



SOUTH OF NEW ZEALAND

# SUBANTARCTIC TREASURES

Our contributor Samuel Bloch travels to one of the remotest areas of the planet to document in words and images its spectacular and fearless wildlife



Kelp is a prominent plant on the shores of the Subantarctic Islands, and it is photogenic. So are penguins. These Snares penguins, viewed from an inflatable boat, were considering whether they wanted to enter the water, or not. Snares penguins are endemic to the Snares archipelago; they are considered Vulnerable by the IUCN, with a population estimated to 25,000 pairs. Location: The Snares, New Zealand. On the previous page, many of the subantarctic islands host endemic shag species, like this Campbell shag, found only on Campbell Island. They are all similar but still show some minor differences.



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY SAMUEL BLOCH  
[HTTP://SAMUELBLOCH.WEEBLY.COM/](http://samuelbloch.weebly.com/)  
[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/EIWARPHOTOGRAPHY](https://www.facebook.com/eiwarphotography)  
[HTTPS://WWW.INSTAGRAM.COM/EIWARWAR/](https://www.instagram.com/eiwarwar/)

Scattered in the Southern Ocean between New Zealand and Antarctica, constantly buffeted by the wind, the Subantarctic Islands of New Zealand and Australia are one of the most remote corners of the Earth. The Maori tried to settle on the Auckland Islands; so did the British, for what would become the shortest-lived settlement in their history. Whalers and sealers used the islands as bases, and a meteorological station was erected on Campbell Island, but these times are now long gone. Apart from the scientific station of Macquarie Island, occupied since 1948, the region is now uninhabited by humans. Snares, Auckland, Campbell, Macquarie, Antipodes, Bounty. These islands are now the realm of wildlife: albatrosses soar in the sky, penguins jump on the shore, elephant seals sleep on the beaches and whales patrol the sea. Less iconic but no less interesting, several species of parakeets, shags, teals and snipes have evolved in isolation, and many of them are endemic to a single archipelago. Sealing has taken its toll, but New Zealand fur seals and sea lions are now entirely protected and have started to recover. Vegetation is variable, from the daisy trees of the Snares to the barren rocks of the Bounty, where only one vascular plant has been found (Cook's scurvy grass). In the open, tussock and endemic megaherbs thrive. The Subantarctic Islands are nature reserves, and the conditions of visit are

strict. In some places, it's forbidden to land, unless you're a researcher with a very good reason to visit. The only way to come close is on an inflatable boat, braving the unruly sea to have a look at the unique wildlife that lives on the shore. In other places, specific landing sites are granted, allowing the lucky visitor to stroll among penguins and albatrosses that haven't learnt to fear humans, and are therefore quite relaxed, or even inquisitive.

Further north, in the Pacific Ocean east of New Zealand, the Chatham Islands are not part of the "Subantarctic", but their isolation is similar, and many endemic species live there as well.

All these islands face the same threats as mainland New Zealand, invasive predators being the most urgent. Birds there have evolved without any terrestrial predator, for the only native mammals are marine mammals. Some have forgotten how to fly, like the Auckland and Campbell teals, but most have anyway dearly suffered at the hands of the countless rats, stoats, cats, mice, rabbits and pigs that men brought with them. Species like the Macquarie parakeet have gone extinct, while others went close. Most of these pests have now been eradicated thanks to colossal projects, but other threats like global warming and fisheries keep pressuring bird populations, in the Southern Ocean like everywhere else around the globe. ●

Royal penguins nest only on Macquarie Island, in large colonies that can be set high on the slopes of the island. In such a remote place, animals haven't learnt to fear humans, and are therefore quite curious when visitors land on their beach.



The Bounty Islands are just rocks jutting out of the sea, with almost no vegetation growing on top; only one species of vascular plant has been found there. They are the epicenter of the Salvin's albatross population, with around 40,000 pairs of this Vulnerable species nesting there, circling in the sky like pigeons in Paris. Location: Bounty Islands, New Zealand



These elephant seals are called "weaners", for they've just been weaned by their mothers. Born this year and newly independent, they are pictured here sparring to prepare for fights they will have to pick when they become adult, to assert dominance on the beach. Location: Macquarie Island



Albatrosses, like many seabirds, like to follow ships, hoping to gather scraps of food. Even when we never threw anything overboard, we always had Cape petrels, prions and an assortment of albatrosses in our wake. This young Antipodean albatross followed us as we left the Auckland Islands, en route to Macquarie Island.



The dark rocks of the Antipodes offer stunning backgrounds for penguin photography. Captured from an inflatable boat, this Erect-crested penguin showed curiosity towards its visitors. The population is declining, and the species is classified as Endangered, with almost all birds nesting on the Antipodes and the Bounty. Location: Antipodes Islands, New Zealand.



Not many passerines have colonized the subantarctic islands, but New Zealand pipits seem to have found appropriate habitat on the Auckland and Campbell islands. One is pictured here in a field of Ross lily, one of the typical megaherbs of this region. Location: Enderby Island, New Zealand.



Unlike Royal penguins, King penguins nest only close to the ocean. Not afraid of humans, they can be inquisitive but also very relaxed, like this group preening and resting on the shores of the Southern Ocean. Location: Macquarie Island.





This massive male elephant seal relaxed on the beach next to the last female in its harem not to have weaned its offspring, in mid-November. Location: Macquarie Island.



A Grey-faced petrel drifts by the ship on its quest for food, in the Pacific Ocean. Because they come to land only at night, being at sea is almost the only way to observe these birds. Location: between Dunedin and the Chathams, New Zealand.



A Yellow-eyed penguin takes a break in a grassy field on Enderby Island. The subantarctic islands hold most of the population of this species, which is also found on New Zealand's South Island, but it seems like they are declining there too.



Three Southern rockhopper penguins stand on volcanic rock on the edge of the ocean, at the Auckland Islands. Rockhoppers are not very common in the Subantarctic Islands of New Zealand and Australia, but they can be found in small numbers, sometimes among colonies formed by other species like the Erect-crested penguin.



Giant petrels, like albatrosses, are seabirds. When we think of them, we imagine them flying above the waves, not seeing land for weeks on end... therefore it was quite an odd sight to see this Northern giant petrel in such a wooden environment. Location: Enderby Island, New Zealand.



After their breeding period, Southern elephant seals stay on land for a few weeks to moult, not consuming any food. Location: Macquarie Island.



A Southern royal albatross takes flight from its nesting grounds on Enderby Island. These giants, clumsy on the ground, need open land to take-off. With a gale like we had that day, they are in the air in a second, graceful again.

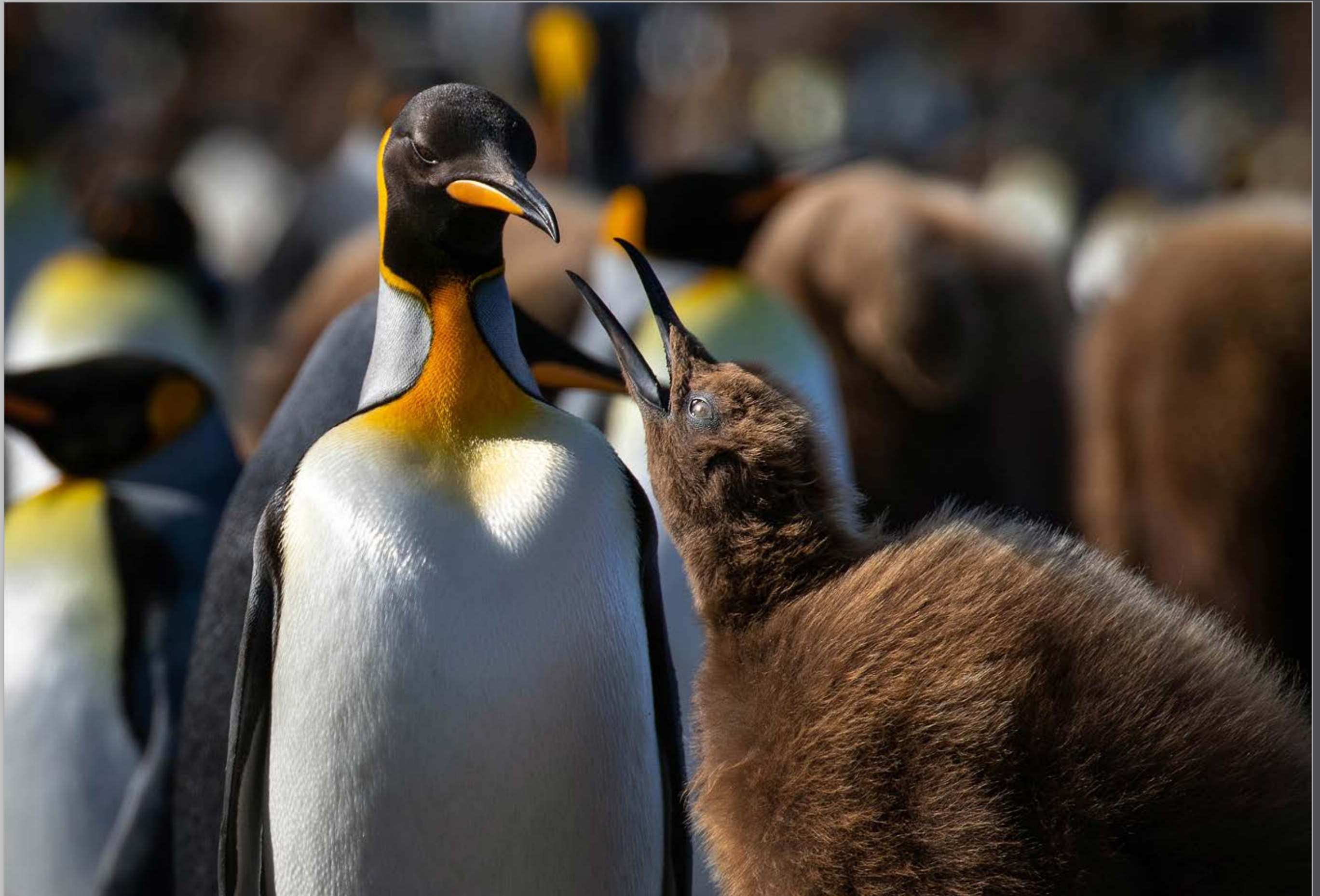


Pitt shags are endemic to the Chatham Islands, where they can be seen along the rocky shore.





The Buller's albatross is a "mollymawk", a lesser albatross. Not as big as the greater albatrosses (wandering albatrosses, royal albatrosses), they are still among the largest seabirds, and sport more colours, especially on the beak.



It takes 14 to 16 months for a young King penguin to fledge. In the meantime, they will rely on their parents to bring them food. Therefore, King penguins breed only every 2 to 3 year. Location: Macquarie Island.



A Southern royal albatross calls while two congeners fly by. These birds have complex courtship rituals, and it's a true spectacle to see them fly in circle around the peaks of Campbell Island. Although they range as far as South America, Southern royals only nest on Campbell Island and a few other islands in the region. They are therefore rated as Vulnerable by the IUCN. Location: Campbell Island, New Zealand.