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

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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

Winter fieldwork on Marion Island, photograph: Sue Tonin

Welcome to the 19th issue of the MFM Project Quarterly Newsletter

With summer fast approaching, we reflect on the work the MFM Project team has achieved over the past few months.

In the previous issue, we reported that the postponed Marion Island relief voyage had set off on an unusual winter voyage. We can now report that the Marion Island base has been successfully reactivated after its short period of inactivity, and the M83 overwintering team has now settled into their new home for the next eight months. For the first time, the MFM Project contingent that travelled to Marion Island for the relief voyage was made up entirely of women. It was led by Dr Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager), returning to Marion Island for the first time since the late 1980s. Sue was joined by Dr Vonica Perold (MFM Field Assistant 2025/2026), along with the two MFM Field Assistants for 2026/2027, Lola Singo and Santjie du Toit.

On arrival the team was flown directly to Rook's Bay Hut on the southwest coast and walked clockwise around the island back to the research base, undertaking fieldwork along the way. Under demanding circumstances, it was a productive and successful takeover. Read more about the relief voyage on page 6.

While the team on Marion Island was working in challenging weather conditions and trekking across ice- and snow-covered terrain, other members of the MFM Project team have been focusing on the preparations for the aerial baiting trial scheduled for April/May 2027. The plans are progressing well; a helicopter contractor has been appointed, and we are now progressing the various logistical and research plans for the trial. The trial is a critical step towards the eradication operation itself, and its purpose is to test, at scale and under Marion's conditions, the equipment, flight procedures and bait application on which the operation will depend.

Public awareness remains central to the project. The MFM Project team were represented at two events this quarter. The most recent was the South African Bird Fair, held at the Pretoria National Botanical Garden on the 5th of September. This fair, hosted by BirdLife South Africa (BLSA), is the premier annual birding event in the country and features in-person exhibitions, expert talks, workshops, a dedicated children's programme and birding walks. The MFM Project, a joint partnership between BLSA and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), was represented by John Cooper (MFM News Correspondent), Beate Hölscher (MFM Research and Reporting Officer), Monique van Bers (MFM Field Assistant 2024/2025) and Carol Jacobs (DFFE Branch: Environmental Programmes). Monique gave an engaging presentation at the live edition of BLSA's popular Conservation Conversations, sponsored by the Ford Wildlife Foundation. All in all, it was an incredibly well-run event. Read more about the MFM Project's presence at the fair on page 12.

In August, several Cape Town-based team members attended a book promotion in Strand, an hour's drive from Cape Town. As part of its regular literary events programme, Sunset Books invited the MFM Project to help promote the book, *Pain forms the character,* compiled by Nico de Buyn and Chris Oosthuizen. Two past Marion Island over-winterers, Rory Heather-Clarke and Dr Liezl Pretorius, spent the morning reminiscing about their own island experiences and answering questions from an engaged audience. Rory spent two winters on Marion Island in the mid-1980s, first as a cat hunter and then two years later as a seal researcher monitoring elephant and fur seals. He then went on to be the Team Leader for a year over 1992/93 at SANAE, South Africa's Antarctic research station. Much more recently, Liezl, now one of the MFM Project's Research and Reporting Officers, spent two years (2014/15 and 2018/19) on the island as a seal biologist, and also spoke about the MFM Project at the event.

Building on the momentum established in 2025, our team continues raising global awareness of the project. In December, a few members of the MFM Project team will head to the United States, where they will present the project to the New York Explorers Club. They will take the opportunity to meet with potential project funders in the USA, reinforcing the importance of the restoration of Marion Island for the entire Southern Ocean ecosystem. Contact Tarryn.Havemann@mousefreemarion.org if you, or someone you know, would like to meet our team while they are in the USA.

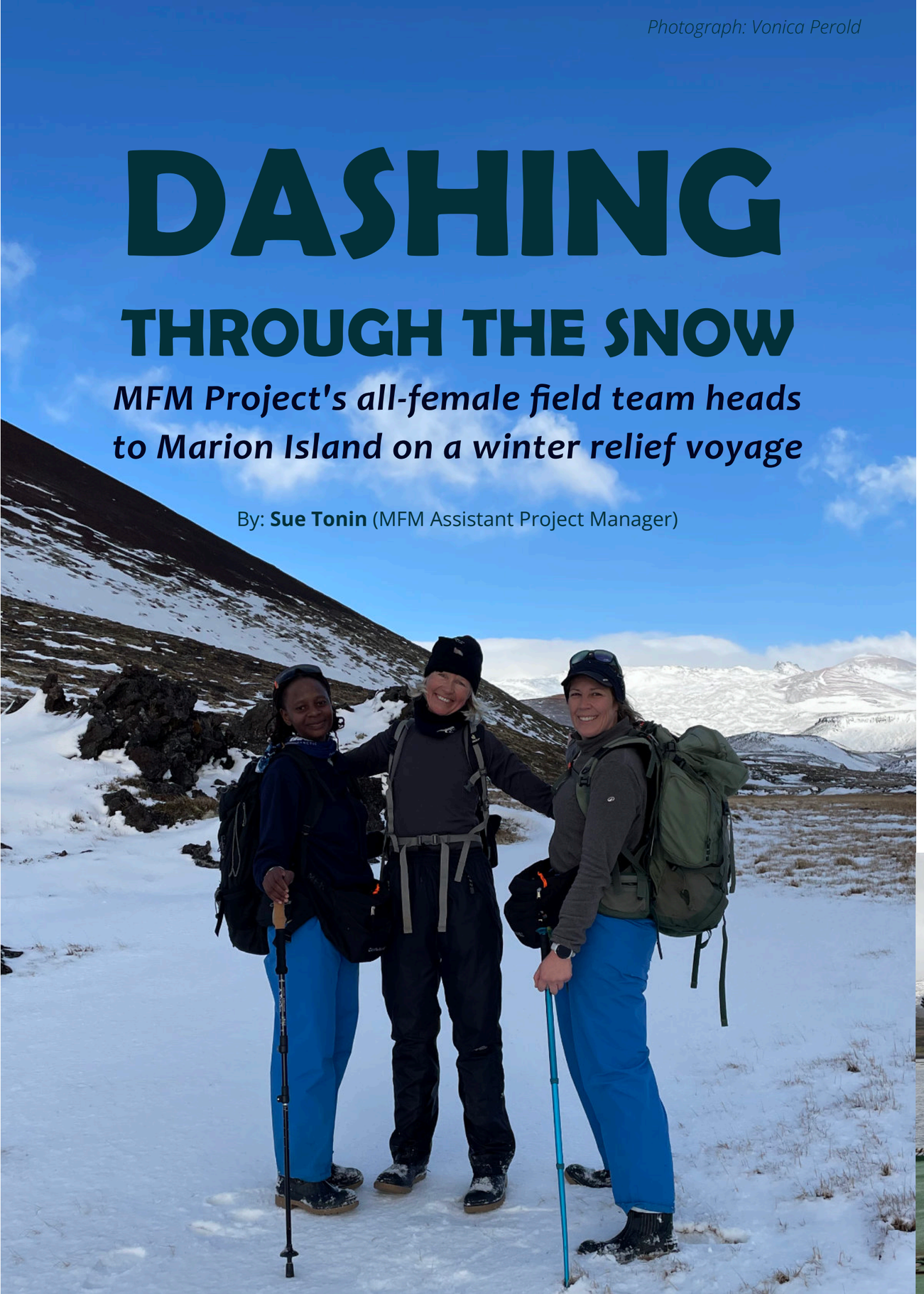
As we head into the last few months of 2026, we look forward to sharing positive outcomes from project planning and hope to see a few familiar faces in the USA this December. Thank you for being part of this journey to restore Marion Island and protect its seabirds.

The MFM Project team

September 2026

Below: Monique van Bers, John Cooper and Carol Jacobs get framed at the bird fair, photograph: Mark Anderson

Lola, Santjie and Vonica walking toward the site of a lava flow from 1980: "Batman's Lair" at Kaalkoppie, north of Swartkops Hut. Photograph: Sue Tonin



Photograph: Vonica Perold

DASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

MFM Project's all-female field team heads to Marion Island on a winter relief voyage

By: **Sue Tonin** (MFM Assistant Project Manager)

This year's relief voyage (takeover) to Marion Island was unusual, because the vessel arrived at an empty base. As many who read this newsletter will know, the previous overwintering team (M82) was evacuated from the island in May 2026, due to issues with polar diesel supply. The island's wildlife and invasive House Mice then had the island to themselves for nearly twelve weeks.

The *S.A. Agulhas II* departed from a stormy Cape Town on 5 August with four Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project team members on board. We were fortunate to be joined by Dr Vonica Perold: she and Roelf Daling were the MFM Project Field Assistants on the M82 (2025/26) Overwintering Team. Von's guidance was essential for the handover to MFM's new Field Assistants, Lola Singo and Santjie du Toit (see "Changing of the Guard", April 2026). The fourth member of our team, Dr Sue Tonin (MFM Assistant Project Manager), last visited Marion Island in 1989 while completing her Ph.D. work on the albatrosses and penguins of the island.

We reached Marion Island on 9 August. The next day, a team from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) was flown across to begin the demanding work of reactivating the base and configuring the new communications system. Fortunately, the base was in good condition after its thorough shutdown in May. Restarting of the five generators was followed by work on the electrical infrastructure and routine building maintenance tasks.

Straight from the ship into the field

During the voyage south, it was confirmed that field research teams would be flown directly from the ship to the field huts scattered around the island. This happened on the second day after our arrival at the island, so that hut restocking could be undertaken simultaneously with recommissioning of the base. This adaptation of the usual relief ("takeover") plan, in which personnel are first flown to the base, meant that many researchers did

Below: Hijinks: excited birders and mousers about to board Ultimate Heli's Bell 412 helicopter, bound for Marion Island's south coast. From left to right: Shani Fourie (South African Polar Research Infrastructure); Michelle Risi and Avumile Bawuli (FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, FIAO); Von Perold, Santjie du Toit, Lola Singo and Sue Tonin (the MFM Project); and Chris Jones (FIAO). The base can be seen in the background. Photograph: Rob Blakey

not need to wait on the ship before their fieldwork could begin. It gave a welcome head-start to the MFM Project's programme, permitting early completion of round-island orientation, servicing of weather monitoring cameras, and scouting of suitable locations for a new mouse trapline on the western side of the island. Our walk around the island began at the hut at Rook's Bay on the island's southwest coast.

It was thrilling beyond words to start our takeover in the field, set down by helicopter straight onto the vegetation with its incomparable mirey fragrance. Soon after our arrival at Rook's Hut, the Airbus H125 ("Squirrel") helicopter brought us a load of new supplies for the coming season. We packed these into the hut pantry and cleared out expired food supplies.

Recruited in late 2025, Santjie and Lola have been waiting since earlier this year to reach Marion Island. Earlier this year Lola graduated *cum laude* from Stellenbosch University with an M.Sc. in the evolution of mouse ectoparasites. Santjie is an experienced islander, weather specialist, and island restoration practitioner who has spent a combined total of more than five years on Marion and Gough islands, Midway Atoll in the Hawaiian Archipelago, and at the SANAE IV base in Antarctica. During the takeover it became clear that Lola and Santjie are more determined than ever to make a meaningful contribution to the restoration of this remarkable island.

Below: Vonica Perold enjoying a snack break on the path to the highest field hut at Katedraalkrans. She sits within the aerial baiting trial area, that's planned for 2027. Hendrik Vister is on the top right and Junior's Kop in the centre background. The slopes of Tafelberg are to the left. Photograph: Sue Tonin

Above left: Santjie and Lola packing up old provisions to be returned to the ship during restocking of the hut at Mixed Pickle Cove. With their complementary skills, tenacity, and positive "can-do" natures, the MFM Project could not have asked for two better Field Assistants. Photograph: Sue Tonin

Above right: One of the challenges of winter is the heavy snowfall that often buries mousetraps. The green mesh visible above the snow is the top of the trap cover that prevents interference by inquisitive birds. It is secured with pegs or stones, with two traps set underneath each cover. Photograph: Sue Tonin

Assessing mouse abundance from coast to mountains

With our restocking work at Rook's Hut complete, we began the ~8-km trek to our next overnight stop: the hut near Swartkop Point on the western shore of the island. This coast is wildly beautiful and more exposed to the prevailing westerlies than the eastern side where the base is located. Still unweathered by the surging power of the great circumpolar swells, Marion's western shore rises steeply from the Southern Ocean. The island was raised from the sea floor by volcanic activity less than 500,000 years ago. The great forces that shaped it are visible across the landscape as icy peaks, lava flows, scoria cones, and dramatic cliffs.

The aim of the MFM Project's work on this side of the island is to build on previous trapping transects that Von and Roelf conducted in July 2025. During the 2026 takeover, we reconnoitred a trapline site from near Swartkop Hut into the mountainous interior, to continue assessments of mouse relative abundance along an altitudinal gradient. These will help confirm whether the quantities of pellets that we plan to spread are sufficient for every mouse on the island to encounter bait. We use a standardised trapping methodology that permits seasonal and spatial comparisons of mouse abundance from the coast up to the polar desert.

Following an exploratory walk to the area around Wolfie and Truter peaks, and after much discussion, we decided on a location and layout for our new trapline. This needed to span from the coastal biotic zone between Swartkop Point and Kaalkoppie to the slopes of Truter Peak at 650 m, yet be sheltered enough for setting and checking of mousetraps – fiddly work in snow, fog and wind. Shelter is a relative term on Marion. The trapline is accessible from Swartkop Hut, which will be Santjie and Lola's second home while they are busy with this work. Two weeks after the relief voyage, they set up and ran the first of a series of repeated transects.

Back at base: setting up bait pellet trials inside mouse exclosure cages

The specially-formulated rodenticide bait we're using comprises cylindrical compressed cereal pellets. One research topic we're investigating is the weathering of these bait pellets after they're spread. Two pellet sizes are currently under consideration: either 20 mm long (weighing 2 g), or 14 mm (1.4 g). To assess pellet

Above: Duikers Point bait trials: flagged non-toxic bait pellets of two different sizes are visible inside this exclosure cage. The cage prevents mice from accessing the bait, allowing us to assess pellet weathering and consumption by invertebrates. Photograph: Vonica Perold

weathering in the absence of mice, we use 1 m^2 wire-mesh cages embedded in the ground in coastal habitats where invertebrate density is high. This allows us to gauge the influence of two factors: weathering by rain or temperature changes (freeze/thaw), and nibbling – chiefly by slugs and tiny wingless invertebrates called springtails (Collembola).

Preparations for 2027 Relief Voyage: monitoring work on the aerially baited plot

In the previous issue of this newsletter, Keith Springer and Robyn Adams described how the MFM Project team is working to refine our eradication strategy and tailor it to the conditions specific to Marion Island (see "Habitat Restoration"). This refinement is guided by a Research Plan that focuses on resolving uncertainties around conditions on Marion Island, using trials over a larger spatial scale than has our previous work. In 2027, we will apply bait twice by helicopter over a 1,050-hectare plot. This will allow us to investigate how fast the mice remove bait once it has been spread, how long the pellets last once all mice in the central area of the plot are dead, and from how far away and how quickly mice reinvade the plot from unbaited areas outside its borders.

Much of Santjie and Lola's work between now and March 2027 involves preparations for this trial. After each of the two bait applications, a team of monitoring staff will walk the plot daily, assessing bait weathering and removal by mice and non-target species (scavenging birds and invertebrates). They will monitor mouse numbers and activity using trail cameras, snap traps, and tracking tunnels.

Thanks to teamwork, a short yet successful takeover

For ensuring that all our essential goals for this relief period were met, particular thanks are due to the DFFE's Departmental Coordinating Officer, Daisy Kotsedi; the on-island DPWI team led by Mahlatse Maja and Mlamli Gazi; and Zaid Watson, Willem Boshoff, David Hedding and many others. Effective teamwork resulted in a successful and rewarding relief voyage. The Ultimate Heli team, led by Captains Stefan Smuts and Mike McDougall, flew enthusiastically, safely, and with great skill under challenging conditions to make everything happen in good time.

Right: All smiles for Sue Tonin despite the cold weather. Photograph: Vonica Perold

Below: A rare sunset at Mixed Pickle Hut. Photograph: Santjie du Toit

“Walbie” spreads his wings at the South African Bird Fair

For the second year running, the Saving Marion Island’s Seabirds: The Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) Project attended the South African Bird Fair in the Pretoria National Botanical Garden, this time on Saturday 05 September. The fair, hosted by BirdLife South Africa, is the premier annual birding event in the country, featuring in-person exhibitions, expert talks, workshops, a dedicated children’s programme and birding walks. This year the project was represented at the fair by John Cooper, News Correspondent and Beate Hölscher, Research and Reporting Officer. With the expected bad weather holding off until the next day the event was well attended with our stand receiving a steady stream of visitors throughout the day.

Undoubtedly, the presence of the MFM Project’s latest mascot, “Walbie”, with its outspread wings, was a great draw. Children and adults requested to be photographed with the life-sized model of a flying Wandering Albatross, with “I didn’t realize they were that big” heard more than once. Marion Island supports a quarter of the world’s population of this globally Vulnerable species, sadly at risk of local extinction due to the depredations of the introduced House Mice.

The main aim of the project’s attendance, as in the previous year, was to raise awareness of the plight of Marion Island’s seabirds and to introduce the MFM Project to the bird-loving attendees. In addition, books and art prints with a Marion Island theme were on sale. A highlight was a framed print of “The Albatrosses of the Prince Edward Islands”, signed and numbered by artist Leigh Wolfaardt, being purchased by an exhibitor from a nearby stall. We also had the sticker map of Marion Island on display, with 10 hectares being the final total sponsorship coming from nine individuals.

Left: “Walbie” is held up at the end of the day by (from left) Courtney Hundermark, John Cooper, Carol Jacobs, Johan Hölscher, Monique van Bers and Beate Hölscher, photograph: Nicola Marneweck

Below: Jamie and Xandre Botes add their albatross sticker to the Marion hectare map, photograph: Carol Jacobs, published with parental permission

Above left: Monique van Bers introduces Marion Island's seabirds to the audience, photograph: Nicola Marneweck

Above right: RSPB Scotland Area Manager Andrew Bielinski (left) visiting the MFM Project stand. Andrew also sponsored a hectare of Marion Island. Photograph: Carol Jacobs

Left: Showing off Walbie's impressive wingspan

Monique van Bers, the project's 2024/25 Field Assistant, gave an excellent talk entitled "Life on Marion Island: Understanding Mice to Save Seabirds" in the afternoon, giving the audience in the garden's African Pride Conference Room an understanding of the field work she undertook on Marion Island's mice. She is now using the information she collected towards her MSc degree at the University of Pretoria. She ended by describing what it is like to live on a sub-Antarctic island: hiking in bad weather, staying overnight in the field huts and living in isolation for 12 months among a small group of fellow team members. The audience was an engaged one, leading to an informative question and answer session.

Special thanks are due to Carol Jacobs, who represents our project partner, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment on the MFM Project Management Committee, and Johan Hölscher, who both spent the whole day helping at our stand from early-morning setting up, arranging the loan of a gazebo at short notice, solving the unsteady easel problem and Johan bestowing the name of his bakkie on the Wandering Albatross model! Thanks also to Felix Holm of Flat Rock Studio for making "Walbie", Wendy Jacobs for loan of the gazebo, Ria Olivier of the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa and author Nico de Bruyn for donating books, and to Leigh Wolfaardt for her continued support of the project via her art prints.

John Cooper, News Correspondent and Beate Hölscher, Research and Reporting Officer, Mouse-Free Marion Project

Photograph: Michelle Risi

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: *Southern Giant Petrel; photograph: Stefan Schoombie*

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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