

SALVESEN RANGE EXPEDITION 2024 – REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This was a mountaineering expedition, supported by *Vinson of Antarctica*, with the primary objective of attempting the first ascent of Mt Macklin and/or P.2229 from the Salomon Glacier, at the far southeast end of the Salvesen Range. Unsettled weather, with winds at times devastating, stopped us even from setting foot on either mountain. We did, however, manage to reconnoitre part of the glacier approach and, after retreating to Hamilton Bay, we were able to make several skiing day excursions further north. We were also able to assess the wildlife populations at several beaches and Steve Brown's survey is included at the end of this report.

EXPEDITION TEAM

Skip Novak – expedition leader
Stephen Venables – mountain co-leader
Kenny Brookman
Steve Brown
Julian Freeman-Attwood
Iain Young

VINSON CREW

Paul Guthrie (skipper)
Justino Garcia-Borreruero Adrada
Mariana Esperón

OUTWARD VOYAGE

The Latam flight to Stanley was delayed by a day, so we did not board *Vinson* until the afternoon of September 8. Nevertheless we managed to get away on September 9 as planned, motoring out through The Narrows that evening. The passage to South Georgia was an easy one, with moderate winds and seas, and the rare treat of being able to sail through Shag Rocks on a calm evening, and we tied up at Grytviken on the evening of November 13, ninety-eight hours after leaving Stanley.



The full team at Stanley. © Lisa Watson





Coming into Grytviken. © Iain Young

SKI EXCURSIONS FROM GRYTVIKEN

The weather forecast was not promising: fairly persistent strong northwesterlies and westerlies, with no prolonged fine spell in sight. So we made the most of short breaks. On September 14 five of us skied up to Echo Pass and back in moderate winds, taking three hours for the round trip. The following day we were blessed with blue sky and no wind, so we skied up to Glacier Col, returning via Hestesletten and the north side of Brown Mountain. The 17 kilometres round trip took 7 1/2 hours. Although staff at KEP had reported huge amounts of snow a fortnight earlier, the northern air stream had melted much of that. We *were* still able to ski right from the beach, but there was a good deal of ducking and weaving round exposed rock and grass patches, and the snow condition was challenging. On September 16 Grytviken was shrouded in low cloud and falling wet snow, so we used the day to prepare food and equipment for the Salomon Glacier.



Returning from Glacier Pass via Hestesletten. © Stephen Venables

SALOMON GLACIER

September 17 was fine but windy, with a forecast for calmer weather the following two days, so we headed south, leaving Grytviken at 8.00 and at 17.00 reaching Hamilton Bay, with time to recce the landing site for the Salomon Glacier, before continuing to anchor in Larsen Harbour. Unlike the Royal Engineers team which came here in 2023, we decided to land in the east corner of Hamilton



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Skipper Paul Guthrie bringing *Vinson* into Hamilton Bay. © Stephen Venables

Bay, where the initial slope up the glacier is less steep. There had been fears of disturbing the King Penguin colony here, but the birds were all congregated in the far east corner of the beach, well clear of our access route.

After a very windy night and morning in Larsen Harbour, we returned on September 18 to offload all our gear and supplies, caching them several hundred metres above the shoreline, before returning to Larsen Harbour for a final comfortable night aboard *Vinson*.

September 19 dawned fine, as forecast, with very light winds. Anchor up was at 8.00 and by 10.00 the mountaineering team was ashore in Hamilton Bay ready to start up the Salomon Glacier. Conditions were perfect, with blue sky overhead and firm snow underfoot, making for easy work towing our well-laden pulks. At 14.20 we stopped to camp at 500 metres.

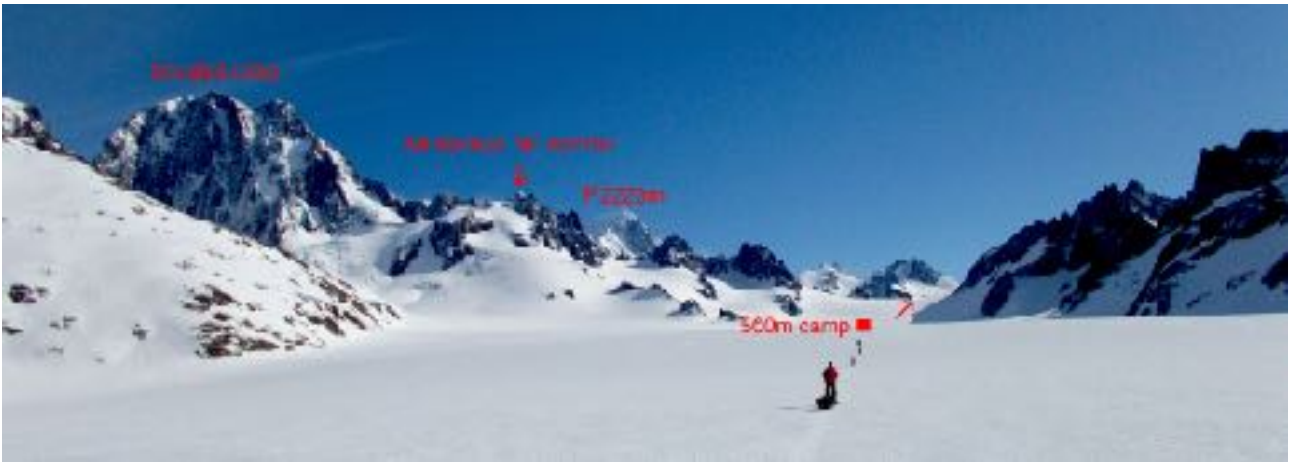
The forecast for September 20 was appalling, but after a windy



Hamilton Bay recce and final faff before setting off up the Salomon Glacier. © Stephen Venables & Mariana Esperón



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A perfect start up the Salomon Glacier. The arrow points up to the chosen col. © Stephen Venables



Recce to the col.
© Stephen Venables



Potential route up the unnamed glacier beyond the col.
Mt Macklin's main summit is still hidden behind the NE summit.

snowy dawn, the wind calmed right down, allowing us to do a recce to the cols at the head of the glacier. We needed to cross one of these cols to reach the unnamed glacier further northwest which flows into Twitcher Bay and which would give access to the north ridge of Mt Macklin's main summit. It soon became apparent that the most northerly col was the best route for our heavily laden pulks. After returning to camp, at midday the promised wind had still not arrived, so we returned to the chosen col to depot all the heavy climbing gear and most of our food and gas, marking the sight with a large snow block cairn. Back at camp, we were preparing afternoon tea when the wind did finally arrive – increasingly violent katabatic gusts hammering against the tents. After around thirty minutes onslaught Stephen's tent succumbed, with broken poles puncturing the flysheet. Meanwhile most of the team was building a hasty snow wall round Skip's tent. After around two hours construction work, the wreckage of Stephen's tent was collapsed and secured with snow blocks, with all the contents – including three Scottish mountaineers – transferred to Skip's tent.



Depot at the col as bad weather builds. © Stephen Venables

It was not an ideal situation: six men, averaging around six feet tall, and all their gear, crammed into a tent designed for three. However, we had plentiful food and gas, and we were warm and sheltered. The only worry, as katabatic gust continued through

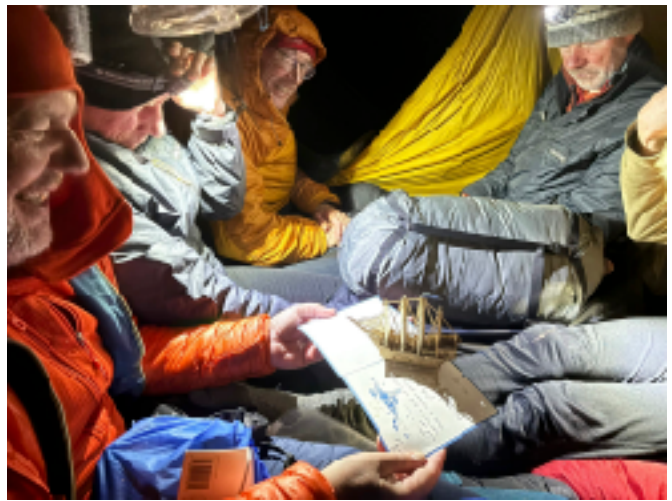
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the night, was that this tent would go the same way as the other one.

We endured three cramped nights in the tent, but were able to emerge during calm daytime spells to stretch legs and keep strengthening the protecting snow wall, which had an annoying habit of melting in the exceptionally warm northerly airstream. (Southerly winds are much easier to deal with, as everything stays frozen and dry powder drifts up against the tents, reducing their profile and making them virtually indestructible). Each day we received forecasts from Paul Guthrie by Inreach text and Iridium conversation. They were not encouraging, with few interruptions to the continuing strong westerlies and northwesterlies. We could return to the beach to collect one of the spare tents, then continue over the col to the next glacier. We could probably get close to Macklin's North Ridge. But the chances

Katabatic destruction at the Salomon camp resolved successfully, with six men averaging six feet tall crammed into a three man tent, celebrating Iain Young's birthday © Skip Novak & Iain Young



Route up the Salomon Glacier with projected route beyond the col.



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of doing that *and* then getting a clear break to climb the mountain *and* then having good enough conditions to return to Hamilton Bay looked slim. We could well spend the best part of ten days cowering in wind-battered tents and have nothing to show for it.

So we decided to cut our losses and return to *Vinson*. September 23 dawned fine, so Stephen, Kenny and Iain skied with pulks back up to the col to collect the depot, while Skip, Steve and Julian dug out the surviving tent. Then we all enjoyed a glorious pulk trundle back down the beach, where Justino was waiting with the *Zodiac* to ferry all the unused gear and supplies back to *Vinson*. With one more fine day promised, we headed north immediately to have a chance of landing at St Andrew's Bay.



Return to Hamilton Bay and *Vinson of Antarctica* © Stephen Venables

DAY SKI TOURS

Wasting no time, we were all set to go ashore at St Andrew's Bay first thing on September 24, when the bay was suddenly whipped up into breaking waves, ruling out any hope of landing. We headed south instead, to Royal Bay, which was equally frenzied. However, there was enough shelter in Mollkte Harbour to anchor and go ashore for an excellent ski up to a small peak overlooking the bay. On our return to the beach we did a wildlife survey, before returning to *Vinson* and heading back north to Grytviken, to tie up safely before the next bout of bad weather arrived.

It was now a case again of snatching opportunities when we could. On the afternoon of September 25 we skied over to Maiviken in fine sunshine, but returned in growing wind, lousy visibility and hideous snow conditions.

On September 26 no-one left the boat, but on the 27th, undeterred by very strong winds, Steve Brown, Kenny Brookman and Iain Young fought their way up and down Mt Hodges, taking six hours over a climb normally completed in three.



Iain Young returning stylishly to Mollkte © Stephen Venables

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Kenny Brookman & Iain Young reach the summit of Mt Hodges. Steve Brown out of sight, ahead as usual. © Stephen Venables



Ocean Harbour. © Skip Novak
Venables on Black Peak. © Steve Brown



Descent from Black Peak towards Reindeer Valley. © Stephen Venables



With an improvement on September 28, we motored round to the far side of the Barff Peninsula, hoping to anchor at Cobblers Cove, only to find the narrow entrance blocked by a large iceberg, so we anchored instead at Ocean Harbour, ready for an attempt on Black Peak. September 29 dawned perfect for our climb and we were ashore by 9.00 am. From the head of Ocean Harbour it is a steep climb of about 300 metres to a col on the south ridge of Black Peak. From there the best route is on the far side of the ridge, up the edge of the south face. Sometimes it is possible to do the whole climb on skins; on this occasion the last two hundred metres or so had to be done on foot, wearing crampons, reaching the

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Stephen Venables at Breakwind Gap. © Skip Novak



Waiting for pickup at Whistle Cove. © Skip Novak



Mariana Esperón ferrying ski party back to *Vinson*. © Skip Novak

on the far side to Fortuna Bay, which was dramatically altered by glacial melting. After the initial gentle slope, you have to turn south into a subsidiary gully. Where in 2011 we had skied gentle lazy turns, easily



Spindrift blasting past Husvik whaling station. © Stephen Venables

highest summit five hours after leaving the beach. The south face gives an excellent steep descent back to Sörling Valley, but on this occasion we dropped down onto the north side for a longer, more meandering descent, all the way to the frozen Reindeer Lake and down to Sandbugten. The whole outing from Ocean Harbour took 8 hours.

With moderate winds forecast for the next day, *Vinson* headed west to anchor in Anchorage Bay that evening. The morning of September 30 was quite windy, but it moderated in the afternoon, so we went ashore to ski up Turnback Glacier, onto the main Fortuna Glacier and then back left to Breakwind Gap. This makes an excellent short day trip taking in one of the famous landmarks on the Shackleton Traverse. The slope leading up the gap seemed to have become noticeably steeper since Stephen was last here in 2011. Likewise the descent

towing pulks, the slope has now melted out to a steep narrow funnel, which would be very awkward with pulks. Once in the subsidiary gully, however, the skiing became easier, and on this occasion we were able to ski all the way down to Whistle Cove, where the Zodiac picked us up to rejoin *Vinson*. The trip from Anchorage Bay to Whistle Cove had taken 4 1/2 hours.

On October 1 the winds increased dramatically, so *Vinson* moved to the comparative shelter of Husvik Bay, anchoring there with some difficulty, with katabatic gusts up to 65 knots. No-one felt any

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Murky conditions near Stromness. © Iain Young



Waiting hopefully for pickup at Husvik. © Iain Young

compulsion to go ashore that afternoon, but on October 2, with the wind slightly reduced, Novak dragged the ski party into action, for a blustery but extremely enjoyable ski round the perimeter of the whaling station and over to Stromness Bay and back.



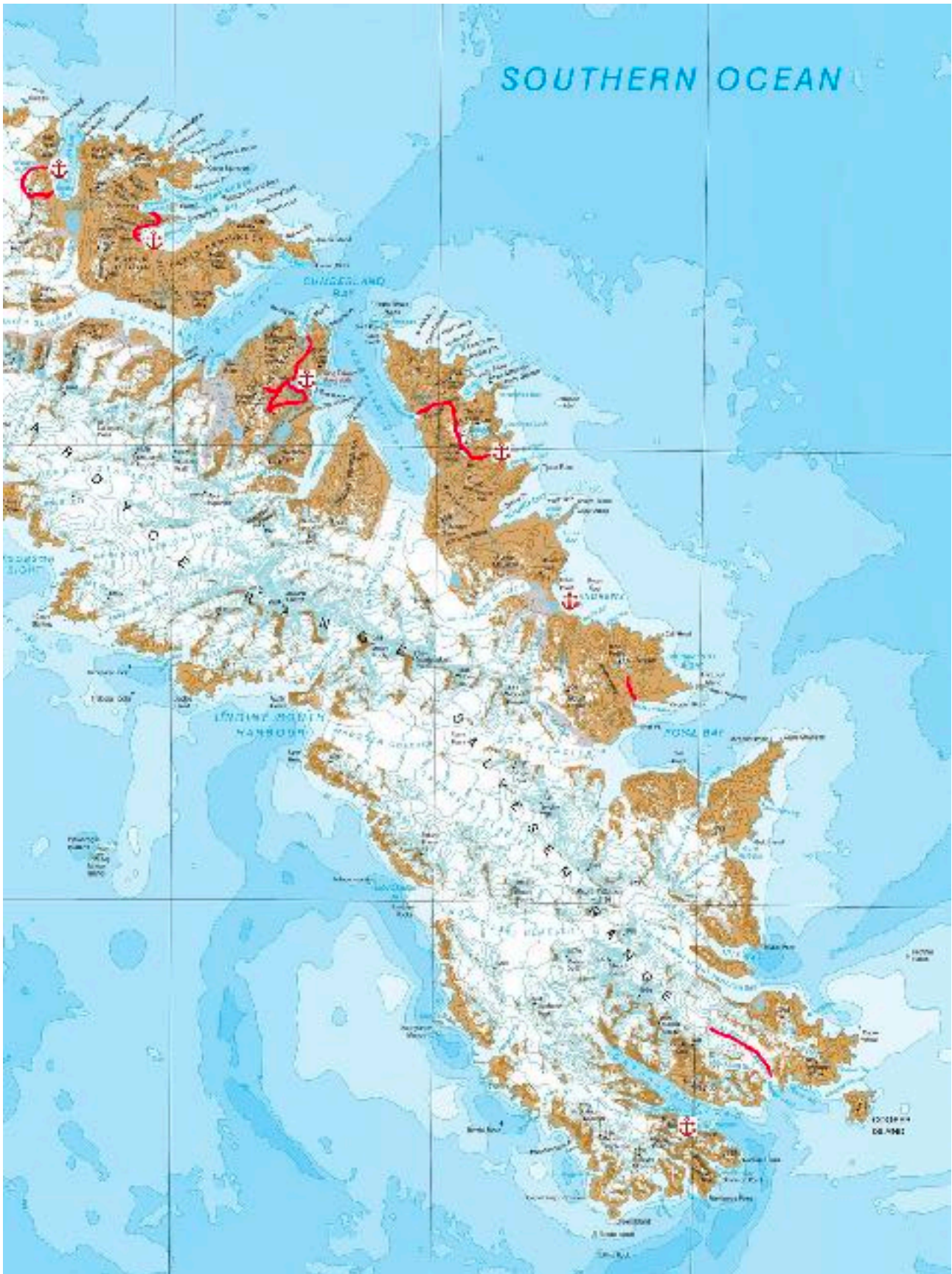
A brief moment of sunshine, leaving Rosita Harbour shortly after dawn © Stephen Venables

RETURN TO THE FALKLANDS

That was the end of our skiing for this season. We hoped on October 3 to visit Salisbury Plain for the South Georgia newcomers to get their first experience of a large teeming penguin colony, but when we got to the Bay of Isles it was obvious that landing was out of the question, so we headed straight to Rosita Harbour to anchor for our final night on South Georgia. At least we got a beautiful calm sunrise the next morning for anchor up, before heading west into increasing cloud, passing through a murky Bird Sound, and then out

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past the Willis Islands. Despite having to motor much of the time into westerlies, the return voyage took just five days and we passed through the Stanley Narrows just before dawn on October 9, tying up at the East Jetty later that morning. Arriving back three days before the Santiago flight gave Skip and Stephen valuable time for cleaning, repairing and sorting kit for the next ski charter. It also gave Stephen, Iain, Kenny and



Main anchorages used and routes skied by the expedition.

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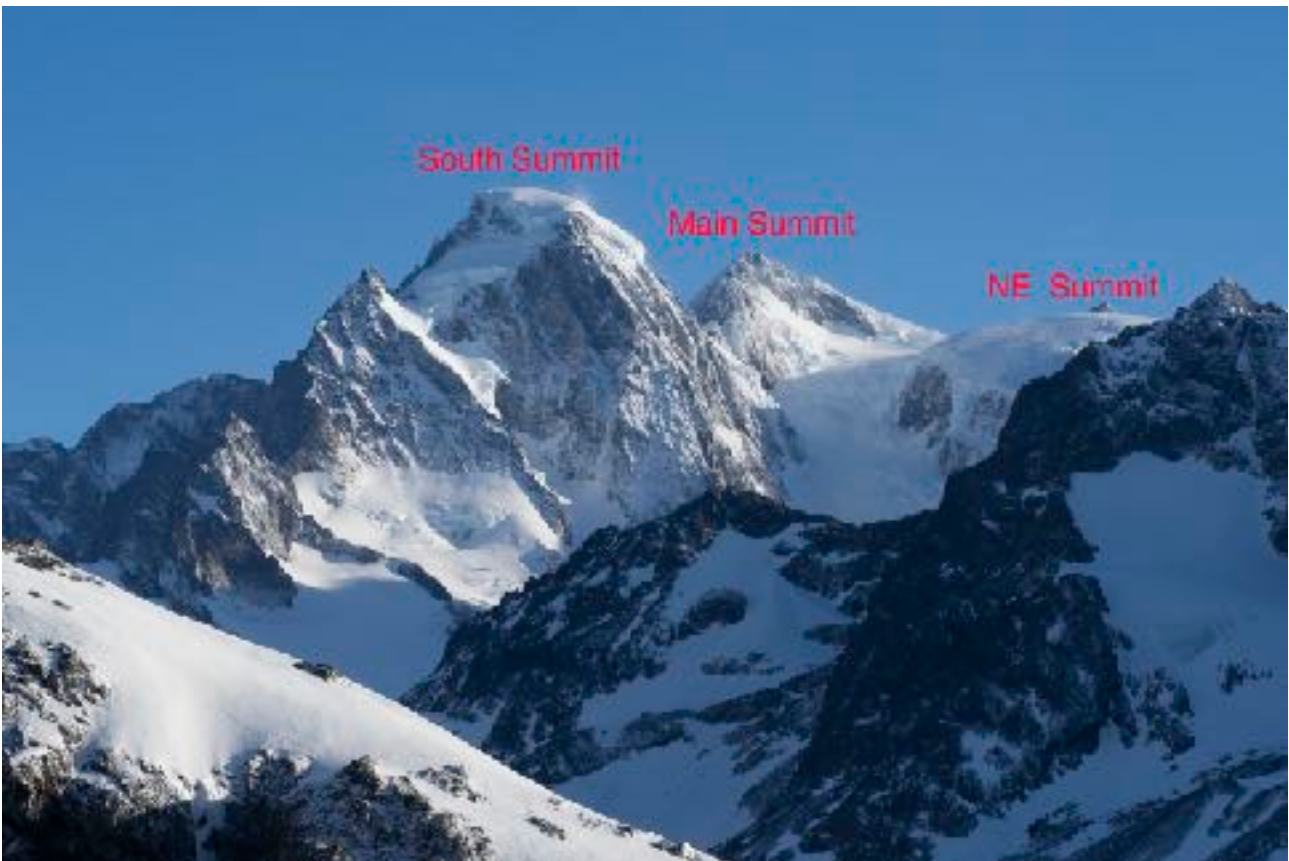
local man Steve Brown the chance of an excellent day on Mt Harriet introducing *Vinson* mate Mariana Esperón to her first ever rock climb.

CONCLUSIONS

Salomon Glacier and Mt Macklin attempt

Mt Macklin is a complex massif with three summits. The highest point, the Northwest summit is hard to see from the east because it is set back, behind the slightly lower Northeast Summit, which was attempted by the 2023 Royal Engineers expedition. Its west face, rising above Drygalski Fjord would give a very hard, very steep mixed and rock climb. For our purposes, the eastern approach to the north ridge seemed more practical. As far as we know, no human being has ever seen the north ridge up close, and no-one has seen at all the north face which lies between the main summit and the Northeast summit. However, given the easy-angled glacier approach to within about 500 metres of the summit, this must be the most practical way up the mountain.

Alas we never got to see it ourselves. Our approach was cautious, relying on heavy duty tents and plentiful supplies of food and gas, transported on pulks, with the aim of spending up to fifteen days attempting the mountain. For that kind of heavyweight approach the best route from the Salomon Glacier to the unnamed glacier to its northwest is over the most northerly of the cols at the head of the Salomon (S54° 44 806 W35° 58 504, 682m). From this broad col a crevasse-free left-trending descent of perhaps 150 metres leads to the unnamed glacier and a clear route to both Mt Macklin and P.2229. Of the two mountains, Macklin has the advantage of resonance, named after one of Shackleton's surgeons, Alexander Macklin; but

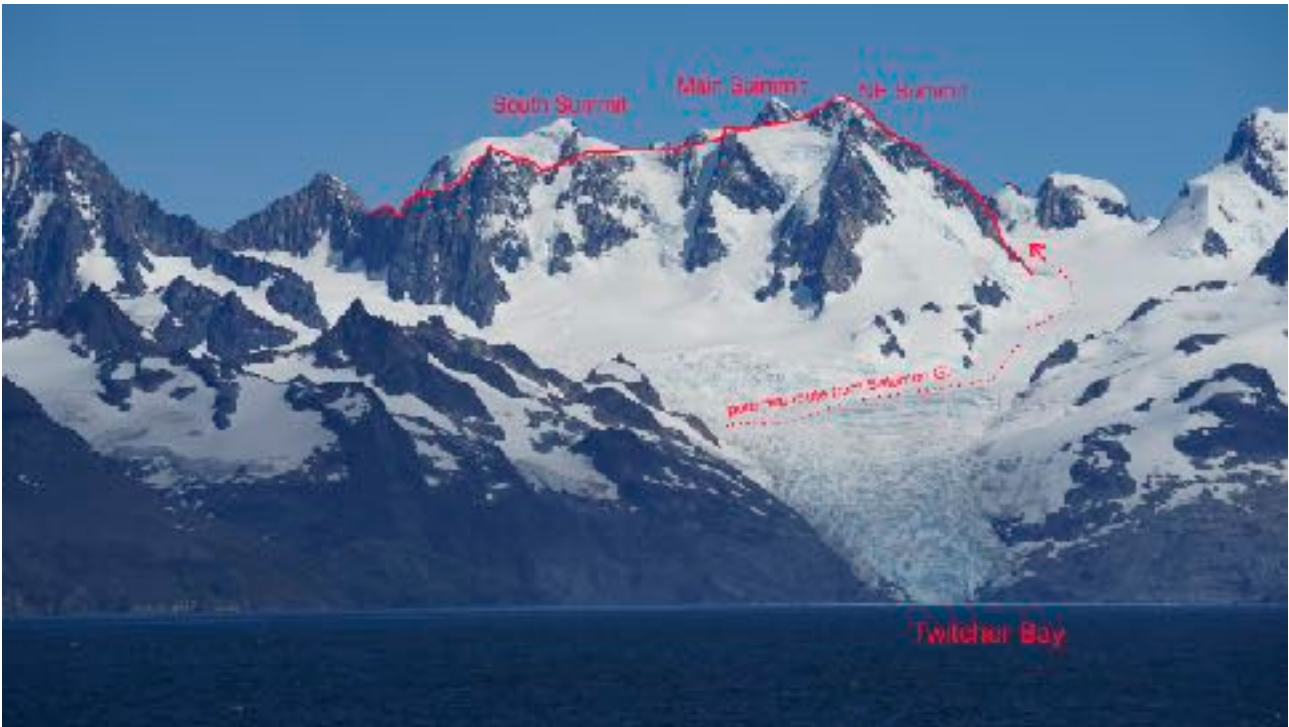


The three summits of Mt Macklin seen from Drygalski Fjord to the south. © Stephen Venables

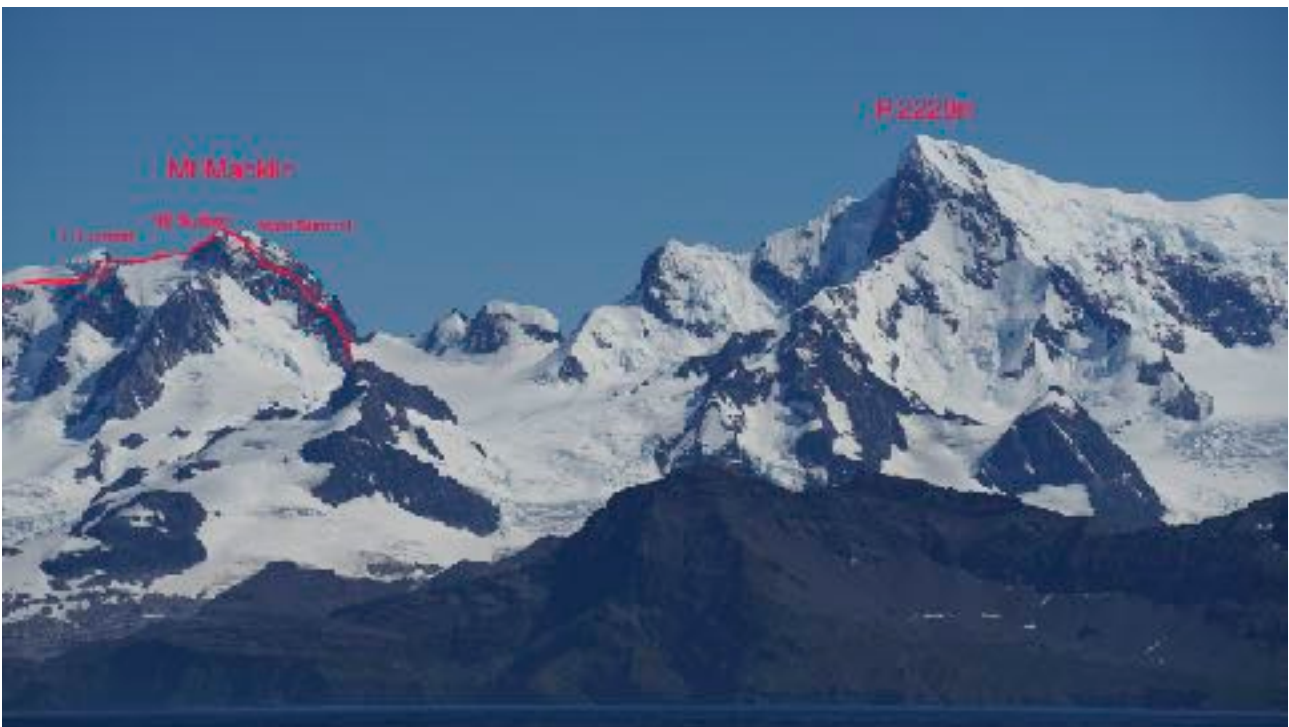
the unnamed P.2229 is an altogether finer looking, more monolithic and higher mountain, with no obvious easy route to the top.

It was obviously disappointing not to even to see the final ridge on Mt Macklin, but that would have required more sustained spells of clear weather. On nearly all our previous expeditions we have enjoyed at least one window of calm clear weather lasting several days. On this occasion that never happened, so we cut our losses and retreated.

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Two slightly different views of Mt Macklin from the northeast. The solid red line highlights the foreground ridge of the Northeast Summit, which hides most of the detail of the South and Main summits. © Stephen Venables



Camping equipment

As mentioned above, we used our well-tried heavyweight approach, with plentiful reserves of food and fuel, and large Terra Nova tents (Terra Firma model), with heavy duty flysheets, double pole sets and heavy duty groundsheets. Despite that, one tent succumbed to the wind – the first time this has ever happened. In retrospect, we should perhaps have built a protecting snow wall before the wind arrived. For the surviving tent we *did* build a wall, almost up to the height of the tent roof. Snow saws were essential for cutting large regular snow blocks: lightweight emergency snow shovels are not sufficient. As usual, we also carried a sharpened steel spade to deal with bands of particular tough snow or ice. For convenience we cooked on gas, not liquid fuel, with two burners for each tent. The Terra Firma's large porch makes an excellent kitchen

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and, even with zips closed, there always seems to be enough air circulation to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.



Terra Nova *Terra Firma* double poled and well snowed in during a previous South Georgia expedition. © Stephen Venables

Skis and pulks

Most of us used alpine skis with touring bindings and plastic touring boots; one member had telemark skis. Provided they are well-fitting and have had any rubbing spots dealt with in advance, plastic touring boots are excellent for uphill and downhill. They also make excellent ice climbing boots. However, in the expectation that Mt Macklin might demand some quite intricate rock and mixed climbing, we also carried with us lighter, less clumpy mountaineering boots. As we never set foot on the mountain, they were never used. Five of the pulks we towed were medium size fibreglass Acapulka sleds. They are probably the best pulks on the market, with excellent tracking runners and comparatively light weight. However, we have replaced Acapulka's rather flimsy skimpy canopies with much more generous robust ones. One member towed a longer Snowsled pulk, which can be used to tow a casualty in the event of an accident. This emergency role was tried and tested with success in 2016.



Heading up the Salomon Glacier with fifteen days supplies loaded onto pulks. © Stephen Venables

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Day ski tours

By way of compensation for our failure on Macklin, we had ample time to enjoy several good day ski tours. In September the scope for ski touring on South Georgia is enormous, and as most potential day tours are on non-glaciated terrain one is spared the hassle of roping up. The main constraint is the state of surf on the beaches – hence our choice of skiing from Molkte Harbour on the day it was impossible to land at St Andrew’s Bay. One other constraint can be fur seals: at beach level you sometimes have to pick your route carefully to avoid disturbing them, but this hardly arises in September when numbers are still very low.

WILDLIFE REPORT COMPILED BY STEVE BROWN

18/09/24 Larsen Harbour

Snow covering the shores down to sea and 100% sea ice from just past the anchorage between Laws beach and Bonner Beach. All counts completed from the yacht/dingy. All animals looked healthy and no signs of unusual mortality.

Bonner Beach

- 4 Weddells, no pups
- 153 Fur seals

Laws Beach

- 1 Weddell and pup
- 52 fur seals

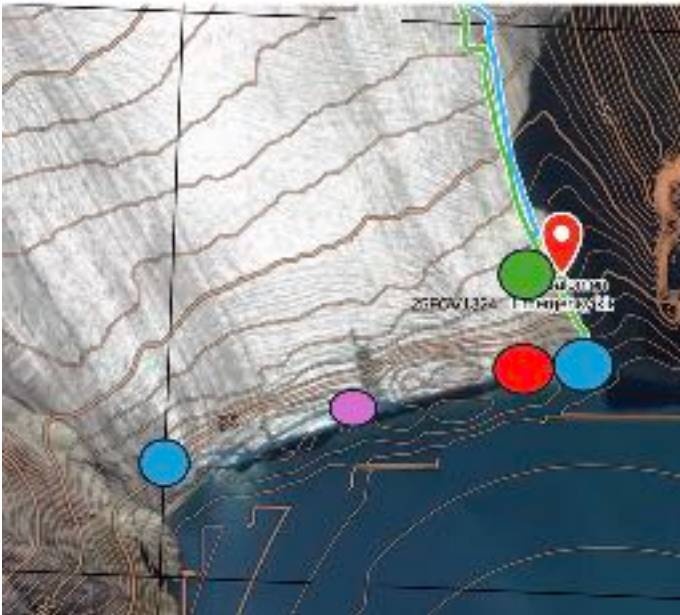


Laws Beach – Weddell and pup in centre of photo, behind the fur seals. © Steve Brown

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18/09/24 Hamilton Bay

A king colony at the north eastern end of the beach below the rocks, also Elephant seals and Fur seals in this area. Some further Fur seals at the south western end of the beach and some Gentoos in the middle. Shoreline consisting of a pebbly/sandy narrow beach in front of the Salomon glacier. All animals looked healthy and no sign of excessive mortality on the beach, 18 King penguin chick carcasses. Animal counts as follows:



- King colony with adults and chicks, from a rough count 300-350 chicks and probably similar number of adult birds.
- 22 elephant seals, male and female.
- 43 Fur seals.
- 50-80 Gentoos.

Locations of animals Red – Elephant seals, Blue – Fur seals, Green – King penguins – adults and chicks, Purple – Gentoos – adults only.



Hamilton Bay – Northeast end. © Steve Brown

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Hamilton Bay – King penguin rookery. © Steve Brown

24/09/24 Moltke Harbour

The beach was free from snow with the snowline starting at the tussac edge. The beach had Elephant seals, Fur seals, Gentoos (transiting to their colony) and a couple of King penguins. All animals looked healthy, some remaining signs of last year's carcasses on the beach, no signs of fresh unusual mortality. Animal counts as follows:



- 12 Elephant seals (m)
- 34 Elephant seals (f)
- 4 Elephant seals (pups)
- 16 Fur seals
- 2 King penguins
- 200 (approx.) Gentoos (colony back from beach)
- 5 Skuas
- 11 Giant petrels

Route walked Purple marks the location of the Gentoos

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Molkte Harbour – general beach view. © Steve Brown



Molkte Harbour – the biggest Elephant seal harem © Steve Brown

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Molkte Harbour – Gentoo colony © Stephen Venables



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29/09/24 Ocean Harbour

A beautiful sunny day to land at Ocean Harbour, again a fairly quiet beach with elephants and a couple of fur seals. (sorry I only did a total count of elephant's here). All animals looked healthy and not signs of carcasses on the shore or surrounding tussac that we skied through. Animal numbers:

40 Elephants

2 Fur seals



Ocean Harbour. Below – looking northwest. © Steve Brown



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Ocean Harbour – looking southeast. © Steve Brown



30/09/24 Anchorage Bay/Whistle Cove

We skied up the Turn back glacier from Anchorage Bay and then through the Break Wind Gap down to the shore around where the Whistle Cove kings are. Snow cover generally down to the edge of the Tussac line and the top of the beach. Only a couple of Kings on the shore in Anchorage Bay but lots of King penguins scattered all along in various size groups and a number of elephant seals on the beach where we skied down. There were no real elephant seal harems, but a mix of females and some bigger males, no pups. No carcasses seen on the beach. We were only on a section of the beach. All animals looked healthy.

22 elephants (sorry only combined numbers)

King penguins, lots!! All along the shore and generally making their way round the bay to Whistle Cove.

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Whistle Cove – looking north towards the head of Fortuna Bay. © Skip Novak



Whistle Cove – looking north up to Breakwind Ridge. © Steve Brown



King penguins in Whistle Cove. © Steve Brown

02/10/24 Husvik Harbour

Snowline to the top of the beach and the weather generally very wintry, -4 degree Celsius with 20-30 knots gusting more (we had 65 knot gusts whilst anchoring the day before). The beach was fairly empty with a small harem (1 male, 4 females, 1 pup) furthest south. Two bigger harems one in the middle of the beach (1 male, 16 females, 6 pups, just south of the managers villa) and one on the edge of the station (1 male, 16 females, 1 pup, counted by binoculars as in the restricted area so may have missed a pup). There were two lone females on the beach. No fur seals or penguins on the beach. There were 3 carcasses visible, 1 seal, 2 penguin that were seen, these were from last year. All animals looked healthy. Animal counts below -

- 3 Elephant seals (m)
- 38 Elephant seals (f)
- 8 Elephant seals (pups)



Husvik Bay – looking south. © Steve Brown

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Husvik Bay – looking north. © Steve Brown



Husvik Bay – Elephant seals slightly south of Manager's villa. © Steve Brown