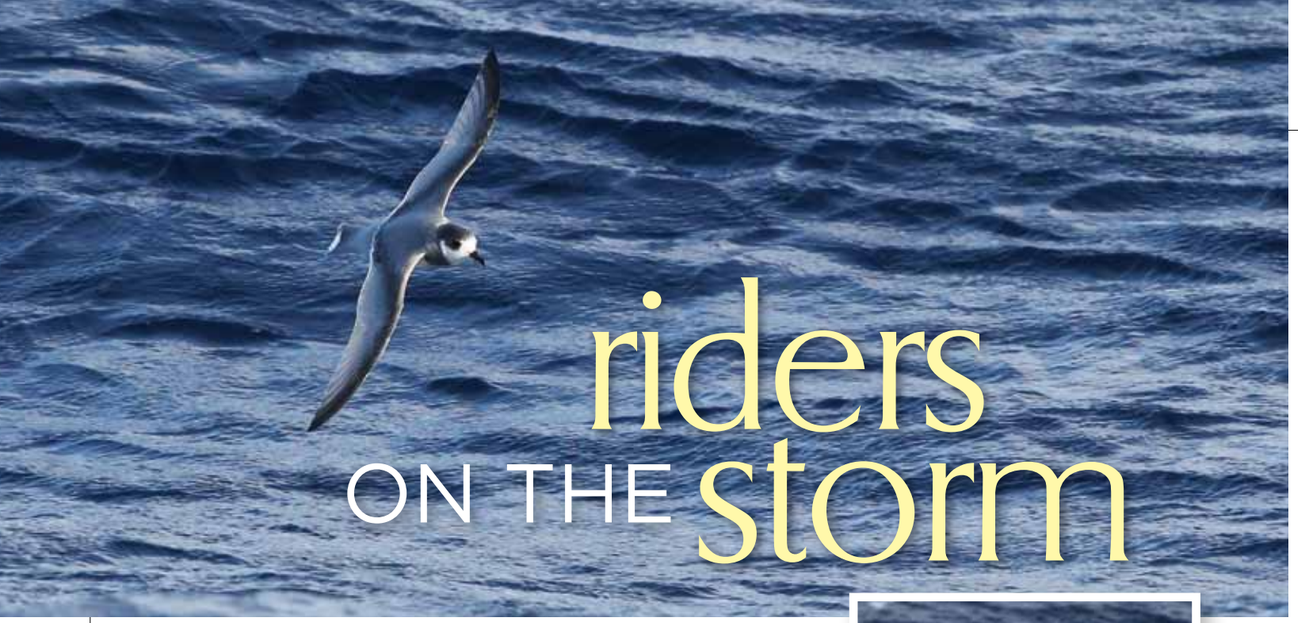

riders ON THE storm

1984 – the year made famous by George Orwell's dystopian novel – saw several memorable events: the first space shuttle flight, the Soviet boycott of the L.A. Olympics, and the launch of Apple's Macintosh computer. Closer to home, P.W. Botha became State President and Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize. But for local seabird fanatics, 1984 means one thing: it was the year the Blues and Kergies came to town. **Peter Ryan** reminisces, 30 years on.

PETER RYAN (5)

Birders who grow up in Cape Town tend to spend a lot of time looking at waders and seabirds, because these are the two groups that offer a real chance of turning up something new. In the 1980s, seabirding generally involved spending hours on windswept headlands with your eyes glued to a telescope; only a lucky few actually got out to sea with the birds. Another fun activity was to scour the beaches for dead birds – perhaps not tickable, but one way to find rare species. In the late 1970s the African Seabird Group instituted regular beach patrols for dead birds, and they became a feature of my later school years.

Winter is the best time for seabirding, especially if you are shorebound, and the 1984 season started with something of a bang. A massive cold front swept the Cape from 15 May, wrecking many juvenile Black-browed Albatrosses along the West Coast. Most came ashore alive; I recall finding one by following its footprints (there's no mistaking those massive webbed feet) up the beach to where its carcass lay huddled in the lee of a dune. And they were not confined to the beach: I found one in a wheat field south of Velddrif. All were newly-fledged birds, still growing their outer primary feathers. They had left their colonies on South Georgia less than four weeks previously and flown straight to the Cape, only to get clobbered by an unseasonably severe storm. There hasn't been an equivalent event since then. But bigger things were to come.

above and right *Blue Petrels are often compared to prions because their upperparts appear fairly similar (albeit darker blue-grey), but their flight action is more dashing, closer to that of a Soft-plumaged Petrel, and they have a distinct, long-tailed jizz. The white-tipped tail is diagnostic, but the white undertail (blackish in prions) and sharply contrasting blackish collar are visible at even greater distances.*

In July 1984 I finally experienced my first real sea trip – a three-week research cruise on the R.S. *Africana*. I was extremely fortunate to have Barrie Rose aboard, who by that stage was a veteran with five years' seabirding experience. Within hours of leaving Cape Town harbour we saw a small, grey petrel soar past in the distance, which left Barrie scratching his head. It reminded him of a Kerguelen Petrel, a species he'd seen at Marion Island but never off the Cape. More followed, and the following day we spotted several Blue Petrels among the prions, scavenging for scraps at the trawl.

By the end of the trip we'd seen more than 20 of both species, as well as 15 Grey-headed Albatrosses, six Southern Fulmars, two white-phase Southern Giant Petrels, two Little Shearwaters, two South Polar Skuas, both royal albatrosses and a Grey Petrel. Barrie was incredulous. He kept saying, 'It's not usually like this!'

We returned to shore elated, and spread the news to jealous fellow seabirders (no instant reporting from the ship in those days!). But even as we did so, another series of severe cold fronts struck, and the wreck was on. All along the coast, from Saldanha to St Lucia, unprecedented numbers of petrels came ashore. Although most perished at sea and washed up dead, some came ashore alive. The most bizarre was a Sooty Albatross perched on a ledge on one of the University of Cape Town residences – it must have thought it was back on its breeding cliff! Few birders were out to witness the event, but Phil Hockey swore blind that he saw a Blue Petrel fly over the causeway to Marcus Island in the mouth of Saldanha Bay.

Relatively few species regular to our shores were affected, but three species came ashore in droves: Blue and Kerguelen petrels and Slender-billed Prions. Beach walks at scattered locations along the coast confirmed at least 76 Blues, 233 Kergies, 70 Slender-billeds and only the second record of an Antarctic Petrel. To put this in perspective, prior to this event there had been only 17 records of Kerguelen Petrels and 26 of Blue Petrels from southern Africa. And although there have been a smattering of records since then, nothing comes close to 1984.

Although Kerguelen Petrels call to mind a Pterodroma *or gadfly petrel, they are more closely related to the fulmarine petrels. They have a peculiar, stiff-winged flight, with rapid bursts of shallow wing beats, and frequently soar high overhead. Seen head-on, they have a very odd, stuffed-sausage appearance. Their reflective plumage changes colour dramatically depending on the lighting and body angle.*

above and above, left *Slender-billed Prions are most easily confused with Antarctic Prions, but can be identified if seen well enough (or, ideally, photographed). The best features are the rather pale head with prominent white supercilium flaring behind the eye, narrow dark cheek stripe, and small dark tail tip, confined to the central three pairs of tail feathers (four to five in Antarctic Prions). The dark tail tip tends to protrude slightly from the rest of the tail, giving a distinctive tail shape that differs from the more regular, wedge-shaped tail of an Antarctic Prion (but beware birds in moult). Considerable caution is needed, however, especially with the head characters, as these overlap with small, pale Antarctic Prions.*

Most interestingly, the 1984 irruption of Blues and Kergies was not confined to South Africa: similar occurrences were reported from Australia and South America. One disbelieving birder even saw a Kerguelen Petrel fly past 200 kilometres inland from Perth. Imagine seeing a Kergy whip overhead in the Tanqua Karoo! The fact that we'd seen the Blues and Kergies (and presumably overlooked Slender-billed Prions among the Antarctics) several weeks before the wreck confirmed that this wasn't just a simple case of birds being carried out of range by the storms that brought them ashore. Something strange must have happened in their normal range, causing the birds to irrupt northwards.

All three species typically remain in Antarctic waters year round. If you are fortunate enough to visit South Africa's Prince Edward Islands, you seldom see a Blue or a Kergy until the day you reach the islands, even though both breed there in large numbers. And you'll be lucky to see a Slender-billed Prion at all – the Indian Ocean population mainly breeds at Kerguelen Island. All three species feed further south, beyond the Roaring Forties, in the Furious Fifties.

I'm writing this well into the Fifties, where I have been for the past 10 days on an oceanographic cruise. The weather in April is atrocious. Fronts roar through continually, whipping up mountainous seas. Icebergs float past, obscured now and then by passing snow squalls. It's a tough place to make a living. I haven't seen a storm petrel for a week. Even pterodromas are thin on the ground, just the occasional White-headed Petrel drifts past, and the only albatrosses are Wandering, Grey-headed and Light-mantled. By far the most common birds are Blue and Kerguelen petrels, and an even mix of Slender-billed and Antarctic prions; clearly, these are not birds to be intimidated by a Cape winter storm.

Why did they come north in 1984? We'll probably never know because the event predated detailed satellite-based remote sensing of the oceans. There was a strong El Niño–Southern Oscillation event in 1983, but such episodes occur quite regularly without similar irruptions. Something must have happened to trigger the birds' northward movement all around the Southern Ocean. And once out of range, they apparently became more susceptible to being wrecked.

But the burning question for most birders is, 'When will it happen again?' One thing is certain: when it does, it will be a bumper season for pelagic birding off the Cape.