

The Science Observer

A Journal of Stories About Scientists on Macquarie Island

Volume 3

1911

Hurley's 'Juvenile' Trick

When Dr Douglas Mawson's Australian Antarctic Expedition first visited Macquarie Island in 1911, photographer, Frank Hurley, went ashore at Caroline Cove. He was so charmed by Caroline Cove that he wanted to remain there forever, photographing its vast populations of wildlife 'that knew no fear of man.' The *Aurora*, however, was headed northward to the isthmus. Hurley was so desperate to return to Caroline Cove that he resorted to a 'juvenile' trick that allowed him to return there.

Charmed by Caroline Cove



Caroline Cove. Photo Geof Copson.

The Australian Antarctic Expedition's photographer, Frank Hurley, was enchanted by his first visit to Caroline Cove in 1911. Fourteen years later, he wrote about this memorable experience:

'As we rowed in wonderment over the glassy surface of swaying reflections, we scared flocks of gulls, petrels and cormorants from their nesting places, and these, circling the great heights, roused the echoes'.

When Hurley stepped ashore, he immediately set to work photographing the Cove, while his companion, the expedition's chief biologist, John Hunter, drew a small mouth organ from

his pocket and began playing a lively tune. Penguins gathered around him, showing no fear, listening curiously to the music.

*H*urley and Hunter had not been ashore for long when they had their first close and terrifying encounter with an elephant seal:



A close encounter with an elephant seal. Photo Geof Copson.

'As Hunter and I rambled about, composing pictures, we came to a dark cave and, venturing inside, were greeted with a fierce bellowing and snorting from the dark, dank, dripping interior. We fled as quickly as our legs could carry us, and pursuing our flying heels came a huge ponderous creature, tumbling, flopping and grunting, so close as to scare us thoroughly. Evidently more scared himself, a bull sea-elephant charged wildly ahead, though a fleeting crowd of penguins, which scattered squarking helter-skelter down the sloping gravel into the water. Having regained this safer element, the amphibian whirled about, puffed up his short trunk and opening wide his huge mouth roared defiance back at us.'

*H*urley dreaded the thought of having to spend the next two weeks in the north of the island building a wireless station and was desperate for an excuse to return to Caroline Cove. He resorted to a 'juvenile ruse', which he later excused by saying that he was not very old at the time. He hid one of his expensive cinematic lenses behind a rock. Hurley then dutifully boarded the *Aurora* as it sailed north to Hasselborough Bay. As the work of unloading stores began, Hurley reported the 'loss' of the lens to Mawson and pretended to be dismayed. Mawson was not impressed by Hurley's apparent carelessness and ordered him to set out at once and walk overland to Caroline Cove. The biologist, Charles Harrison accompanied him, and a sealer, D. Livingstone, offered to be their guide. *Although heavily laden with photographic equipment, Hurley had trouble disguising his eagerness as he headed southwards.*

*N*earing the Nuggets, Hurley became aware of the stench of decaying elephant seals. As he came closer to the Nuggets, he saw Joseph Hatch's oil refinery, which had by then ceased operating. That night the men camped in a rough sealers' hut. Sealer, Tom Hutchinson arrived unexpectedly to tell Livingstone that the *Toroa* was offering the sealers a passage back to Hobart. Livingstone left the hut and made a dash for the *Toroa*. Hutchinson took over as Hurley and Hutchinson's guide. That night he regaled his companions with

vivid yarns of Macquarie Island shipwrecks.



A Macquarie Island rat. Photo Terrence Pye.

After a stormy and disturbed night of yarning and fending off rats, the three men breakfasted at dawn and set out for 'Three Brothers' Point. They passed the remains of the *Jessie Niccol* and three graves marked by lifebuoys.

The coastline soon became impassable, so Hurley and his companions climbed the plateau:

'The going was treacherous with peaty swamps and we had to step from clump to clump of tussock grass to avoid sinking in. The plateau was barren of all vegetation and littered with lakes and tarns.'

The men had trouble seeing though the mist and the plateau soon seemed a 'watery maze'. They decided they should head back to the coast, but steep cliffs prevented their descent. Eventually they groped their way down to a wide coastal flat overgrown with tussock

grasses and bogs. Night had fallen and they had nowhere to sleep, so they pelted elephant seals with pebbles and drove them from their wallow. Hurley later wrote:

'They made a great snorting hubbub and at first attacked one another, each thinking that the assault came from his neighbor. When, however, we added our shouts to their confusion, they fled to the sea in alarm and left us in undisputed possession. We found their beds very wet and slimy, yet preferable to the cold knobby pebbles of the beach.'

'First of all we laid a sodden blanket on the kelp, huddled ourselves together on it, and then stretched the other blankets and oilskins over us. But we did not sleep. The cold crept in and made our bones ache with cramp. Furthermore, we had to be on the constant alert to drive off the sea-elephants, which were about in large numbers.'

After yet another uncomfortable night, the party set off again in the early morning. *They had not gone far when they came across a small hut, which they bitterly regretted not finding a few hours earlier.*

The men eventually made it to Caroline Cove and Hurley recovered his lens. A storm was brewing and Hutchinson urged his companions to leave immediately. Harrisson, who was on the lookout for biological specimens, saw a fine albatross sitting on the hillside. He could not resist the impulse to kill it and add it to his collection. The men had no guns and there were no stones nearby. Hurley suddenly remembered he had a small tin of meat in his backpack. He hurled the tin and hit

the bird on the head, 'killing the majestic creature on the spot.'



Frank Hurley, later in life. Photo courtesy Scott Polar Research Institute

Shouldering the enormous albatross, Hurley made for a shelter at Lusitania Bay. He was guided in the dark by the shrill croaking and whistling of King penguins in the rookery close to the hut. As he groped along in the dark, Hurley injured his ankle. He limped to the weather-worn hut, where he was grateful to find Hutchinson cooking:

'luscious slices of sea-elephant's tongue, which smelt so good that for the moment the anticipation of a hearty meal dulled our physical aches.'

Harrison collected numerous King Penguin eggs, which he tried to carry back to camp, in addition to his gear and the dead albatross. Hurley's foot was so swollen that he could not put his boot on, so Harrison bandaged it with canvas. Heavily laden with his camera gear, Hurley limped seventeen slow miles over boulders, cliffs and bogs. He was overjoyed when he finally arrived back at camp. *Although the trip was much harder than he had expected, Hurley had taken a number of exquisite photographs of Macquarie Island on the way.*



Photo by Hurley, courtesy Mawson Institute, South Australia.

REFERENCES

Hurley, F, 1925, *Argonauts of the South*, Knickerbocker Press, New York and London, pp14-38.

Mawson, D, 1996 reprint, *The Home of the Blizzard*, the story of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911-1914, Wakefield Press, p26.

Further Reading

Other stories about the Australasian Antarctic Expedition can be found in:

Building Wireless Hill - The AAE, 1911

The Wireless Crew, 1911-1913

Hamilton, Blake and Mac, 1911 - 1913

and stories of shipwrecks in:

'All Hands safe - Tremendous Battle with Seas' - Gratitude, 1898

Third Hatch Shipwreck at Nuggets - Clyde 1911

'Sinking a Small Fortune' - Joseph Hatch and the Oiling Industry

'Graveyard Reefs and Tombstone Rocks' - Tom Hutchinson's Tragic Tales, 1911