

Subject: Scholes cabin 5: Birds at sea

17 December 2009 0833 UTM 55.4011 S 1.1845 E

Dear Stirling,

Any time you look out the back of the ship there are a few birds following us, and sometimes there are many. I often wonder, given the vastness of this ocean, how do they find us? In the past, ships would throw out kitchen scraps, which was a good reason for the birds to hang around. But we don't do that anymore, so I wonder why they bother? Most of them live on small crustaceans, which seem to be brought to the surface by the propellers. I often see the birds diving down and pecking at the water before flying off again. They hardly ever flap their wings, but use the lift created by the wind striking the leading edge of the wave to cruise backwards and forwards, for days on end, and easily keeping up with us.

There are not very many different species, but lots of individuals, and the species are mostly only found in Antarctica and its surrounding islands. So they are all new to me. The commonest birds at the moment are called 'Cape Pigeons', which is a bit unfair, since they aren't pigeons at all, and I don't know which Cape they are referring to. I never saw them in Cape Town. But we are at the same latitude here as Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America, so maybe it is that one. They are a very handsome black-and-white bird, like a small seagull. There are also some Antarctic Prions, which look a bit like swifts on land - curved wings, flying low and fast. The most impressive birds are the albatrosses - I have seen wandering albatross and black-browed albatross so far. They have an enormous wingspan, more than 3m, with narrow bent-tip wings perfect for soaring the waves. In the old days sailors said it was really unlucky to kill an albatross. If I sailed these seas in a flimsy wooden boat I would be superstitious too.

Yesterday we passed through the polar front, where there are often upwellings of nutrient-rich water, and therefore lots of phytoplankton and the crustaceae (krill) that feed on them, and the fish that feed on them, and the birds that feed on them, so we had a big flock following us. Perhaps it helped that we were only a hundred kilometres or so west of Bouvet Island, where many of the birds breed.

Love,

Dad