

# My Twitcher's Day in Antarctica

by Rebecca Suomala

My first sight when I began my Superbowl of Birding at 6:00 am was an iceberg! I know it can be cold during the winter in New Hampshire but an iceberg on the Superbowl was a first for me! It was January 28, 2023 and instead of captaining The Twitchers for the competition in Rockingham County, NH, I was on a cruise ship in Antarctic waters, but still birding to raise money for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and NH eBird.



*My first iceberg in Antarctica. Photo by R. Suomala.*

I was part of a WINGS birding tour that went from Valparaiso, Chile to Buenos Aires, Argentina via Antarctica aboard the Sapphire Princess. Our group was 13 people plus leaders Steve Howell and Gavin Bieber and we were with about 2,000 of our newest acquaintances and 1,500 crew taking care of our every need. The goal was to see pelagic birds and, of course, Antarctica. WINGS also sets up birding trips at each port of call. When the ship was sailing, we spent our time on the bow on deck eight watching for birds and mammals – and that's what I was doing on the Superbowl. The boat is so big you can use scopes on deck – a major plus when looking at distant shores or icebergs for penguins. It also means I don't get seasick. A huge benefit since I usually have to take drugs on any other pelagic. Being on ship also means never having to pack up and move. And those of you who have birded with me will know that having food whenever I wanted it was a big plus!



*Breakfast on deck. Photo by Zeke Cornell.*

The Superbowl usually runs from 5:00 am to 5:00 pm but I had to change it to 6:00 am to 6:00 pm to accommodate the activities of the birding group. I was a team of one, but Zeke Cornell was there to insure I stuck to the rules (and bring me breakfast on deck). The ship spent the day sailing through waters around the Antarctic Peninsula – a land of ice and snow, water and rocks. It was an amazing sight that is almost impossible to describe. I never thought I would have a chance to see it, but here I was.

I spent the entire Superbowl on deck except for a lunch break to warm up a bit. The scenery was spectacular and it seriously distracted from my birding! We sailed into Wilhelmina Bay then took the Gerlache Strait to the spectacularly narrow (as least for a cruise ship) Neumayer Channel and out to the Bransfield Strait. The number of species here is small, but for some it's the only place you can see them. When I first went on deck in the morning and could stop photographing the icebergs, I tallied a hundred plus Southern (Antarctic) Fulmars around the boat.

I had a total of 13 species for the day. The highlight was a Snow Petrel – an all-white, graceful petrel that gave us fantastic views. We had four overall. It was a life bird for me and one I had very much hoped to see. It's only found in the waters around Antarctica.

There were two penguins – Gentoo and Chinstrap. The latter would have been a life bird but we had seen it the day before. One of the highlight experiences that seemed to capture Antarctica for me was watching the penguins on the small icebergs, called “bergy bits.” The penguins would shoot up out of the water trying to get onto the ice and flop back into the water when they didn't make it. The ones standing on the ice waddled around and sometimes slid on their bellies back into the water. There's nowhere else in the world where you can see that!



*Gentoo and one Chinstrap Penguin.  
Photo by R. Suomala.*

We also went by penguin colonies where there were hundreds of birds (or more). You could see them walking on their penguin trails in the snow going up into the colony. That was where a couple of Snowy Sheathbills could be seen – white dots moving around on the rocks at the rocky edge of the colony. The ship doesn't go close to the shore of the colonies so it's difficult to identify the species, but most were likely Gentoo and Chinstrap. We spent much time looking for Adelie without success, although there were likely some in the big colonies that were just too far away to identify. We had close penguins in the water but it took a while to figure out how to see and identify them as they swam from the boat, porpoising out of the water and almost somersaulting before they landed.

You'll notice in the photos that even though it was summer, I'm dressed like it's winter. The temperature was in the thirties, and the wind was cold. Even if the winds are calm, the ship creates its own wind and when the wind comes off the ice sheets it's bitter cold. It also snowed for a short time in the morning. Thanks to Patience Chamberlin's advice, I had my big parka with me. I did not have my snow pants or heavy long underwear (mistake) and the three layers of lightweight long underwear, flannel-lined pants, and rain pants weren't enough. Fortunately, I had enough warm layers on top so I was reasonable comfortable despite my cool legs. I tallied up all the pieces of clothing I had on and it

came to 22: boots, two socks, three light weight long underwear bottoms, flannel-lined pants, rain pants, t-shirt, long underwear top, turtleneck, second long underwear top, wool sweater, fleece jacket, fleece-lined jacket, parka, birding vest, two neck warmers, and two hats! About what I would wear for a normal Superbowl in New Hampshire.

Humpback Whales were the mammals of the day. They seemed to be everywhere we went. Some were sleeping in Wilhelmina Bay among the icy bits, resting quietly at the surface with just their back showing. We also saw a group of Orcas a ways away – thanks to scopes.

There were some fun pledges this year and I really appreciate all of you who donated to support this unique Twitcher effort. This is an important fund raiser for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and your support is terrific. Donations can be made at any time. **Thank You All!**



*One of the many Humpback Whales. Photo by R. Suomala.*

### Species List

Gentoo Penguin

Chinstrap Penguin – a trip life bird but I first saw it the day before the Superbowl

Southern Giant-Petrel

Southern (Antarctic) Fulmar – a trip life bird but I first saw it the day before the Superbowl

Black-bellied Storm-Petrel

Wilson’s Storm-Petrel

Antarctic Shag (Cormorant) – a trip life bird but I first saw it the day before the Superbowl

Snowy Sheathbill

Brown Skua

South Polar Skua

Kelp Gull

Antarctic Tern – a trip life bird but I first saw it the day before

Snow Petrel – **Life Bird**

### Big Miss

A few people saw an Emperor Penguin in the water a distance from the boat but I missed it. I saw the photo and couldn’t even tell it was a penguin, so it wouldn’t have been a very satisfying life view, but I still wish I had seen it. It was the only one on the entire trip.



*Snow Petrel (above) and Southern Fulmars (below). Photos by R. Suomala*



## More Photos!



Antarctic ice and snow. Photos by R. Suomala.





Clockwise from the left: Becky in all her layers in the snow and fog, by Zeke Cornell. Penguins walking their trail up to the colony and Antarctic ice by R. Suomala.

