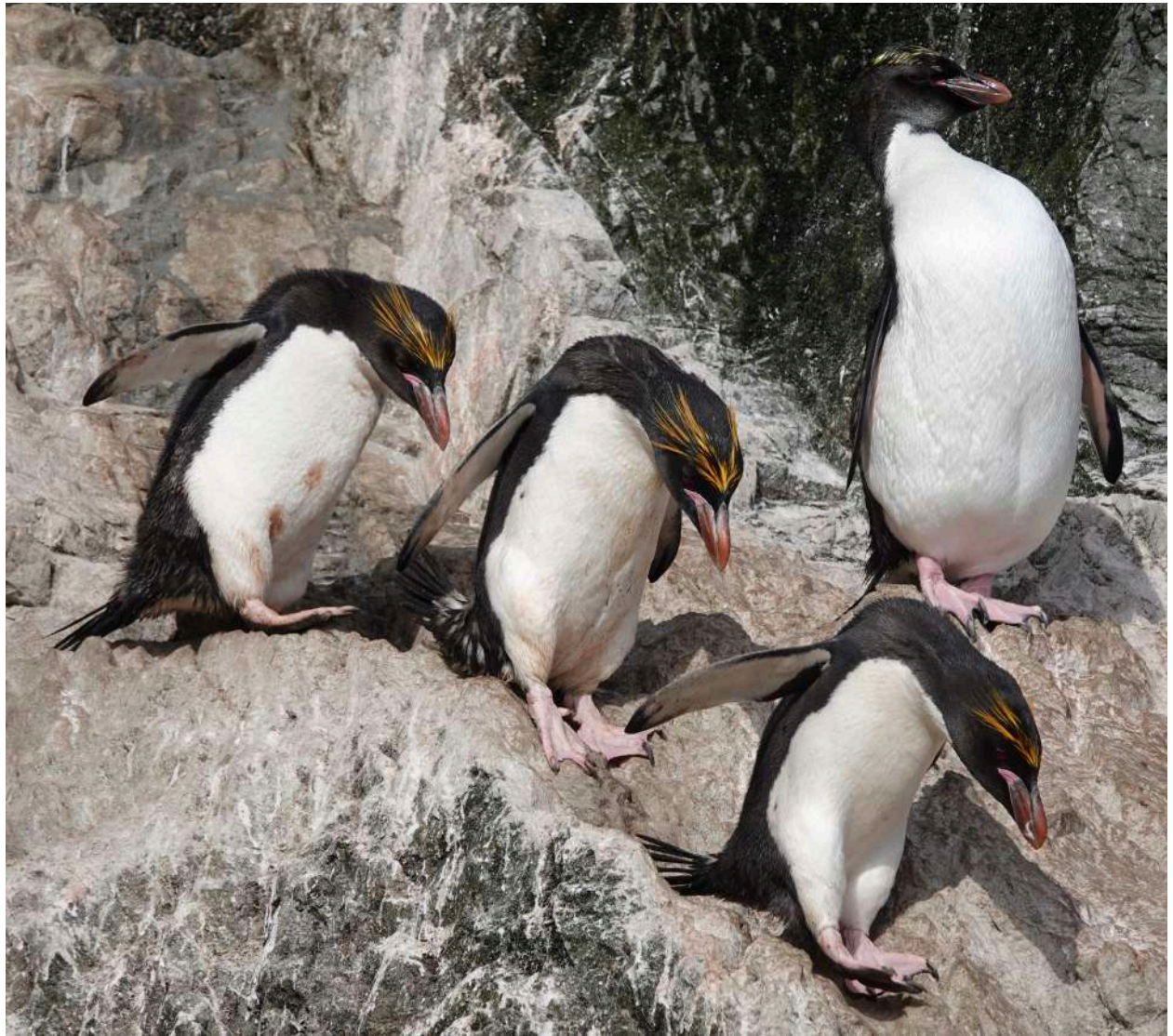




We had been told the previous evening that Fortuna Bay had just been re-opened for landings. Named after the whaling ship Fortuna, it is also home to a 20,000 strong King Penguin colony. It is the starting point where Ernest Shackleton walked across South Georgia and was a historical sealing spot. Along the way we saw SO many fur seals in the water as well as more Humpback Whales.

My group was supposed to Zodiac cruise first, then do a landing, but we watched from the ship as the expedition crew found a landing spot, briefly let people land, then started to load up again. This was the section of beach that 74 dead seal pups were counted. Our evening briefing included a collage of the before mentioned pups bodies to try to hit home how serious the virus was. So we ended up doing a Zodiac cruise along the beach edge to see some of the adult King Penguins, as well as more Fur seals and Elephant seals. This was also the first of several "Blondie" fur seal pups that we would see. A leucistic form of Antarctic Fur Seals.

Day 12 - This morning we headed to Hercules Bay. Named after the whaling ship that first laid eyes in it, it was our stop to see Macaroni Penguins and a bird called a South Georgia Pipit that the birders on board were excited about. We were awoken however at 6:30 am with an announcement that two Antarctic Blue Whales were in front of there boat. Dressed in my pajamas and slippers (as well as most passengers) I ran to the open deck on my floor and watched as the two whales swam away.







Hercules Bay did not disappoint and was almost something out of a fairy tale. We were surrounded by penguins, the before mentioned Macaroni's as well as Gentoos and Kings, plus three of those Pipits. Multiple fur seals and Elephant Seals were hauled out and in the center of the bay was a waterfall at the back of a beach. While we were not allowed to do a landing, the zodiacs were able to get us right next to the action.

When we departed Hercules Bay we got the call that another (or maybe one of the previous two) Blue Whale was in front of us. This whale allowed much closer views as it swam right in front of the boat.



We saw more fur seals and watched from my room as a Humpback whale was breaching next to the boat.

In the afternoon we headed to Godthul. This was our second and last landing spot. A former Norwegian whaling station from 1908 - 1929 the entire beach was covered in whale bones. Some of the group did a hike up through the tussac grass to an overlook. I decided to stay on the beach and watch all the Elephant and Fur Seal action. This was also the spot where I saw many dead decaying adult seals. I did watch as one person in my group almost stepped on the sleeping elephant seal in the picture, only stopping after my third call of "WATCH OUT".



It also was the spot where I had by best/closest views of two Blondie fur seals as well as the usual color morph.





Day 13 - in the morning we were supposed to go Pinion Island to see nesting Wandering Albatross. However, the entire island was covered in thick fog which made visibility zero. Instead, we headed to Salisbury Plains, home to about 150,000 King Penguins, South Georgia's biggest Elephant seal breeding population and lots of fur seals. It is also the biggest open flat space on the island. We were not allowed to land, but again did a zodiac ride up against the waters edge. It was also pouring rain the entire time which made me put my camera away the majority of the time. It was a non stop view of King Penguin after King Penguin with the seals, but it was also the site of the only predatory event I saw on the trip. Southern Giant Petrels were in full force. I saw a small group eating the remains of a penguin, and multiple ones trying to land on fur seal pups trying to push them under the water. But it was in the end in a small cove that an injured fur seal pup (it looked like something was wrong with one of its flippers) was being eaten alive by the birds. I have seen plenty of predation in the wild, but this one was one of the most gruesome as the birds ripped chunks of flesh from it while it screamed in vain. I also saw it

try to jump into one the zodiacs. The birders in the group kept saying, well the Petrels need to eat too.....



We ended going back to Prion Island, but again the fog was too thick to see the chicks on the island. We did see multiple adults in the water. From here we left South Georgia and headed towards the Falklands. We were also told the next two days would be the roughest of the trip.

Day 14 - all day at sea. We saw one Humpback blow during the day and some people reported they saw Orcas behind the boat.

Day 15 - the storm did not disappoint this day. 19-21 foot swells made for an interesting balancing act and at this point I luckily did not get sea sick. No mammals were seen this day.

Day 16 - We landed in Stanley. Steven and I did a walk along Gypsy Cove as he had not seen a Magellanic Penguin. Some of the group also did a walk along Yorke Beach and saw a Peale's dolphin in the surf. After this we walked around the city. Deb found us a South American Sea Lion in the water behind the Historic Dockyard Museum.



Day 17 - We were supposed to an area in the Northwest of the island, but the storm was raging at this point and we were told if we wanted to make it back to Ushuaia, we could do one stop in the morning, then head out. They picked a spot called Bleaker Island. Owned by a family of sheep and cattle ranchers, it also had a small rookery of Southern Rockhopper Penguins and a large Magellanic cormorant colony. On the way there we saw at least six Sei whales. The Falklands are reported to be one of the more reliable spots to see this species, one I had seen well years before in Massachusetts.



We walked around the island and took turns looking at the penguins, but as the wind picked up we were asked to make it back to the ship a little early.



We saw more Sei Whales leaving the Falklands as well as Fin whales, and Peales dolphins.

Chris was able to get a few photos of them while I unsuccessfully tried for a video.



Day 18 - A very dreary weather day to be outside but we did manage to see some South American Sea Lions and more Peales dolphins before we docked for the evening in Ushuaia.

Day 19 - We left the boat and flew back to Buenos Aires for the night.

All in all an amazing trip!

Species List -

1. Hourglass Dolphins (not by me) - *Lagenorhynchus crucifer*
2. Long-Finned Pilot Whale - *Globicephala melas*
3. Antarctic Fur Seal - *Arctocephalus gazella*
4. Humpback Whale - *Megaptera novaeangliae*
5. Leopard Seal - *Hydrurga leptonyx*
6. Antarctic Minke Whale - *Balaenoptera bonaerensis*
7. Crabeater Seal - *Lobodon carcinophaga*

8. Wendell Seal - *Leptonychotes weddelli*
9. Orca - *Orcinus orca*
10. Southern Elephant Seal - *Mirounga leonina*
11. Fin Whale - *Balaenoptera physalus*
12. Antarctic Blue Whale - *Balaenoptera musculus intermedia*
13. Sei Whale - *Balaenoptera borealis*
14. Peales Dolphin - *Lagenorhynchus australis*