

# Through rain, hail and shine, ambitious island program completed successfully

After a little over three months away, the 28 members of the Heard Island expedition arrived at Fremantle aboard *Southern Supporter* early on Saturday 6 March, weary yet happy and satisfied with their three months' labour on the remote island. The summer had been spent in one of the most beautiful, wild and demanding environments possible.

As we arrived back in Australia it seemed like an age ago that we had splashed ashore by amphibious 'LARC' and zodiac, with quite some trepidation, to set up our five field camps. We subsequently closed down one of these camps to see us permanently occupy four locations around the island. Three other small campsites were also set up using various tents and an existing 'Apple' hut to allow us to work at a variety of sites.

We had achieved much over the summer in what was an ambitious program of scientific research. The Antarctic Marine Living Resources team had successfully deployed satellite trackers and collected data on the foraging ecology of fur seals, king penguins, macaroni penguins, black browed albatross and light mantled sooty albatross. This was all integrated with a concurrent marine science voyage by *Aurora Australis* in the waters off Heard Island. The extent and location of seabird populations were also mapped over the summer to further allow us to understand and manage this amazing place.

Three glaciologists spent long and often trying days up on Brown Glacier. Valuable data was collected through GPS surveys, ice coring from inside crevasses, and melt stream

*Hi Ho Hi Ho ... Glaciologists high on Brown Glacier, roped up to guard against falling into crevasses. The Spit is in the background.*



DOUG THOST



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*Amphibious craft deliver equipment and supplies to Spit Bay base camp on Heard Island as the Southern Supporter waits off-shore.*

surveys. Over the season the individuals in the team ascended well over 30,000m in cumulative altitude gains.

Back down on the coast, where the vegetation grows, a team investigated the terrestrial ecology of the island through the collection of soil cores for invertebrate assemblage investigation, the study of plant morphology and phenology, and research into the fluorescence and respiration rates of various botanic species. The changing vegetation limits on the island were also investigated and as part of these investigations

a new and 12th vascular plant species was discovered growing on the island.

All this was aided by a team of five support staff who were busy guiding, feeding, powering, repairing and assisting the 23 scientists and their equipment throughout the season.

We travelled across lagoons by small boats, often negotiating large expanses of ice and ever changing conditions. Many kilometres were travelled by foot as we negotiated rocky coastlines, soul-destroying scree slopes and icy glaciers to reach the places our work required us to be. The sun shone, the rain fell, the wind howled and the snow blew throughout the season to provide a constantly changing backdrop to our temporary home.

Sitting on the ship, looking back to where our tents had once stood, it was hard to take it all in. But we took away some wonderful memories and, most importantly, a mountain of valuable research data to better inform our future decisions about this magnificent part of the world.

*ROBB CLIFTON, 2003–04 HEARD ISLAND  
EXPEDITION FIELD LEADER*

*The next issue of Australian Antarctic Magazine will feature Heard Island, and the research programs conducted there in the 2003–04 season.*