

Falklands – Veterans Tour

12 – 25 January 2006

Trip Report

Leader

Tim Earl

The Falkland Islands group is a destination which captivates people. It is rare for any of our Falkland trips to run without repeat clients and this tour was aimed specifically at people who had been before. The itinerary proved to be excellent with visits to new places throughout for everyone. Cape Dolphin was stunning and a great introduction to the islands for those who were on their first trip. Bleaker Island was remote and wild with great birds, particularly penguins. Carcass Island has been built into our regular itinerary and was sheer heaven with wonderful encounters with dolphins, elephant seals, and a trip to an albatross colony.

This report is about the lure of the islands:

Highlights:

- Our first picnic lunch on a white-sand beach at Cape Dolphin was sheer delight.
- A gale on Bleaker Island which left us breathless and blew Black-browed Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters close inshore.
- Watching three Queen of the Falklands Fritillaries on Sea Lion Island where we also saw Orcas on three different occasions.
- Finding a Macaroni Penguin in a Rockhopper colony on east Pebble and then three in another 'out west'. That colony had a star bird, an Erect-crested Penguin.
- A pond with Yellow-billed Pintail, Red Shoveler and Flying Steamerducks on Pebble.
- Lunch in the tussock on Carcass Island with Peale's Dolphins at our feet, a Sea Lion group sunning close by, and squadrons of King Cormorants passing overhead.
- Prions and diving petrels on the boat trip to West Point Island.

Trip Diary

Thursday 12 January

To Ascension Island

Work on the runway at RAF Brize Norton saw us make the longest ever coach transfer from terminal to aircraft at 15 miles. While we checked in at Brize, the chartered Air Atlanta Jumbo-jet was being prepared at RAF Fairford.

Our crew was held up by road traffic problems and we took off an hour late at midnight. A further delay occurred on arrival at Ascension as a navigational beacon was out of action but our pilot eventually made a perfect visual landing at Wideawake Airfield, named after a colony of Sooty Terns which breed close by.

Friday 13 January

To the Falkland Islands

A late arrival at Ascension is not unusual and has the benefit of increasing the chance of seeing Ascension Island Frigatebirds. Who forgot to tell them? We saw only one of these rare seabirds and that at a considerable distance. Common Mynas were more obliging, however,

but only one Yellow-fronted Canary was seen. Tim was told that the Sooty Terns had left their breeding colony on the Wideawake Fairs.

No hot water on the flight down had meant no tea or coffee with breakfast and we all enjoyed the refreshments available at the Ascension NAAFI. We took off after another technical delay, at 11.15am for the flight down to our destination, arriving at 4.45pm local.

Icebergs were pointed out by the pilot about 500 miles north of the Falklands, the first time Tim has seen them on this trip and a sure sign of global warming. The islands are bathed in a cold current from Antarctica which gives them their brilliant wildlife. Icebergs so far north indicates that the glaciers are producing more and bigger ones.

After transferring to the Malvina Hotel a few of us went for a short walk along the harbour wall to start our discovery of new birds which included a couple of Magellanic Penguins and a pair of sleepy Falklands Flightless Steamerducks.

We all met at 7pm for a welcome drink followed by an excellent dinner.

Saturday 14 January

Cape Dolphin

This 2006 Veteran's Tour started with a little-done trip to Cape Dolphin, the most northerly point of East Falkland. It proved a delightful day with interesting drives, a stroll along a white-sand beach, lunch with penguins, albatrosses and dolphins, and great views of a sea lion colony.

Leaving the hotel at 8am we were soon speeding along new roads (built since the Conflict) which showed us all new parts of the Falklands. Stops were made to watch two Black-necked Swans and a pair of Red-backed Hawks. Rufous-chested Dotterel taxed us a little, while Long-tailed Meadowlarks, the males resplendent in their military-red jackets, delighted in equal measure. A pool contained several pretty Speckled Teal and a pair of Crested Ducks.

We stopped after about two hours for 'smoko' – tea and biscuits – at Cape Dolphin Cottage where a roosting Barn Owl sat patiently in a fir tree a few inches away from our admiring glances. It had moved a few feet by the time we returned.

Our first experience of 'camp driving' (from the Spanish campo meaning countryside) off-road was exciting along a pretty good track. The result was our arrival at a beautiful beach where we watched Magellanic Penguins coming ashore and four pods of Peale's Dolphins which remained in the bay for the whole of our lunch. Black-browed Albatrosses were feeding just beyond the bay's kelp-beds and gave us good views albeit through a scope.

The whole experience was delightful, combining great birds and animals with a remoteness only the Falkland Islands seem able to deliver. It was certainly with reluctance that we left to search for a colony of Southern Sea Lions which again many of us could have spent a few days watching. There were about five large 'beachmasters', bulls which had claimed an area of beach. In these areas were many females with black pubs bleating like lambs. Also present were younger bulls which were creeping up on the harems in the hope of finding a willing female.

Eventually we set off back to Stanley, arriving at the hotel at about 5.15pm, well pleased with our first encounter with Falklands' wildlife.

Sunday 15 January

To Bleaker Island

Pretty poor weather made an early morning walk brave rather than birdy, although glimpses of Black-chinned Siskin were obtained. A leisurely breakfast was followed by packing and a

trip up to Stanley Airport where we were weighed and dispatched for Bleaker Island on two red FIGAS Islander aircraft, 30 minutes apart. The second went via Mount Pleasant Airport and we were reunited as a group at about 12.30pm. We were met by Elaine and Robert who drove us back to the settlement

After being given packed lunches and doing a few domestic chores we set off in a borrowed Landrover for Sandy Bay where the lunches were consumed with gusto. A thunderstorm over Stanley drifted past us but we had only a few minutes of rain and got off lightly considering the wind and low cloud left behind at the capital.

Our lunch was interspersed with calls for wildlife: a male Southern Sea Lion on a nearby tussock-island was being watched with a couple of females when Wendy noticed a Striated Caracara in attendance. Lots of South American Terns were nesting nearby and the bay was full of feeding birds which had Kelp Gulls and King Cormorants in attendance.

Gentoo penguins were watched torpedoing up to the beach where they congregated before heading up to their hill-top colony. We followed them and found a King Penguin in the midst of the nesting Gentoos.

Driving back to the settlement we stopped at the island's main pond where 56 Silvery Grebes were found with a few White Tufted Grebes. A likely Flying Steamerduck was checked carefully but we could not convince ourselves that it could fly. Neither could we find any of the White-winged Coots Tim had seen the previous summer.

Thousands of King Cormorants were nesting on the cliff-top near the settlement but we could not find a colony of Rockhopper Penguins reputed to be there. We resolved to get better directions and return the following morning.

The group was split between two houses 50 yards apart and we met at the top one for drinks at 7pm before returning to Cobb's Cottage at 7.30 where Elaine had cooked a super meal of egg mayonnaise, chicken casserole and a superb rhubarb crumble with custard (sounds like Tim was in heaven – Ed).

Monday 16 January

Bleaker Island

It was a toss up between 48 Silver Teal and Rockhopper Penguins emerging from violent seas as highlight of the day. Or perhaps it was the Baird's Sandpiper, Sooty Shearwaters, Snowy Sheathbills, breath-taking winds, mountainous seas, getting the Landrover bogged...

Well, actually, it was the whole experience of being on Bleaker in an amazing gale, watching superb birds and participating in the frontier-spirited Falklands way of life.

Yesterday ended with an amazing electrical-storm, crashing thunderbolts, torrential rain and a gale which finally blew itself out 24 hours later. Deep blue clouds filled the sky with flashes of lightening for more than an hour before the wind started to howl and the heavens opened.

We awoke after a night of rattling doors and rain beating on the windows, to a cancelled pre-breakfast walk and a leisurely start instead. The phone system had broken down and we realised that the world was effectually cut off.

After preparing breakfast Tim's group from Cobb's Cottage met the others for a walk up to the Rockhopper colony. We were beaten back by the strength of the wind which was gusting to 45mph and vast quantities of salt water which appeared to be from waves breaking over the 60ft high cliffs. It seemed impossible that the Rockhoppers and King Cormorants could not be washed away from their nests.

We drove instead southwards to explore the other end of Bleaker Island. The expedition was doing well with a fine pair of Kelp Geese to our credit when the Landrover came to a shuddering halt in a deep, water-filled ditch. Happily, it was not too far for help to be summonsed and Robert soon towed us out. After a cuppa at Cobb's Cottage we set off again.

This time it was spectacular results with which we were rewarded. Stopping on a cliff-top to watch the vast waves rolling past, Tim first found passing Black-browed Albatrosses and then waves of Sooty Shearwaters went by, their underwings gleaming silver in the improving light.

A lone Baird's Sandpiper, identified from its plain flanks, thinner bill and absence of white rump when it flew, was the second bonus. The bird had migrated 4,000 miles further than us and was a great find. White-rumped Sandpipers are far more common.

We found a tiny pond created by water backing up behind a storm-beach, and on it were lots of Speckled Teal, four Chiloe Wigeon and a brilliant flock of 48 Silver Teal. It is usual for our groups to see one or two of these most beautiful ducks. With blue beaks, a dark cap, stunning and varied vermiculate markings on the flanks, these were real gems.

We drove onwards to a small headland where we were able to count more than 200 Wandering Albatrosses before turning around.

Returning to the settlement to eat our packed lunches we found a flock of about 40 Rufous-chested Dotterel gathered on the diddle-dee plants. The females were resplendent in their ochre-coloured chest-bands (this is a species which practices sex-reversal and thus has dowdy hen-pecked males) and a good number of immatures were in attendance.

After a sandwich lunch and a short snooze we set off for the airstrip where a walk with backs to the wind was planned. Stops were made to photograph the King Penguin found yesterday, Gentoos and aggressive Brown Skuas which hurled themselves at us if we strayed unwittingly into their territories.

The group ended on Sandy Bay where they watched Gentoos and Magellanic penguins coming ashore through terrific rollers which had an evil-looking undertow. The Magellanic Penguins stopped once away from the sea to preen and rest after their foraging expeditions. Gentoos, however, squared their shoulders and immediately started the long walk up to their colonies on the hilltop we had just ascended.

Tim brought the Landrover around and we drove off towards the Rockhopper colonies, again expecting to be beaten back by the ferocious waves, even though the wind had dropped slightly.

We were delighted to find that not only were the Rockhoppers still nesting on the cliff-tops but that they were also managing to get out of the foaming maelstrom at the bottom of the cliffs. Our group watched in awe as they hopped up the cliffs by an ancient route and passed us within inches as the birds returned to their nest sites.

Lots of Snowy Sheathbills were in attendance and once again we were treated to a masterclass in one of the world's most obscure bird families.

Happy that all was well in the Rockhopper world we returned to our accommodation for a shower before dinner. Cobb's Cottage residents walked up for pre-dinner drinks and at 7.20pm we all returned to Cobb's for a great meal of Falklands mushroom (gathered on the island that day) soup, roast Bleaker beef and trifle.

Learning that we were on a flight at about 9am, we turned in early, well pleased with our adventures.

Tuesday 17 January

To Sea Lion Island

The Queen of the Falklands Fritillary was the highlight of a day that saw us record our second species of owl and both the islands' wrens.

The day dawned bright and the wind had dropped considerably. We packed up after breakfast and were at the airport in time to see the first of our aircraft come in over the low hill. Four of us were soon drinking tea and eating biscuits on Sea Lion Island while the others enjoyed a trip via Mount Pleasant Airport, such is the nature of inter-island services.

Once reunited, we went to Elephant Point to see our first Southern Elephant Seals and Cobb's Wrens. The latter were picking around in the stones and seaweed at the top of the beach, a bigger bird than our familiar wren at home.

Splitting up after lunch some of us went to Cow Point watching a few stupidly tame South American Snipe and a brilliant Sedge Wren which posed on a fence wire as we admired it. After saying hello to a few elephants seals we turned to retrace our steps when Kate spotted an orange butterfly that produced a yelp of delight from Tim. The Queen of the Falklands Fritillary is a much sought-after flut which he had glimpsed in 1991 and here was one fluttering around for us. It shot off pursued by a Cobb's Wren and a couple of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants and disappeared. It, or a second, appeared as we reached the top of the low cliff at the point where it flitted around a little and even settled for Kate to get a picture before disappearing into the tussock grass.

Elated we returned for 'smoko' before borrowing the lodge Landrover and touring the island. The Rockhopper Penguins were coming ashore in tremendous seas following the previous day's storm and yet appeared at the top of the cliff as if by magic. Snowy Sheathbills were present, some feeding from the carcasses of dead penguin and King Cormorant chicks which had perished in the bad weather.

We stopped at the Southern Sea Lion colony but there was little action we could see from the cliff.

After dinner, including a superb rhubarb crumble with custard (sounds like Tim was still in heaven – Ed) we decided to borrow the Landrover and drive to Long Pond where Short-eared Owls had been seen earlier. Stepping out of the lodge, however, Tim saw an owl hunting over the sand dune opposite. Those with him had great views as he went into the lodge to call the rest. By the time they emerged the bird had flown across to the Lodge, circled the roof twice at low height and headed off over the airstrip. Latecomers were able to see it and a second bird performing courtship flights over a hill opposite. They were lit by the most amazing sunset which compensated for the rather poor views. By the time we returned to the lounge South American Snipe were drumming overhead, a fitting sound for the day to end on.

Wednesday 18 January

Go as you please

Tim was up and out at Elephant Point by 6am where a pod of six Orcas put in a prolonged appearance finally disappearing at about 6.45 – the same time that Marigold first saw them a little further down the coast at Tussock Pond. They delighted her for 20 minutes before moving off down past the sea lions at Loafers.

Go as you please days allow people the freedom to walk, explore and enjoy Sea Lion Island's wildlife at their leisure. Tim took some folk down to look for the fritillary, without success, but we did see Black-browed Albatrosses by the score and a few dashing Sooty Shearwaters as compensation.

We walked around to the Neck where beautiful pink-bellied Brown-hooded Gulls were seen roosting with a flock of terns which included a couple of Common Terns in non-breeding plumage.

Four King penguins were admired before we found a pale grey skua out over the bay. It had long white wing-bars, seemed smaller than the Brown Skuas and we decided eventually that it was a South Polar Skua, an occasional migrant to the Falklands.

As we passed Elephant beach a black fin was spotted – our second sighting of Orca that morning. We watched as two males swam across the bay to join four females and a calf. Visitors from a cruise ship who had come in by helicopter that morning also saw the Orcas. “Shark!” shouted one, while the others seemed nonchalant about the sighting. Little did they know how difficult it can be to see the world’s largest dolphin.

After lunch Tim drove the Rockhopper fans up to their colony to walk back at leisure. We all met at the end of the afternoon to compare notes. Steven had found a Queen of the Falklands Fritillary and was delighted. Everyone had enjoyed the relaxed day and its results.

The owls did not appear but there was little enough cloud to allow some to study the stars at about 11pm. The Southern Cross was found with ease, we saw Saturn’s rings but only poorly as a fresh breeze shook the telescope. Sirius and Orion’s Belt, upside down, were also seen.

Thursday 19 January

To Pebble Island and its duck-ponds

The day started with a final walk to Elephant Beach at 6am. Just as we arrived the pod of Orcas put in an unprecedented third appearance, staying around for 30 minutes or so. Some came close in as if hunting the elephants, while others attempted a pincer movement.

We had early flights in rough conditions for the 45-minute trip to Pebble Island. By 10.45am we were all there and enjoying smoko in the lodge lounge and at 11.15 we set off for the east end of the island.

Pebble is famous for its wildfowl and we visited several ponds, finding two Black-necked Swans at the first. An inexperienced Peregrine was watched as it attempted to take Long-tailed Meadowlarks which avoided it almost with disdain. Bett’s Pond was terrific with about 20 Black-necked Swans and, amazingly, 20 Silver Teal, some with well-grown ducklings. Among them were several Yellow-billed Pintails, one of the target birds for the veterans who had missed them on their first visit. The sun chose that moment to come out and we decided to eat lunch there and then.

Tim’s favourite pond is another 45 minutes across country – a gamble not taken by other tour leaders. It paid off for us, however, when we found 58 Black-necked Swans in residence. Driving to the right-hand edge we stopped to examine the duck flocks and immediately found a pair of Red Shovelers. This is an uncommon species in the Falklands but a second pair made us think they might be breeding on the pond.

Lots of Chiloe Wigeon were grouped at the back of the pond and Speckled Teal were numerous too. Allen found a pair of Flying Steamerducks whose close resemblance to Falklands steamers makes them a difficult species.

Driving on around the pond we found hundreds of White-rumped Sandpipers. These were searched meticulously in the hope of finding something rare but, sadly, Two-banded Plovers were the only other species we could see.

Eventually we set off for a site close to Cape Tamar where to our amazement we found a Macaroni Penguin among a colony of Rockhoppers. This was a great find and we enjoyed the bird and its most popular companions for some time before rumbling tums set us homeward, via the vast five-mile stretch of Elephant Beach which was accessible now that the tide had dropped.

A Snowy Sheathbill was scavenging among the piles of kelp left after the last storm and a dark-phased Red-backed Hawk was watched as it hung in the stiff breeze above the sand dunes. We enjoyed a super meal, including rhubarb crumble and custard (five more of these and you will be in Seventh Heaven – Ed), in relaxed surroundings.

Friday 20 January

West Pebble for penguins on parade

It is a bit of fun attempting to see six species of penguin in a day on Pebble. In reality, it is unlikely that such an achievement could be made anywhere else on earth. Nobody fancied a pre-breakfast walk in the wind and rain which greeted us and we set off for the west end of the island in gloomy weather.

We were able to get out of the vehicles at the memorial to HMS Coventry which was sunk 10 miles off the island on 25 May, 1982, but things remained cool and windy until our coffee stop overlooking a colony of Southern Giant Petrels.

Gentooos were resting at the beach-head before starting their 1.5-mile walk inland to the colony and Magellanic Penguins were plentiful at the top of a short cliff protecting the beach.

Huge waves were rolling in while the strong off-shore wind was blowing their tops back out to sea. It was a most impressive sight and we had to wonder how penguins of any species managed to leave their watery realm where they are so much at home, to waddle around helplessly on land.

Two species up, we had a sudden rush to the tally when we arrived at the Green Rincon Rockhopper Penguin colony. There, among the hundreds of Rockies were three Macaroni and an Erect-crested Penguin. Phew! Five species in a morning. This was amazing.

Tim and Allen were glum, however. A possible Snares Island Penguin seen a few days earlier was missing. It had gone out to sea fishing. We searched and waited but it was not to be seen. We also knew that our sixth likely species, a King Penguin, was missing from the Gentoo colony where it normally hangs out.

The cold wind persisted despite a brighter sky and absence of rain so we drove to the far end of the island where a shepherd's shack would provide shelter and facilities. Here we had our picnic before Tim took some folk to see a nearby Gentoo colony and Allan went in search of a wayward group member who had been seen walking off in the wrong direction.

The following sequence of events caused considerable mirth around the islands as the photograph might suggest. Allan set off across a trackless paddock which knocked off the rear four feet of his vehicle's exhaust system. Once Tim was back in radio contact after watching the penguins (boo hoo... no King there either), he was called back to give assistance and the exhaust pipe was eventually removed.

Both vehicles set off back out of the paddock (our missing guest long-found) and with a squelch and groan, Tim's Landrover's two passenger-wheels dropped towards the centre of the earth. He was bogged again!

"Not a second time," Allan called on the radio which immediately produced a gale of laughter from the lodge where Jackie was listening in while cooking the evening meal.

"Twice in one tour," she howled with delight as Tim's countenance took on a weary, glum look.

The situation looked grim and Allen dashed for the most important piece of equipment – his camera. Once the humiliation of our once great and glorious leader was complete the vehicle was towed out with a minimum of fuss and the expedition resumed. Boggings are a national delight in the Falklands but happily Tim has avoided them over the many years he has driven there.... until January 2006 that is.

No sign of the King could be had at its adopted colony and we returned to the lodge minus the Pebble Island six-pack, but generally delighted with the day which had been a great adventure.

Saturday 21 January

Carcass and tussock heaven

Another rough morning prevented the walk down to Elephant beach before breakfast but things were clearing by the time we arrived on Carcass Island to be met by Rob McGill and about 25 Tussock-birds which settled on and in the Landrover. Tim had phoned our packed lunch requests through to Rob early on and we were able to set off for the island's north point

while our cases were taken back to the settlement. This gave us a long day exploring Carcass and enjoying its wildlife.

Besides the Tussock-birds we were escorted across to the coast by Black-throated Finches, Sedge Wrens (this was a terrific trip for this sometimes difficult species), South American Snipe and the occasional inquisitive Striated Caracara.

The beaches were heaving with wildlife: Cobb's Wrens picking about in the seaweed and stones, masses of Kelp Geese, more than we had seen anywhere, Southern Elephant Seals basking on their beds of rotting kelp (the combined smell of animal and compost heap is memorable) and skeins of Imperial Shags flying past. These were going from their cliff-top nesting sites to feeding grounds offshore and it was noticeable that there was a stream of birds returning by a different route – clearly some shag air-traffic controller was enforcing a separation zone. The occasional Peale's Dolphin was seen cruising the kelp too.

Our way to the northern point was blocked by a group of juvenile Southern Sea Lions which were lazing on rocks ahead of us. The male was big even though young and we decided to settle in the tussock and eat our picnics rather than risk disturbing them. It was sheer bliss, sheltered and warm, with a fantastic Attenborough wildlife set at our feet.

Peale's Dolphins came close and loafed around for while, as if checking us out, Magellanic Penguins popped out of the sea and nervously slipped back again to land a little further away from the interlopers, and Tim slipped into a light doze, as is common at such times.

He was woken by a warning from the non-sleepers that his bare toes were at risk.

“Why? Am I burning?” he asked from under his hat.

“No. A caracara is about to sample them,” came the reply.

He sat up in time to see the bird off but undeterred it then turned its attention to the acquisition of a raincoat. This was grabbed and pulled from Denise's rucksack and only a flying dive by Stephen saved the garment entirely. Even so, the bird was not giving up on its prize and a tug-of-war ensued with the caracara losing, just.

Excitement over and Zs ruined we decided to set off back to the vehicle which had been left at the airstrip for our use. This involved crossing the headland and walking around a shallow lagoon around which White-rumped Sandpipers were feeding and many Elephant Seals were sleeping. Some were huge and we could only wonder at the fantastic battles which go on between competing males in the breeding season.

A flock of about 120 Crested Ducks was sitting on the beach and we had no choice but to pass them. They quietly slipped into the sea a few at a time as we approached and waddled out back to their roost site as we passed. It was quite amazing to be among such tame creatures.

A pond was checked out but apart from a pair of Silvery Grebes there was little of note. It was approaching 4pm and we decided to drive back to the settlement arriving in time for tea and wonderful cakes. Hospitality at Carcass is legendary and was one of the highlights of the trip. We sat in the warm farmhouse kitchen enjoying delicious food and company.

Commerson's Dolphins had been seen in the bay earlier and we walked down to the jetty in the hope of seeing some but were unsuccessful. A feeding South American Snipe allowed close-up photography (actually, the bird behaved as if it owned shares in Kodak), Crested Ducks had a full-scale argument come shouting-match in front of us and Black-throated Siskins posed on fence wires for us.

It was, in so many words, just another typical Falklands experience. So too was dinner: island lamb-chops marinated in barbeque sauce and roasted in a slow oven, followed by rhubarb crumble pie and a huge bowl of thick Carcass cream (much more of this and Jamie Oliver will be signing up on a tour... Ed).

Sunday 22 January

West Point Island and seabirds

Sadly, the day dawned with a stiff breeze which cast doubt on the trip to West Point Island and its Black-browed Albatross colonies. After much discussion Tim and boatman Michael Clark decided to give it a go and we set off at 10.30 in a force 6 wind. The boat hugged to coast of Carcass getting maximum shelter before striking out for a tidal over-flow north of the island. With the wind behind conditions were not too bad and we were soon enjoying the sight of albatrosses whizzing past, examining the former trawler for signs of fish. As we went out further they were joined by tiny grey seabirds which shot past on some mission or other. Those close to us showed a black line across the wings and were identified as Slender-billed Prions. One or two seemed slightly larger and had a different flight pattern. These we surmised as possible Antarctic Prions. The rough sea made examination of the heads difficult, however, and we could not be absolutely certain. Passing Common Diving Petrels were easier to identify as they looked so similar to our auks back home.

We slipped into the shelter of West Point and went close to the Devil's Nose, site of the albatross colony which would be visited later. Rockhoppers were found scrambling out of the sea and we were joined by three Peale's Dolphins which escorted us almost into the island's sheltered natural harbour.

Falklands' hospitality was rolled out yet again and it was with reluctance that we dragged ourselves away from the kitchen and warmth to visit the mixed Black-browed Albatross and Rockhopper Penguin colony.

Here we ate sandwiches and penguins (the biscuits not birds, I hope...Ed) while albatrosses called and Rockies cried their love songs. Life in the colonies is fascinating and we were able to spend a good time there watching the comings and goings.

Our return to Carcass was rougher as we were punching into the wind but we all took shelter in one of the two cabins and arrived safely and with no sea-sickness (well done everyone).

Another good dinner followed with fish pie and meringues. Wine flowed and we celebrated our last evening in 'the camp'.

Monday 23 January

Carcass surprise and Stanley

Waiting for our flight out the group again enjoyed the antics of Tussock-birds until a FIGAS Islander aircraft made an exemplary landing. Just as the first two guests were boarding Rob spotted a strange bird which Tim pointed out to everyone as a Chilean Swallow which looks a great deal like our House Martin but with a forked tail. The bird soon skipped off not to be seen again.

A second aircraft with chief pilot Eddie Anderson at the controls slipped in and the remaining six set off for Stanley. It was no race as the first aircraft was going via several settlements. The group was reunited at the Malvina Hotel in time for lunch. Tim entertained Jenny Luxton as a treat for all the work she had done arranging the tour.

After lunch retail therapy was called for by most folk, some of whom visited the excellent museum too. We met for pre-dinner drinks and a wash up on the tour generally. Rockhopper Penguins again made bird of the trip with albatrosses, Short-eared Owl, Slender-billed Prion Magellanic Oystercatcher and Ruddy-headed Goose getting good support too. Elephant Seals and Sea Lions tied for mammal of the trip with Peale's Dolphin a close third. Queen of the Falklands Fritillary was the top insect with no competition (not even the 11-spotted Ladybird).

Tuesday 24 January

Up and away

The presence of Commander British Forces and the Bishop of Dover (who queue-jumped at check-in) on our flight meant that we took off spot on time and had a two-Tornado escort out of the islands. We settled back into our spacious accommodation on the old Jumbo-jet and contemplated the success of this Veteran's Tour.

Without doubt, the new elements – Cape Dolphin, Bleaker Island and Carcass with its boat trip – were hugely popular. But our old favourites too were enjoyed, perhaps more the second time around than the first. Sea Lion and Pebble island can be overwhelming when first visited with huge numbers of new animals and birds to be seen, recognised and remembered. The veterans were able to relax more, aiming their attentions at the highlights from the first trip and reliving the magic which comes when visiting these fantastic islands for the first time.

Our new friends, Sasha, Wendy and Kate, benefited from the veteran's (and leader's) knowledge and advice. They also discovered the charm and lure of the Falklands. No doubt they too will one day revisit these fantastic islands which many believe provide a better wildlife experience than the Galapagos.

Footnote: One group member suffered a bad asthma attack in Ascension and was admitted to Georgetown Hospital where excellent treatment was received. An enforced four-day visit to Ascension resulted, during which Green Turtles and more frigatebirds were seen. A good recovery was made.

ANNOTATED LIST OF SPECIES

BIRDS

ASCENSION ISLAND

	FRIGATEBIRDS	Pelecaniformes	Fregatidae
1	Ascension Island Frigatebird	Fregata Aquila One seen drifting past at a distance on the 13th.	
	STARLINGS	Passeriformes	Sturnidae
2	Common myna	Acridotheres tristis Several seen around 'the cage'.	
	FINCHES	Passeriformes	Fringillidae
3	Yellow canary	Serinus flaviventris One seen from 'the cage'.	

FALKLAND ISLANDS

	PENGUINS	Sphenisciformes	Spheniscidae
1	King penguin	Aptenodytes patagonicus One incubating an egg, not necessarily its own, in a Gentoo colony on Bleaker on the 15th and 16th; four on Sea Lion; sadly, none on Pebble, thus reducing our 'six-pack' in a day to five species.	
2	Gentoo penguin	Pygoscelis papua One small colony at Cape Dolphin; three large colonies on Bleaker; about 3,000 pairs on Sea Lion; two huge colonies on Pebble.	
3	Erect-crested penguin	Eudyptes sclateri One in a Rockhopper colony at Green Rincon, Pebble, on the 20th.	
4	Rockhopper penguin	Eudyptes chrysocome Colony of about 150 pairs on Bleaker: birds watched emerging unscathed from 20ft waves crashing onto rocks; good colonies on Sea Lion and Pebble. Several colonies	

	FINCHES	Passeriformes	Fringillidae
61	Black-chinned siskin	Carduelis barbata A party of 10 living in style at Government House; a few on Bleaker; Sea Lion and Pebble islands, abundant on Carcass.	
	TRUE BUNTINGS	Passeriformes	Emberizidae
62	Canary-winged finch	Melanoderes melanoderes A few seen on the drive down to Stanley. Common on heathland.	
	TROUPIALS & ALLIES	Passeriformes	Icteridae
63	Long-tailed meadowlark	Sturnella loyca One seen at Mount Pleasant airbase on our arrival. Common on heathland; not on Sea Lion Island.	

MAMMALS

	RABBITS & HARES	Lagomorpha	Leporidae
1	European hare	Lepus europaeus One at Cape Dolphin on the 14th.	
	CATS	Carnivora	Felidae
2	Wild cat (Feral cat)	Felis silvestris Two at Cape Dolphin on the 14th.	
	EARED SEALS	Carnivora	Otariidae
3	South American sea-lion	Otaria byronia Two colonies at Cape Dolphin on the 14th; one male with a few females on a tussock island off Sandy Bay, Bleaker, on the 15th; colony of about 50 on Sea Lion Island; Male and seven females on Carcass, 21st; male, female and pup on West Point Island.	
	EARLESS SEALS	Carnivora	Phocidae
4	Southern elephant seal	Mirounga leonina About 60 young animals scattered around the beaches of Sea Lion Island; more than 120 on Carcass Island.	
	MARINE DOLPHINS	Cete	Delphinidae
5	Orca (Killer whale)	Orcinus orca A pod of two males, three females and a calf off Elephant Point, Sea Lion Island, on three occasions.	
6	Peale's dolphin	Lagenorhynchus australis At least four pods amounting to 25 animals as we ate lunch at Cape Dolphin on the 14th; three riding the bow wave on the boat trip, 22nd.	
7	Commerson's dolphin	Cephalorhynchus commersonii Two seen on the boat trip as we were leaving Carcass Island for West Point on the 22nd.	

FISH

1	Falkland's smelt	Galaxias attenatus One in Stanley harbour on the 13th.
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FLUTS AND MOTHS

1	Queen of the Falklands fritillary	Yranea cytheris One, possibly two, seen at Cow Point, Sea Lion Island, on the 17th, another with a damaged wing seen in the same place on the 18th.
2	Southern painted lady	Cynthia carye One seen on Carcass Island on the 21st.
3	Brocade moth	Pareuxonia falklandica Common on heathland throughout the trip.
4	Pug moth	Eupithecia anguligera Common on heathland throughout the trip.

OTHER TAXA

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|--|
| 1 | Eleven-spot ladybird | Coccinella 11-punctata
One on Bleaker Island, 15th. |
| 2 | Ground beetle | Trechisibus antarcticus
Common in houses and baths. |
| 3 | Amphipod sp | This common shrimp-like marine crustacean was found on the beaches but also under stones a long way from the sea, for example at the Rockhopper colony on Sea Lion Island. |

HEAVENLY BODIES

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|---|----------------------|--|
| 1 | Crux, Southern Cross | Seen well from Sea Lion on the 18th. |
| 2 | Saturn | Showed well from Sea Lion on the 18th but the wind prevented top views of its spectacular rings. |
| 3 | Orion's Belt | Upside down from Sea Lion on the 18th, we were dubious about this sighting at first. |
| 4 | Sirius | As ever, the brightest star from Sea Lion on the 18th. |

Tim Earl, January 2006

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