

SHORE

Edited by David W. Shaw

Lonely Research

WHEN WE LEFT BLUFF, NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTHERNMOST PORT, IN THE 50-foot cutter *Tiama*, a 40-knot westerly funneled out of Foveaux Strait and sent us on our way to the remote Antipodes Islands, a 540-mile voyage to the southeast. With the wind off the starboard quarter and two reefs in the mainsail, *Tiama* surged through the rough seas.

We kept up a good pace throughout the next day until the wind eased, then died, leaving us rolling in the swells as we proceeded under power. We were on a mission of sorts: Once we arrived at the Antipodes, we'd drop off New Zealand Department of Conservation researchers Kathy Walker and Graeme Taylor, both of whom would spend 10 weeks studying the majestic albatross that frequent the islands.

The albatross symbolizes the beauty of the Southern Ocean and its immense



JOE MADONIA DIVISIONS UNLIMITED



The sailing research vessel *Tiama* (right) lies anchored off the barren yet beautiful Antipodes Islands (top), about 540 miles southeast of New Zealand, after some boisterous sailing and motoring through calms. Its mission was to bring two scientists and all their gear (far right) to a tiny hut from which they'd study the albatross that nest on the islands.

emptiness; as a species, these magnificent birds are truly unique and well adapted to the harsh environment of the high latitudes. Once a young albatross leaves the nest, it takes to the sky and the water for years without returning to land, riding the updrafts generated by the ceaseless rollers of the Southern Ocean. Many of these birds circle the globe, flying more than 500 miles in a single day. After three or more years, the albatross returns to its birthplace, where it mates for life, often a very long one, indeed. Some albatross



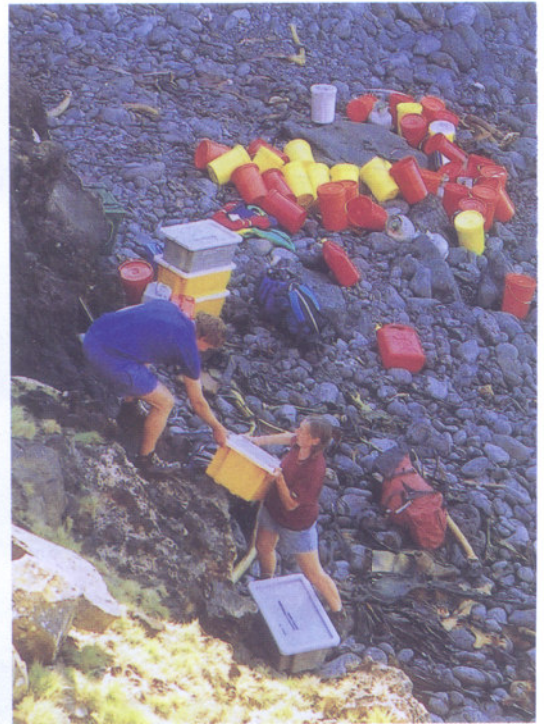
reach the age of 80, though life spans of 50 years are more common.

The work that lay ahead of the researchers aboard *Tiama* was important. In recent years, the albatross population has dramatically declined. According to some studies, nine of the 21 species of albatross are now endangered, with the balance either threatened or highly vulnerable. In short, the albatross is in trouble. Commercial longline fishing is considered a key reason. As the lines pay out behind the boats, the birds dive for the sinking bait, get hooked, and drown in large numbers. Various techniques have been used to reduce the death toll, such as bird-scaring lines towed behind the vessel. Still, the decline continues.

There may be other causes as well—global warming, shifts in ocean currents—and that's why more data is needed. Among the various techniques used to study the albatross is satellite tracking.



These amusing-looking rockhopper penguins kept the scientists company while they did their research.



Transmitters, each costing \$5,000, are taped to the birds' backs. These allow scientists to trace the progress of individual birds, some of which have flown from the Antipodes all the way to Argentina.

Soon we arrived at the desolate islands, where we prepared to put Kathy and Graeme ashore with 44 five-gallon plastic buckets, nine big plastic bins, and assorted cases containing provisions and equipment. As we nosed the dinghy in, broad fronds of brown kelp waved in the swell, and huge sea lions basked on the boulder-strewn beach. A cacophony of braying, screeching, squalling, and squabbling from a penguin colony in the next bay echoed off the cliffs.

After the gear was landed and hauled up the 100-foot bluff to the hut, we all hugged on the beach. The long subantarctic dusk settled in as we weighed anchor and left the bay. About 24 hours later, we received a sat-phone call reporting that Kathy's father had just died of a heart attack. We hove to and waited to see if Kathy wanted to be brought back for the funeral. She was grieving, but she decided to stay on the island to carry out her work to save one of the world's most beautiful birds, the graceful and lonely albatross that so epitomizes the sea. To help save the albatross, check out some of the many websites (for example, www.albatrossaction.org and www.birdlife.net) dedicated to the cause.

Lindsay Wright

LINDSAY WRIGHT (TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM), COURTESY OF LINDSAY WRIGHT