



Saving Marion
Island's Seabirds™
The Mouse-Free Marion Project

Issue No. 17 • April 2026

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

*Saving Marion Island's Seabirds:
The Mouse-Free Marion Project*


BirdLife
SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings



**forestry, fisheries
& the environment**

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Welcome to the 17th issue of the MFM Project Quarterly Newsletter and the first issue for 2026

On Marion Island, the beginning of the new year is the season of farewells. The summer breeding seabirds are well into their parenting journeys, and their chicks are preparing to leave the nest. While the island's 'busy season' winds down for most of the birds, on the mainland, the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: the Mouse-Free Marion Project* team is already in full swing, kickstarting another important year in the preparations and planning for the eradication operation.



Mouse-free Prince Edward Island viewed from Marion island.
Photo: Roelf Daling



An eradication operation is not simply conducted without extensive preparation, and we are currently progressing with the most time-consuming stage of eradication: the preparatory and planning phase. We have learnt valuable lessons from the hundreds of operations that have preceded ours. However, it remains beneficial to continue to share ideas with other similar projects and other experts in the field of island eradications. To this end, several members of the MFM Project team headed to New Zealand in February to attend the Island Invasives 2026 “Charting the Future” conference in Auckland. The conference was a valuable opportunity to engage with island eradication experts from around the world and learn lessons from other eradication operations, both completed and planned. Anton Wolfaardt (MFM Project Manager), Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager) and Keith Springer (MFM Operations Manager) participated in a workshop organised by the MFM Project Team on mouse eradications. Sue writes more about the conference on page 12.

The discussions held during the conference help ensure that our planning, including the continuing fieldwork on Marion Island, is informed by best-practice principles, as well as emerging insights and lessons learned from precedent projects. Fieldwork on Marion Island thus continues in 2026, supported by the appointment of two new Field Assistants. Santjie du Toit and Lola Singo have joined the MFM Team as overwintering Field Assistants and will spend the next year on Marion Island. Lola and Santjie will relieve Vonica Perold and Roelf Daling (M82), who have spent the last 12 months on the island. The relief voyage provides the opportunity to resupply the research base and train incoming Field Assistants. Read more about the upcoming relief voyage and our new Field Assistants on page 6.

The MFM Project team has continued to make significant progress across multiple fronts this year, with notable fundraising successes. In February, we received the highly encouraging news that the project has secured a transformational pledge of US\$10 million from a

Swiss-based international foundation. This commitment represents the largest contribution received to date and marks a major milestone in the journey towards restoring Marion Island to its former ecological condition. With this pledge, the MFM Project has now secured approximately 60% of its overall funding target.

This incredible news followed a generous ZAR 1 million donation from the Lewis Foundation. The foundation was amongst the project's earliest supporters, and it is fantastic to have their ongoing support as we move closer to our goal.

Public support is critical to our project's success, and we remain incredibly grateful for the continued support we have received from South African bird clubs and the wider public. One individual who is supporting the MFM Project is fourteen-year-old Romario Valentine, who previously successfully

crowdfunded for the project twice, raising a 57-hectare sponsorship of Marion Island (via the Sponsor-A-Hectare initiative). Romario has once again decided to support the MFM Project through a crowdfunding campaign, aiming to increase his sponsorship to 100 hectares (Wandering Albatross category). In addition to supporting the MFM Project, Romario's appeal is raising funds for the SANCCOB Foundation's efforts to save the Critically Endangered African Penguin and BirdLife South Africa's Albatross Task Force. All donations received will be divided equally between the three projects. You can read more about Romario and his goal to save seabirds [here](#).

This year is critical for the MFM Project as we progress preparations for the 2027 aerial baiting trial on Marion Island, while progressing our fundraising efforts to secure the remaining funds needed to conduct the eradication operation. The aerial baiting trial builds on the smaller-scale field trial

Below left: Young conservationist Romario Valentine holds one of his paintings. Photo Delsha Moodley

Below right: BirdLife eThekweni KZN club members at their recent AGM. The club recently increased their support of the MFM Project to a quarter of a million rands. Photo: Preeya Daya



completed in 2025 and will contribute towards the final eradication design.

While we continue to advance project planning and fundraising, our central goal remains firmly in focus: a resilient mouse-free Marion Island. We look forward to sharing further progress throughout the year. With your support, we can help secure a profound and lasting global conservation legacy. By safeguarding iconic seabirds, restoring a rare wilderness, and demonstrating the power of national and

international commitment and collaboration, the MFM Project has the potential to deliver enduring ecological renewal and inspire hope for generations to come.

Robyn Adams

MFM Communications Officer and Project Assistant



Photo: Roelf Daling

Changing of the Guard

A new year of MFM Project
Research begins at Marion Island





For many first-time Marion Island overwintering researchers, the first sight of the island is met with feelings of wonder, anticipation and no small amount of trepidation. It marks the beginning of what will almost certainly be a profoundly life-changing year, living and working in one of the most remote, wild, and sometimes inhospitable, places on the planet.

The annual Marion Island relief voyage sees South Africa's Antarctic research and support vessel journey to the island to relieve the current overwintering team and resupply the research base with food, fuel and provisions to sustain the next year's operations. This takeover period is to progress important maintenance and research activities, and to equip new team members with the skills and training required to carry out their tasks safely and effectively.

Since 2022, the *Saving Marion Island's Seabirds: the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project* has maintained a continuous research presence on Marion Island. Each year, Field Assistants conduct critical field work to help inform the planning of the operation to restore the island's degraded ecosystem by eradicating invasive mice. In May 2026, our team will once again set sail for Marion Island aboard the *S.A. Agulhas II*.

This year we are pleased to introduce Lola Singo and Santjie du Toit, who will be relieving Vonica Perold and Roelf Daling, following their year on the island. Lola and Santjie will form part of the M83 overwintering team and join the broader MFM Project team participating in the takeover voyage. Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager) will lead the team during the relief period, overseeing a smooth transition between outgoing and incoming field staff. This takeover will be particularly meaningful for Sue, as it marks her first return to Marion Island since undertaking fieldwork for her PhD in the late 1980s.

Seabirds are a constant and ever-changing presence throughout the voyage south from Cape Town. However, the first sign that the journey to the island aboard the *S.A. Agulhas II* is ending is the

greater number of seabird sightings...the unofficial "Prince Edward Islands Welcoming Committee". First come the longer-ranging species like albatrosses and petrels. As the island looms closer on the horizon, the distinctive calls of King Penguins carry over the waves and, as the research base comes into view, the regionally-endemic Crozet Shags start making their appearance known. A vivid foretaste of the remarkable wildlife inhabiting the island.

The ship will anchor near Transvaal Cove, the most protected part of the island's coastline, ready to begin the process of restocking the research base and huts with the provisions needed for the year ahead. As soon as the weather permits, island-based staff will be taken to the island via helicopter, where they will be greeted by the overwintering staff who have spent the last 12 months on the island.

During their year on the island, Lola and Santjie will continue to undertake research that will inform planning of the baiting operation. They will also play a key role in preparing for and helping to implement the aerial baiting trial scheduled for May 2027.

With the *S.A. Agulhas II* departing for Marion Island in May, Lola and Santjie share their personal stories and why they are looking forward to their year on Marion Island.

Lola Singo

"I am very excited to be part of the Mouse-Free Marion Project because it represents one of the most impactful island restoration initiatives in the world. Marion Island is a globally important biodiversity hotspot, and being able to contribute to protecting its unique seabird populations is not only an honour but also a privilege.

The project aligns with my passion for conservation. I am looking forward to experiencing the island's environment firsthand and contributing to a collaborative effort focused on long-term ecological restoration and I am eager to learn from the team involved in the project.

My fascination with rodents began when I completed my MSc in Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University where my research focused on ectoparasite diversity and distribution associated with *Rhabdomys* (mice) species across different South African biomes. I always had an itch at the back of my head on what kind of impact rodents could have on wild animals and a video on Facebook posted by MFM of a mouse eating Marion Island's seabirds made me



Lola Singo

question a lot of things. This was one of the main reasons I applied for the Field Assistant position. I also applied because this project combines my academic interests as well as my love for adventure. I look forward to the opportunity to contribute to a project that will have significant global conservation value for years to come."

Santjie Du Toit

"Many years ago, as a 3rd year meteorology student, I participated in the yearly resupply voyage to SANAE IV (South Africa's base in Antarctica) with three classmates. Our project was ship-based, and we spent a total of less than two days on the ice, but it was enough to make a lasting impression and change the course of my life. Since graduating, I've had multiple different jobs in wide-ranging fields, but it doesn't seem to matter where I am or what I'm doing, the

remote islands always find a way to pull me back into their orbits.

Like most things in my life, meeting the right people at the right time, loads of luck and supportive family and friends are how I ended up in the world of island restoration. I was accepted as part of the Gough Island Restoration Programme, and this opened a whole new world to me. A world where I felt like I was making a real difference, in real time. It is an indescribable feeling. When I was told about the Midway Seabird Protection Project, I applied and was luckily accepted. This experience confirmed my interest in this kind of work and provided me with additional skills with regards to rodent baiting and monitoring. I am sure this helped me get the position as one of the 2026/2027 Mouse-Free Marion Project Field Assistants.

Marion Island, in particular, holds a very special place in my heart because it was my first overwintering experience. I can hardly



believe that I have been given the opportunity to return to this wonderful place and especially to be part of the Mouse-Free Marion Project. Having seen first-hand the devastation that mice cause to these fragile environments, I am even more motivated to do my part to make this project a success. I am particularly looking forward to the aerial baiting trial that is planned for 2027 and adding people to my ever-expanding group of friends. Lola and I have big shoes to fill but we are up for the challenge!"

The iconic Table Mountain serves as defining landmark for overwintering researchers; it is the final glimpse of home as they embark on a grand adventure and a beacon welcoming them home upon their return. Thirteen

months after saying their goodbyes to friends and family, Vonica Perold and Roelf Daling will return from Marion Island. While their time on the island was a life-changing experience, they will certainly be eager to return home to the familiar sight of Table Mountain greeting them on their return.

We will report more on the relief voyage and activities on the island once the takeover team, along with Vonica and Roelf, return to the mainland. Until then, we wish Sue, Lola and Santjie all the best, safe travels and smooth seas as they sail to Marion Island.

Robyn Adams

MFM Communications Officer and Project Assistant

Below: Roelf Daling, Vonica Perold and Camilla Smyth (Current SAPRI seal researcher 2025/2026 and previous MFM Overwintering Field Assistant 2023/2024) are eagerly anticipating returning home. Photo: Roelf Daling





MFM goes to New Zealand: the Island Invasives Conference in Auckland, February 2026



Restoration of the world's marvellously diverse islands through removal of invasive predators is one of the most effective tools in conservation management today. Having grown from small beginnings in New Zealand, this method has grown significantly in scale and has been successfully used around the world. Hundreds of islands are now home to healthy bird, plant, and invertebrate communities after the eradication of invasive mammals. The application of this biodiversity conservation tool for Marion Island is under way, and at 30,000 ha it stands out as one of the largest rodent

eradication operations planned to be conducted in a single attempt.

In February 2026, four members of the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project team travelled to Auckland, New Zealand, to participate in the fourth Island Invasives conference, which had a theme of 'Charting the Future' (<https://www.islandinvasives.org/>). Anton Wolfaardt (MFM Project Manager), Keith Springer (MFM Operations Manager), Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager) and Guy Preston (MFM NPC Board member) joined a congress of more than 300 conservation professionals who are focused on saving island ecosystems

Left: The MFM team taking in the sights of New Zealand. From left: Penny Preston, Keith Springer, Anton Wolfaardt, Guy Preston and Sue Tonin. Photo: Leigh Wolfaardt

Below: Susan Micol (Senior Programme Manager, Preventing Extinctions, BLI) organised this lunch get-together for BirdLife International and partnering BirdLife organisations including BLSA. From L to R, around the table are Susan Micol, Malo Braquier, Anton Wolfaardt, Miliana Ravuso, James Millett, Andrew Callender, Harry Marshall, Pete McClelland, Steve Cranwell, Karen Varnham, Melania Bulimaitoga, Keith Springer, Sophie Thomas, Tehani Withers, and Sue Tonin.



from the effects of invasive species. From the appropriately diverse community of hands-on conservation professionals, conference delegates included practitioners, researchers, representatives of multiple levels of many governments, holders of indigenous knowledge, people with in-depth knowledge of financing, biosecurity experts, dog handlers, drone specialists and industry providers including bait and trap manufacturers. Delegates came from at least five continents, along with islanders from the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and the Caribbean.

Scale influences the complexity of island restoration operations, which require anticipation of, and planning for, uncertainties. To successfully eradicate an invasive predator as adaptable as the house mouse, we must learn from past successes and failures. The success rate of rodent eradications since the 1990s is high, but it is essential that we learn critical lessons from two eradications that have failed in the last five years: Gough Island in the South Atlantic and Sand Island, Midway Atoll, in the tropical north Pacific.

Before the start of the conference, two separate but complementary workshops took up the challenges of rodent eradication by focusing on rats and house mice. The latter was convened and chaired by Keith Springer. Rodenticide bait composition was a topic of particular interest: specialised bait manufacturers are integrally involved in developments of eradication tools and were well represented at the conference. Choosing a bait pellet that smells and tastes good to mice, and is just the right size, is a research focus for several groups around the world, including the MFM Project on Marion Island. The MFM Project team has been conducting bait trials both on the island as

well as in New Zealand in collaboration with the Department of Conservation.

During the four days of the conference, the MFM Project team heard various presentations on novel technologies for eradication of invasive species on islands. Several, while interesting, were not suitable for Marion Island. Most valuable were the discussions around the technical aspects of bait spreading, and maximising the accuracy and evenness during aerial spreading from bait buckets. Flow rates from the buckets need to be carefully calibrated to achieve the required density of bait pellets on the ground. Sensors to measure this are currently being trialled and refined in New Zealand and results from recent trials of these new technologies were presented by the New Zealand Department of Conservation.

Exchange of ideas at the conference spanned all aspects of eradication projects designed for many groups of invaders: plants, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, arthropods, fish, birds, and pathogens. Presentations, including one by Anton Wolfaardt, the MFM Project Manager, spanned (but were not limited to) the implementation of best practise, iterative research tailored for the climate and habitat of individual islands, studies of ecology and behaviour, bait acceptance by, and availability to the relevant invasive species, and importantly, the importance of human social considerations. Knowledge capture and modes of information sharing are increasingly important as the field expands, aiming to communicate the results of each successive operation quickly to the wider community. Technical collaboration, and always, the management of risks, are consistent themes.

Field trips to locations that are predator-free or where current eradication projects

are underway included Maungatautari Sanctuary Mountain, Rangitoto and Motutapu Islands and Waiheke Island. These gave conference delegates unforgettable demonstrations of the biodiversity gains achieved by invasive predator removal. These places echo with some of the most beautiful birdsong on the planet – the sound of New Zealand’s past and, for many islands and parts of the mainland, also its future, as predator control gains momentum.

Globally, restoration specialists are united by their understanding of how well and completely this methodology can work.

Most of them have seen first-hand the rebounding and flourishing that follows removal of invasive predators introduced by humans to fragile island ecosystems. This knowledge fuels our determination to continue refining and using this conservation tool on an expanding number of islands to bring back their safe haven status.

Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager)
Keith Springer (MFM Operations Manager)
Anton Wolfaardt (MFM Project Manager)

Anton Wolfaardt and Sue Tonin at Lake Sylvan Track near Glenorchy, New Zealand.





Photograph: Roelf Daling

Get involved and help make a Mouse-Free Marion possible!

- For more information on the Project, visit our website at mousefreemarion.org or contact us at: info@mousefreemarion.org
- To make a gift of any amount or support the project by sponsoring a hectare (or more) visit our website or contact: donations@mousefreemarion.org
- Stay up to date: follow us on Facebook (Mouse-Free Marion) and Instagram (@mousefreemarion) or sign up on our website to receive project news alerts

Cover Photo: Grey-headed albatross chicks; photograph: Roelf Daling

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™ The Mouse-Free Marion Project



forestry, fisheries
& the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

The Mouse-Free Marion Project is a registered non-profit company (No. 2020/922433/08) in South Africa, established to eradicate invasive albatross-killing mice on Marion Island in the Southern Ocean. The project was initiated by BirdLife South Africa and the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment. Upon successful completion, the project will restore the critical breeding habitat of over two million seabirds, many globally threatened, and improve the island's resilience to a warming climate. For more information or to support the project please visit mousefreemarion.org