

# OPERATION BIRD COUNT

Forest and Bird Society members are not confined in their areas of interest and study. Here, CHRIS SALE, a member of the Far North branch, writes of an expedition mounted and led by another Far North member, CAPTAIN GERRY CLARK, who has taken his expedition yacht *Totorore* around the stormy but bird-rich southern oceans.

The *Totorore* expedition left New Zealand in February, 1983, with the aim of studying the seabird life along the Antarctic convergence at sea and on all the islands and coasts along that region. It spent approximately two years exploring the bird life on the coast of Chile, also making a voyage down to the Antarctic continent and spending two winters around the coast of South Georgia. During the first voyage to South Georgia, a visit was also made to the Falkland Islands – *Totorore* losing its mast on this trip – and after the second voyage there it continued to the South Sandwich Islands and to Bouvetoya before heading to Cape Town, for repairs.

Bound for New Zealand, though, a mast was lost on the next leg, halfway between Cape Town and Marion Island, and the yacht had to cover 750 miles to Marion Island under jury rig. (The jury rig consisted of a spinnaker pole for a mast and a tarpaulin and bed sheets for sails!) At Marion Island some repairs were made, enabling Gerry Clark to continue solo to Crozet and Kerguelen Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. From there he sent a message that he was sailing on to New Zealand via Macquarie Island but storms rolled *Totorore* several times more, breaking its jury rig, and late in June the yacht limped into Freemantle, Western Australia. Repaired again, *Totorore* resumed its voyage, aiming now for New Zealand.

## Deep concern for birds

Gerry Clark is a 59-year-old master mariner who through a lifelong study of birds, along with a feeling for the wide oceans, developed a deep concern for the future of the birds of the southern seas. This led him to build a small and sturdy boat in which others similarly dedicated might join him in studies aimed at safeguarding the birds and their lonely nesting places against the threat of commercialisation of the Antarctic continent.

On the family organic orchard at Kerikeri he built the 11m expedition yacht *Totorore* (Maori name for Antarctic prion) largely at his own expense over a period of seven years and early in 1983 he sailed via Chatham Islands for Juan Fernandez Islands and southern Chile. In more than three years spent mainly visiting remote islands off Chile and in the southern oceans the expedition has collected a vast amount of detailed information about the distribution and breeding grounds of many sea birds.

The expedition committee is grateful for the assistance and support it has received, especially from the Far North branch of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, and many others.

## Rich fields of study

The rocky wind and wave-swept islands of the Cape Horn area stretching eastward

past the Falkland Islands to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands have over the past year been rich fields of study for *Totorore* and her crew. Those aboard with Gerry Clark have included such top ornithologists as Dr Alan Cowan, who has a Polar Medal for work on seabirds and Peter Harrison, British bird artist and photographer and author of the authoritative *Seabirds, an Identification Manual*.

Both had left the expedition just before I joined it in February 1985 at Punta Arenas, in the Straits of Magellan and had left glowing accounts of their periods of voyaging and study aboard *Totorore* around the far south of Chile, Harrison commenting that Gerry had contributed a lot to the knowledge of the birds, the sea birds especially, of the "fantastic" Cape Horn area; and Cowan recorded a "most memorable experience in an extraordinary part of the world – harsh and desolate and quite frightening at times when the weather is fierce and one really feels the force of nature."

I arrived too late in the season to see much that was significant in the Cape Horn area, but *Totorore* was soon off past the magnificent canals of Southern Chile and then down across Drake Passage to the Antarctic peninsula, with a New Zealander working in Chile, Joi Rosoman making up our crew of three. It was a very late time of the year to make such a trip because of the advancing pack ice. Most of the breeding bird life had left but because this was an unusual time to visit the area the information gathered could prove interesting. And it was definitely a stunning place with nature at its grandest.

## Major undertaking

The next stage was to follow up the expedition made to South Georgia by *Totorore* the previous winter, on work for the British Antarctic Survey. On the results of this, Dr J. P. Croxall, head of the Birds and Mammals section of the British Antarctic Survey, based in Cambridge, England, wrote to the expedition headquarters at Kerikeri:

"The project was to try to estimate the breeding populations of the two species, king penguins and wandering albatrosses, at all breeding sites known to us at South Georgia. This represents a major undertaking, the island being 182 km long, often of rugged topography and difficult of access, particularly under the weather conditions prevailing in the last winter.

"Nevertheless in their two-month field-work period the *Totorore* team carried out counts of wandering albatross chicks at every known breeding site and of king pen-

