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Hospitality Russian Style - Admiral Bellingshausen

Russian explorer and naturalist, Admiral Thaddeus Bellingshausen visited Macquarie Island late in 1820. He had expected to find the island covered with ice and snow, but to his great surprise, the island 'beautifully green, with the exception of its rocky cliffs, which were of a dreary dark colour'. Bellingshausen and his crew collected specimens of plants, rocks and wildlife to exhibit in St Petersburg. When they left Macquarie Island, the resident sealers were grateful for the Russian visitors' hospitality.

First Russian Visit

Admiral Thaddeus Bellingshausen commanded the *Vostok* and the *Mirnyi*. He made a scientific voyage to the South Seas between 1819 and 1821, and circumnavigated Antarctica in this voyage. Bellingshausen visited Macquarie Island late in 1820. By then water supplies on the vessels were getting low, so some of Bellingshausen's crew rowed ashore with barrels to try to collect water.



Garden Cove, Macquarie Island with *Vostok* and *Mirnyi* in Background. Sketch by Mikhailov, from J.S. Cumpston, Macquarie Island.

While the Russian sailors were ashore, a party of sealers rowed out to the *Vostok*. These men, who were from Port Jackson, had been on Macquarie Island for more than six months. They had filled all their barrels with elephant seal oil and had been unable to work for the last four months. Their provisions were also running short.

To the sealers' great delight, Bellingshausen offered them biscuits, butter and grog.

The sealers became more talkative and helpful after a good feed and a drink or two, and told the Russians where they could find fresh water. They even offered to help fill the ships' water barrels.

The Russians who rowed ashore were astonished to find that the penguins and seals on Macquarie Island were not afraid of them. They reported that penguins did not get out of their way and 'had to be pushed aside.'



Elephant seals on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

Mr Zavodovski shot a sea elephant, and he was amazed that the other animals opened their mouths to roar, then fell asleep again. Without moving from one spot, another crew member, Mr Demidov, shot 20 'Egmont hens' or petrels. The shore party collected a 'furry' penguin, several adult penguins, as well as some eggs, grasses, stones, young sea elephant hides, blubber, various species of gulls and a parrot.

While the sealers were aboard the *Vostok*, a large elephant seal or 'sea elephant', covered with blood swam past the ship. This seal was, most likely, the seal shot by Mr Zavodovski. Bellingshausen wanted to chase the wounded seal in the ship's boat, but the sealers told him that it would be impossible to kill in the water and besides, he could take his choice from the seals on the shore.

That evening the *Vostok* and *Mirnyi* sailed NNE along the coast of Macquarie Island in search of water. At around ten o'clock that night, the crews of both vessels felt two violent shocks. Bellingshausen, who was aboard the *Vostok*, worried that the vessel might have been wrecked on a reef. He checked the water depth, but found the ship was not close to the bottom. He then thought that the *Vostok* might have struck a sleeping whale or touched an underwater ridge. It was only after the crew of the *Mirnyi* told him that they, too had felt the shocks, that *Bellingshausen*

realised that they had experienced an earthquake.

Bellingshausen went ashore in a rowboat with three other officers and, with the keen eye of the naturalist, observed the rather miserable lifestyle of the sealers:

'The foreman of the sealers invited us to his hut, which was 20 feet long by 10 feet broad. Inside it was lined with skins of seals, and the outside was covered with a kind of grass which grows on the island. At one end there was a small hearth, and a lamp was kept always alight. On the hearth, as wood and coal were unobtainable, there was burning a piece of sea-elephant blubber and melted fat was used for lamp. Beside the hearth was a bedstead. Provisions were stored at the other end of the hut. Inside it was so black and dark from the smoke that the smouldering light from the lamp and from the holes in the wall over which bladders were stretched scarcely lit the interior of the hut, and until we got accustomed to the light the sealers had to lead us by the hand. They eat carrion and penguins' eggs. Their flesh tastes like blackcock and is very good to eat.'

Bellingshausen noted that the sealers were living on sea birds, the flippers of young sea elephants, eggs of penguins and other birds, and the Macquarie Island cabbage. He wrote:

'The so-called "wild cabbage", undoubtedly an effective remedy, grows abundantly over the whole island. It is distinguished from the other vegetation by the darkness of its foliage. It has broad leaves growing horizontally with slight indentations at the edges, dark on top and light underneath. The stalk is about a foot high, and, like the leaves, is hairy. The

flower on the central stalk is white like a cauliflower. The greater part of the root, which is about 2 inches in thickness, lies on the surface of the ground and its thin suckers grow into the earth. The roots resemble cabbage in flavour. The sealers scrape the stalks and roots, cut them up very fine and make soup of them. We took a lot of these cabbages with us and preserved them for the use of the crew, the roots being pickled for the officers' mess. From the preserved cabbage we made a very tasty shtshi (Russian cabbage soup), and we were sorry that we had not prepared more.'



Macquarie Island cabbage, *Stilbocarpa Polaris*.
Photo Geof Copson.

Bellingshausen observed a sealer club an elephant seal with a club that was 4 _ feet long and 2 inches thick. The end was bell-shaped, 4 or 5 inches in diameter and bound with iron and studded with sharp nails. After clubbing the seal, the sealer slit its throat with a knife, saying: 'It is a pity to see the poor animal suffer'. The sealers speared larger elephant seals through the heart after they had been clubbed:

'Having killed the sleeping animals, the men cut off the blubber with a knife, and put it in a boiler, placed on stones and with room for a fire beneath it, which they kindle with lumps of the same fat. The oil from the boilers is then poured into barrels. Part of it is sent to New South Wales, and the remainder is shipped to Britain, where it commands a very remunerative price'.

Bellingshausen noted that wild cats and dogs were living on the island on the plateau.



A wild cat on Macquarie Island. Photo Geof Copson.

One of the Russian officers left behind a dog which the sealers adopted as a pet. Bellingshausen also reported seeing some small parakeets. The Russians went back to their ships with a haul of two albatrosses, twenty dead parrots and one live parrot. The sealers offered these to Bellingshausen and happily accepted three bottles of rum in exchange.

Bellingshausen delayed his departure from Macquarie Island because he wanted to wait for a skin of a large sea elephant that the sealers had promised to deliver. He eventually sent a crewman to row ashore and talk to the sealers. Bellingshausen had expected this sailor to return with barrels of water, but instead he returned with a supply of elephant seal fat that he had exchanged three bottles of rum.

The wind was freshening when the sealers rowed out in a whaleboat and delivered the seal skin to the *Mirnyi*. This was a dangerous deed, because a mist had sprung up and a fine rain meant that the visibility was poor. Bellingshausen gave the sealers a compass and showed them the course they should follow when returning to shore. **They loaded the sealers' rowboat with extra provisions and rum, and the sealers rowed back to shore, no doubt very gladdened by the Russians' hospitality.**



References

Debenham, F, (Ed), 1945 *The Voyage of Captain Bellingshausen's to the Antarctic Seas, 1819-1821*, Hakluyt Society, London, pp 364-372.

Further Reading

The Sealers' Legacy – the Ferals