

Fabulous Falkland Islands

11 to 24 January 2007

Trip Report

Leader:

Tim Earl

Highlights:

- A few distant Ascension Island Frigatebirds seen as we waited for the aircraft to be refuelled. Myna-birds were outdone by a major sighting – Princess Anne was sharing our flight to the Falklands.
- Our first Pink Gull (Brown-hooded Gull) watched paddling the mud as we drove out to San Carlos.
- The battlefield tour of Darwin and Goose Green.
- The afternoon at Tamar Point and around the ponds of eastern Pebble Island when we saw our first penguins, so many ducks, swans and the wonderful Rockhopper Penguin colony. The air-show put on by a female Peregrine and her youngster was quite breathtaking.
- Five species of penguin in an afternoon on Pebble Island, surely a record, included an Erect-crested Penguin and the most stunning King Penguin in immaculate plumage paying a royal visit to a Gentoo Colony.
- The exciting boat trip to West Point Island on which we saw two species of prion and six Common Diving Petrels.
- The coastal backdrop to West Point's Black-browed Albatross colony which was shared with Rockhopper Penguins.
- Meeting local people and their hospitality around the Falklands, in particular on West Point Island, 50s style.
- Penguins on fine white sand beaches all around the islands.
- Sea Lion eating fish off Cow Point on the island which bore its name.
- Comet Mc Naught (aka Earl's Falklands Comet) which was seen on a brilliant night's star-watching.

Best birds by vote:

- Black-browed Albatross, Southern Caracara and Long-tailed Meadowlark first equal.

Best mammal by vote:

- Peale's Dolphin which just beat Southern Sea Lion

Daily Diary

Thursday 11 January

To Ascension Island

A picnic supper at RAF Brize Norton was the first activity we enjoyed – on my suggestion as I had been told that the Gateway Hotel was closed and that our first meal would be in the air. Wanting to sleep after boarding, we took a picnic which we ate as we got to know one another.

We boarded our Jumbo-jet, chartered because the usual RAF Tri-Star jets were in use elsewhere in the world, and took off on time at 11pm. I worried that too early an arrival in Ascension could result in us missing views of the Frigatebird.

We had been given three seats between two of us and this worked well ensuring reasonable comfort and sleep.

Friday 12 January

To the Falkland Islands

We landed in Ascension at 8am after encountering headwinds overnight. A prolonged search eventually resulted in distant views of about six Ascension Island Frigatebirds, giving us all a sighting of this highly endangered bird. A few Common (Indian) Mynas were also seen around the passenger compound. I was relieved.

After the Myna-birds we were amazed to be rejoined by a major bird on the flight – the Princess Anne and her husband were also on their way down to the Falklands with us. We took off at 10am, all well pleased with the visit to one of the world's most remote islands.

We arrived at Mount Pleasant Airport, East Falkland, at 2.30pm after receiving a single Tornado welcome on our approach.

Jenny Luxton from Falkland Island Holidays, who had organised our visit, met us at the airport with Ken Greenland and Peter Wakefield from Darwin Lodge.

Our first birds en-route to Darwin were Upland Geese, grazing on the verges around the military base. Indeed, some had been spotted from the aircraft as we taxied in. We were split between two vehicles with the front runner stopping to watch Red-backed Hawk, Blackish Oystercatcher and catching glimpses of Long-tailed Meadowlark, Turkey Vulture, Kelp Gull and Southern Giant Petrel.

The second vehicle was delayed some minutes by Princess Anne's cavalcade but managed to see all the above and more besides.

Having settled in at Darwin Lodge we enjoyed a cuppa and sampled Bonnie's cooking with a delicious range of cakes and biscuits. Our first call-over was at 7.30pm followed by a meal of quiche, lamb, and pavlova.

Saturday 13 January

Darwin, San Carlos and Goose Green

A few of us were up early, our bodies still ticking three hours fast on UK time. The reward for insomnia was a good selection of local birds and a better understanding of the common species. Several Magellanic Oystercatchers, their bright yellow eyes gleaming even a distance, gave their weedy piping calls as they flew from one beach to another; Crested Ducks and Rock Shags were photographed; and the common garden birds such as Austral Thrush and Long-tailed Meadowlarks were much admired.

Ken and I drove the group out to San Carlos in the morning, stopping to admire Rufous-chested Dotterels, Black-throated Finches and Correndera Pipits.

We visited the British war cemetery at San Carlos, always a moving experience, but were running late for lunch and stopped only to take a few photographs on the return journey. We passed a number of horse-riders who had set off from San Carlos to Port Stanley to raise money for a local charity. Bonnie Greenland's daughter Natasha was among them and we gave her a small donation for her efforts.

A superb lunch was followed by a tour of the Darwin battlefield in which the events leading up to the Argentinean surrender of Goose Green were charted in detail by Ken. It was an illuminating and somewhat chilling experience, widely appreciated by everyone.

As ever in the Falklands we watched birds here and there but a number of goodies were seen as we walked back to the lodge from Goose Green in a cool strong wind.

Two Magellanic Penguins found on a nearby island were much admired, the first of this super family for several of us. Three or four Brown Skuas, a family of Crested Ducks and the resident Falklands Steamerducks were studied. The walk became damp when a squall struck as we got closer to Darwin but the compensation was a rainbow, reflecting both aspects of today's weather. A family of Dark-faced Ground-tyrants was flitting around outside the lodge as we finished the walk.

A super dinner of corn fritters, sea trout and pear Helene was followed by the customary weigh-in of luggage and bodies prior to our first flights in the morning. The weather forecast was terrible – gale and rain – prompting plans for a no-flying day tomorrow.

Sunday 14 January

Pebble Island and its duck ponds

We need not have worried, the day dawned sunny and calm, although a strong wind picked up later with several squalls. It was with some sadness that we bade farewell to Ken and Bonnie who had given us such a warm welcome to the Falkland Islands, detailed their recent history and introduced the group to local wildlife. We were driven to Darwin International Airport (the duty free shop had still not been built) where a small FIGAS (Falkland Islands Government Air Service) aircraft landed to collect five of us, destination Pebble Island. It returned to Darwin about an hour later to collect the last three.

Jackie Jennings, Allan White and Dot were on hand to meet us. After smoko – tea and cakes – and being shown our rooms we started a wonderful wildlife safari. Allan and I drove two vehicles inland on barely visible tracks across the 'camp,' short for the Spanish word campo meaning countryside. The island's sheep were being rounded up for shearing later in the month so we took the main road eastwards – along Elephant beach.

If Kelp Gulls were cones it was like the M25 – there were hundreds probably brought in by the poor weather. It was blowing hard by now. Among them, roosting on the beach were five Brown Hooded Gulls and we enjoyed excellent views of these pretty birds.

Crested Ducks and Flightless Steamerducks were on the sea and while watching these we spotted a pod of Commerson's Dolphins. A few White-rumped Sandpipers were also seen but we were unable to catch a glimpse of their bums as they flew off. We marvelled at these birds which had flown even further than us from their breeding grounds in Arctic Canada to be in the Fabulous Falkland Islands

Turning inland after three miles along the beach we stopped to watch Magellanic Penguins inside and outside their burrows. Even a few chicks were seen taking the air, possibly for the first time.

We arrived at Bett's Pond to an amazing sight – 25 Black-necked Swans were feeding in the red water-weed. (They were joined later by cows with an equal appetite for the weed.) We drove around to an arm of the lake which was crowded with ducks – Silver Teal, Chiloe Widgeon, and as a real bonus about 15 Yellow-billed Pintails which we were able to compare with Speckled Teals nearby. A pair of Silver Teal had about six ducklings and stunning White-tufted Grebes were popping up in the red weed. One Silvery Grebe was among them.

Having scoped each species (everyone had great views) we settled down to our picnic lunches which prompted some mirth as they included penguins – the chocolate bar not birds.

The Falklands are not all happiness and we stopped at nearby cliffs to see the damage done by goats which were introduced to the island as a substitute for sheep. Great black swathes marked the sites where once deep tussock grass had clothed the cliffs. Happily, beneath this destruction Di spotted a female Sea Lion swimming casually along a gully. Watching her led us to another which was hauled up onto rocks, sunbathing between showers.

We drove along Ship Harbour, an inlet where ships once waited for favourable tides and wind to cross the nearby Tamar Passage, pausing to look down into penguin burrows from the vehicles. The safari continued up to Tamar Point where we stopped at a mixed colony of Rockhopper Penguins and King Cormorants, a bustling city of birds which had attracted fearless Brown Skuas and Dolphin Gulls.

Allan had wandered off but came back within seconds having found a Macaroni Penguin among the Rockhoppers. It seemed to be paired with a Rockie. We enjoyed super views as the bird was conveniently settled close to the edge of the colony. Peeping over a nearby cliff we were able to see penguins coming ashore where they were greeted by a reception committee of Snowy Sheathbills.

While we were admiring the Macaroni Allan had again discovered ornithological gold in the form of two Cassin's Falcons, the race of Peregrine found in the Falklands. A big female was putting her fully-grown chick through its paces practicing deadly stoops down the cliffs in a breathtaking display of speed and power – a little like a teenager trying out a Ferrari. The chick finally settled about 10m from us (this is not a mistake) where it posed for more than 30 minutes. We were able to study its black balaclava and dark plumage, characteristics which led Cassin to believe it was an entirely different species when he first discovered them.

It was with great reluctance that we dragged ourselves away and headed back to the settlement, A stop at Big Pond allowed us superb views of yet more White-tufted Grebes and four stunning Silvery Grebes – a debate started as to which was the most attractive.

We were so late that dinner had been put back to 7pm and we had to do the call-over afterwards. It was with some relief that most of us slinked off to enjoy an early night... albeit with an optional pre-breakfast walk on the minds of some.

Monday 15 January

Out in the West End

Four of us set off for Elephant Beach after a cuppa at 7am on a wonderful pre-breakfast bumble (army-speak for a walk). Correndera Pipits flitted over our heads as we examined the old peat-beds which had kept generations of Pebble-islanders warm and cooked their meals. The route took us across sand-dunes and onto the magnificent white sands of Elephant Beach. There were no elephants and our only dolphins were gulls but no matter. It was great to be out.

A few Brown-hooded Gulls were with the Kelp Gulls on the edge of the sea while Giant Petrels were patrolling the top of the beach. We admired shells (Common, Painted Keyhole and Coppery Limpets, Clams, Blue and Ribbed Mussels, plus some huge Barnacles), Giant and Tree Kelp, and archways of sand. A few Speckled Teals and geese were seen on First Pond but little else and we returned for a late breakfast at 8.30am.

The main excursion was up to the west end of Pebble Island – around First Mountain, Middle Peak to end beneath Marble Mountain. Rising up to the airstrip, my vehicle was pulled up short by a call from Allan who had spotted a dark-phased Red-backed Hawk female on prey. We all had good views of this most unusual bird.

A little-used track took us behind First Mountain along beautiful hillside of Tall Fern which glowed with reds, browns and greens in contrast to the rough blue waters far below us. Here we admired Sedge Wrens which played hard to get until we discovered their sense on curiosity by making quiet squeaking sounds. Driving up a near-45-degree slope we arrived at a lookout which set the whole of Middle Peak and Marble Mountain out before us and had the nest-site of a pair of Red-backed Hawks on the cliffs behind. These duly turned up to examine the intruders giving us great views of a white-phased female in contrast with the bird seen earlier and a male.

Driving on we soon reached Green Rincon with its beautiful penguin bay. Here a colony of about 50 pairs of Giant Petrels was seen before we went to a new Gentoo Penguin colony at the beach-head. The birds behaved impeccably (as did the group) and soon people who had settled in the grass away from the colony were receiving visitors. Gentoos are inquisitive and will come out to investigate visitors, sometimes even hopping up onto hiking boots for a better view. Birds investigating Terry even nibbled his fingers, maybe mistaking them for some sort of squid.

Dark-faced Ground-tyrants, Black-throated Finches and Long-tailed Meadowlarks kept us company over our picnic lunches and soon after we were learning about the island's Lear-jet memorial.

All this was a precursor to our second Rockhopper colony of the tour, a vibrant city of birds with many well-grown chicks. This is a pure colony with no King Cormorants and it was easy to pick out the odd-one-out, an Erect-crested Penguin. This bird should have been south of New Zealand but got lost five years earlier and has been visiting the colony each season since. It is often out at sea and we were fortunate to be there at the right time. Turkey Vultures were picking off weak or sickly chicks from the large crèches which had formed. How adults find their offspring from the teeming throng we can only wonder about.

The penguin highway is a well-used route from the sea to the colony and we were able to watch birds arriving in small flocks (or should that be shoals?) and climbing the cliffs, while others were descending and bathing after the rather mucky experience of being in the colony.

The strong wind was in a direction which encouraged Black-browed Albatrosses to cut across the headland and we had superb views of these birds zooming past. The magnificence of these wildlife experiences on the Falklands is difficult to describe... we were the only people for miles, close to penguins, albatrosses, petrels, shag and cormorants which had no fear of us, in a setting which is wildly beautiful. It is little wonder that people return to the lodge wide-eyed and in awe of the experiences we enjoy.

Return we did, of course, via another Gentoo Penguin colony 2km from the sea. It takes the birds 90 minutes to walk up across rough terrain to be reunited with their chicks. These have to chase the adult around the colony for several minutes before they are fed, exercise surely intended to strengthen the youngsters for the long walk they would make in a few weeks time.

King Penguins are aptly named. They stand nine inches above the Gentoos and have a regal appearance. It was not difficult to spot one on the edge of the colony and what a bird... It had just completed a moult and was in stunning shape – steel-grey back, dazzling white front, black face hiding the eyes and yellow throat and neck patches which glowed in the sunshine. They have long pointed beaks which are held slightly aloft adding to the charismatic air. We wondered what Princess Anne made of them when she first saw the species. Our bird wandered into the colony walking straight past us to the sound of camera shutters clicking. Well, that's what being royalty is about, I suppose.

Heads full of brilliant memories we drove back to the lodge, past a sheep which had given birth second earlier (three months late).

Tuesday 16 January

To Carcass Island and West Point

Our flights to Carcass were just 30 minutes apart and in blustery weather with squalls we said goodbye to Pebble Island. My flight went via the cliffs of Saunders Island where we saw our first nesting Black-browed Albatrosses and realised just how wild these remote islands are.

Arriving on Carcass we were immediately greeted by many Tussock-birds which swarmed around the aircraft and Rob McGill's Land Rover. The weather was cold, windy with some showers and I was faced with the decision to visit West Point Island today. The forecast was for gales tomorrow so this was our only opportunity but the crossing by boat would be uncomfortable for some. I decided we should give it a go and after smoko at the farm we set off.

Michael Clark had come across to fetch us and we were soon aboard his sturdy converted fishing boat. It was rough and uncomfortable – we needed all our wet-weather gear to stay on deck – but the rewards were good.

A few albatrosses passed at first but as we headed out of the channel between the two islands Slender-billed Prions began to shoot past, singly at first and at times in small flocks. An occasional bigger Antarctic (Dove) Prion was seen, more frequent wing-beating a major clue to their identity.

Soon there were lots of albatrosses and occasional goodies too such as a White-chinned Petrel and a lone Wilson's Storm-petrel in the prion flocks. A few Common Diving-petrels were seen too whirring away with rapid wing-beats looking like our Puffins back home.

We were glad to land at West Point Island and were given tea and cakes by Lillian and Roddie Napier. A short ride took us up onto wind-swept cliffs where the thick tussock stands gave us shelter and allowed us amazingly close access to a mixed Rockhopper Penguin and Black-browed Albatross colony. It was a wonderful experience. The colony is visited by scores of cruise-ship visitors and the birds were completely relaxed and unconcerned about our presence as a result.

The albatrosses were coming in at speed over our heads in an almost continual stream. The arrival of each new bird prompted much greeting between the pairs and eventually their single chicks would be fed. The penguins too were arriving after emerging from bone-crushing seas (or so it seemed) and a vast walk (hop surely – Ed?) up the cliff. Nature certainly is amazing the way each niche is filled.

Eventually we retired to the settlement and yet more cake and tea before boarding the boat for a much smoother return to Carcass Island. A Southern Fur Seal was seen in the sheltered mooring.

The day had been difficult for some but we were all agreed that it was worth the effort to see the brilliant albatrosses and exceptional sea-birds.

Wednesday 17 January

Carcass explored

It was almost inevitable that the day dawned much kinder than forecast although the wind was stronger still out of the sheltered bay. Certainly a trip to West Point Island would have been impossible.

Instead we took picnic lunches and headed north to sheltered tussock stands overlooking the Jason Islands.

A pair of young Sea-lions showed us what to do as they slept through a heavy hail squall sheltering in the lee of tussock, although our decision to remain in the Land Rover and have a cuppa was good too. We walked a couple of miles down to the northerly tip of the island watching a host of animals and birds including the first Elephant Seals of the trip and a huge Sea-lion at the point. Sadly, he had returned to the sea by the time we got there. The beach had lots of Two-banded Plovers, White-rumped Sandpipers and a we were able to tease out a single Baird's Sandpiper. Our walk was in the company of many Blackish Cinclodes (Tussock-birds) and Cobb's Wrens put in an appearance every time we stopped.

Reaching the point, hundreds of Black-browed Albatrosses were passing as we looked out to sea and through the scope we were able to identify a few Diving Petrels and Prions. We retraced our steps, often to the snorting sounds of Elephant Seals in the tussock nearby, and reached the vehicle in time for a late lunch and a snooze.

Driving out of the vast paddock was interesting but achieved without mishap and we returned to the farm in time for afternoon tea and a spot of free time.

Thursday 18 January

To Sea Lion Island

An El Nino year jiggers up weather patterns around the world and we awoke to a seriously jiggered one. A storm blowing from the south west was both cold and fierce. A cruise ship due to stop at Carcass Island cancelled her visit and we were lucky that the FIGAS planes were flying. Sea Lion Island was windswept and cold and it was a slightly downhearted group that set off after lunch for a familiarisation tour of the island.

We visited Long Pond and saw Silvery Grebes but the Rockhopper colony was unapproachable due to the volume of spray pouring over the top of 130ft-high cliffs. It was a dramatic scene with hundreds of King Cormorants roosting to avoid the storm. We could only speculate on the effect it was having on penguin and cormorant chicks.

The Gulch was sheltered and we watched Kelp Geese with their goslings on the terraces below. A few Two-banded Plovers and Rufous-chested Dotterel were seen in the Diddle-dee and a Yellow-billed Pintail was found on a flooded tyre-track at the top of the island. Tussock-birds were abundant and seemed to cope with the wind and cold without much effort.

It was a different story for us, however, and we were pleased to return for afternoon tea and cake. A few of us ventured out to look at penguins and our 30-minute walk allowed us to watch hundreds of Gentoos returning from the sea to their scattered colonies. About 2,500 pairs are on the flats in front of the lodge and even in the poor conditions it was a great sight.

Friday 19 January

Sea Lion Island explored

Perseverance often pays but usually not in such abundance as we enjoyed today. Instead of dashing around ticking off a list of species we stopped and watched just one animal for nearly two hours. With weather conditions little changed from the night before we dropped plans to look for Orcas at 6am in favour of a trip to sheltered Cow Point after breakfast. By then the wind was dropping although it was still cold and we pleased for the shelter. We watched Tussock-birds, Cobb's Wrens and a lone 'weaner' Elephant Seal before a Sea Lion was spotted in the surf. Little attention was given to the animal until Giant Petrels started dropping onto the surf – a sign that a kill had been made. Sure enough, the Sea Lion emerged from the water with a huge fish in its mouth. It's feeding technique was to hold the fish by its head and thrash the body around until it was decapitated. The petrels fought for bits that were discarded such as the intestines which went flying. The head was eaten by the animal which then held the body aloft and after some trial and error swallowed it whole, front end first. All this took some time and we were absorbed by the spectacle.

Eventually, the Sea Lion slipped back into the water and our attention wandered to the many seabirds that were passing. Seawatching is an acquired taste but for a few minutes we took turns on the telescope to watch Sooty Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-petrels among the Black-browed Albatrosses which had been pushed close to the shore by the storm.

Suddenly the Sea Lion's head appeared close to us, this time carrying a large flat fish – a ray of some species. Again we watched as the animal ate the fish piecemeal – and only 20 yards from us. Our presence probably put the Giant Petrels off – the Sea Lion had no competition for its meal.

We left the animal digesting what had been two huge portions of sushi and wandered off down the beach watching penguins, ducks and plovers as they went about their daily routines unperturbed by us.

After smoko at the lodge we walked down to Elephant Beach but there were hardly any to be seen. Our return to the lodge coincided with the drumming of a South American Snipe which we watched as it performed huge undulations, spreading its tail to produce the extraordinary sound.

The afternoon walk was out to Loafers cliff where we saw 14 huge male Sea Lions, 20 females, all around the biggest 'beachmaster', and nine black pups. We wondered if their reduced numbers (normally more than 40 females are present with lots of pups) was due to the terrible gale which had send vast waves crashing into the Sea Lions' breeding beach. Some of us returned to the lodge, looking at plants as we went (see the list below) while other went to Long Pond where we saw lots of Silvery Grebes, most pairs with chicks, Chiloe Widgeon and more than 20 Speckled Teal. A real surprise was the discovery of a Silver Teal pair with one duckling, a good breeding record for Sea Lion Island.

A walk from the lodge late in the afternoon failed to locate Sanderlings which had been reported, although we did see lots of White-rumped Sandpipers. Our final outing after dinner was to look for Short-eared Owls, again without success. Two more drumming South American Snipe were heard.

Friday 20 January

Go as you please day

A 6am start saw four of us gazing out to sea for an hour in the hope of seeing Orcas. Hope curdled to despair and we set off to look for a King Penguin among the Gentoos at 7.15. This time we were successful and returned to the lodge for breakfast feeling the exertion had been worthwhile.

The group split with five going up to the Rockhopper Penguin colony which seemed to have survived the storm well. We watched as penguins were repeatedly washed off their landing ledges but were reassured by the sight of some which made it and were hopping around the cliff-top to join the colony. There were lots of King Cormorants in the several colonies along the cliff-top. Walking the fence-line towards the lodge, we were saddened to see sheep grazing what had been a pristine tussock patch. A noisy tractor was being used to build a permanent road across the island – an amazing piece of stupidity on an island which has just been declared a RAMSAR site. Two pairs of Silver Teal were found on Long Pond, one with two ducklings, an increase on yesterday's count. Finally, a Southern Caracara which flew down to the garden area and perched for us as we walked past, a great sight.

The afternoon was spent going our separate ways with some watching the Caracara, others paddling in the sea and still more exploring the sand dunes. An early supper was followed by the call-over and another attempt to see an owl which this time was successful. One was seen perched on a post – its short ear-tufts just visible – while possibly a second was seen a minute later. We lost sight of them but soon afterwards one and possibly two were seen flitting around the vegetable gardens. It was quite dark by this time and we returned pleased with the result.

Stars were just beginning to show when at 10.30pm I welcomed those who wanted to do a bit of astronomy. Little did we know that it was to be the best session ever for a Travelling Naturalist group.

Our first heavenly bodies were simple – Sirius, the brightest star, and Orion – upside down but with Rigel and Betelgeuse showing well. We could see the Orion Nebula in the sword, here pointing upwards. Suddenly I noticed an amazing sight – a comet apparently burning up as it passed. It was heading downwards in the south-west and was absolutely stunning. We learned that it has never been seen by modern man and was the brightest comet for more than 30 years.

As if that were not enough, the Space-station passed overhead giving great views, we found Crux, the Southern Cross, the Coalsack Dark Nebula under it, and the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds.

Sunday 21 January

Stanley and chumming

Our flight to Port Stanley was delayed but after a walk to the sand-dune beach where we said farewell to several Elephant Seals, we flew to the capital (via Bleaker Island for some), were met by Jenny Luxton and taken to the Malvina Hotel. The day's main activity was a boat trip to watch seabirds. We left Stanley Jetty at 3pm and soon found our first flock – of Black-browed Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters. Strangely, they were sitting on the sea and did not respond to the fish and Rice Krispies we threw to them. Out to sea we continued but immediately ran into a fog-bank which may have inhibited the birds. The only response we had was lukewarm: after the boat was brought back nearer shore and just clear of the fog. The birds might also have been full –swarms of krill and lots of squid were in the area. However, there were plenty of good birds which diverted to examine the chum-trail including lots of Wilson's Storm Petrels, a few White-chinned and Giant Petrels. Peale's Dolphins accompanied the boat for some time and we saw Rockhopper, Magellanic and Gentoo penguins.

We motored around to Kidney Island after the chum was used up where more than 50 young Sea Lions were lazing about on the beach. It was a wonderful sight – more animals than any of us who had been there before could remember. As our three-hour trip came to an end we returned to Stanley Jetty, the hotel and a well-earned cuppa.

Monday 22 January

Volunteer Point and the Kings of the Falklands

The last wildlife highlight of the trip was a colony of 700 King Penguins and many more pairs of Gentoos at Volunteer Point. To get there we were picked up at 8am and driven over a rough unmetalled road to Johnson's Harbour, sadly across countryside shrouded in fog. Our guides pointed to banks of mist and said 'there be mountains,' or 'an Argentine Puma crashed here,' but we saw little. We did see two King Penguins which had hauled onto a beach to moult, however.

The fog was beginning to lift as we approached Volunteer Point by which time we were again driving across raw camp – tussock and diddle-dee bog. We were almost at the end of our journey when an amazing sight confronted us: about 400 South American Terns were nesting on an island in a moorland pool and with them were at least 40 Brown-hooded Gulls. It was a fascinating spectacle.

After a comfort stop at the warden's house, complete with the smell of a peat-fire, we arrived at the penguin colonies. What a super sight... 700 King Penguins and thousands of Gentoos. Many pictures were taken by group members while I went to the beach in a futile search for Sanderlings and Leopard Seals. There were scores of penguins setting off for the sea or returning to their colonies and about 40 White-rumped Sandpipers up in the dunes. Eventually we met at the portacabin shelter for hot coffee and our packed lunches before setting off early to catch the Port Stanley shops. Happily, the fog had lifted and we were able to enjoy the wonderful views as we returned. A pair of Southern Caracaras were found close to the main Mount Pleasant road and we were delighted to see the male's curious backwards over-the-shoulder head-flick as he displayed.

Our tour ended with a good dinner over which we reminisced about a fabulous trip. Notes were swapped about the best bird, mammal and overall experience and plans for future tours were discussed.

Tuesday 23 January

Off home

A minibus and baggage-van arrived 20 minutes early at 6.55am but had to wait while breakfast was finished and luggage brought down. I flew out to Port Howard to plan a 'veterans tour' for people who have already enjoyed a wildlife holiday here, while waiting for the second group to come down to the Falklands. I understand the flight back to RAF Brize Norton was uneventful.

Footnote: This was a great trip despite encountering few rarities (the Erect-crested Penguin was an exception) and pretty horrible weather (caused we were told, by the El Niño effect) and I thank everyone for their humour and patience. I am sure the wonderful Falklands experience was well worth the effort.

SPECIES CHECKLIST

BIRDS

ASCENSION ISLAND

	FRIGATEBIRDS	Pelecaniformes	Fregatidae
1	Ascension Island Frigatebird	<i>Fregata aquila</i>	Distant views of about six from the enclosure.
	STARLINGS	Passeriformes	Sturnidae
2	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Several flying around the base.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

	PENGUINS	Sphenisciformes	Spheniscidae
1	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>	Singles on Pebble and Sea Lion, 700 pairs at Volunteer Point.
2	Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelispapua</i>	Colonies on Pebble, Sea Lion and Volunteer Point.
3	Erect-crested Penguin	<i>Eudyptes sclateri</i>	One splendid bird among Rockhoppers on Pebble Island.
4	Rockhopper Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	Colonies on Pebble and Sea Lion.
5	Macaroni Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysolophus</i>	One among Rockhoppers on Pebble.
6	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Abundant on Pebble, Carcass and Sea Lion, a few elsewhere.
	GREBES	Podicipediformes	Podicipedidae
7	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>	Fifteen on Bett's Pond, Pebble.
8	Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>	About five on Big Pond, Pebble, 15 on Long Pond, Sea Lion.
	ALBATROSSES	Procellariiformes	Diomedidae
9	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	Common out at sea, seen from Pebble, Carcass and Sea Lion; a colony visited on West Point Island, around the boat on our trip from Port Stanley.
	SHEARWATERS & PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Procellariidae
10	Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Common at sea and across the camp.
11	Antarctic (Dove)Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	About 20 on the boat trip to West Point Island.
12	Slender-billedPrion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	Scores on the boat trip to West Point Island; a few from the north point, Carcass Island.
13	White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellariaaequinotialis</i>	Two on the boat trip to West Point Island.
14	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Several seen from Cow Point, Sea Lion Island; around the boat
	STORM-PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Hydrobatidae
15	Wilson's Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanitesoceanicus</i>	One on the boat trip to West Point Island; several seen from Cow Point, Sea Lion Island.
	DIVING-PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Pelecanoididae
16	Common Diving-petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>	Six on the boat trip to West Point Island; a few from the north point, Carcass Island.
	CORMORANTS	Pelecaniformes	Phalacrocoracidae
17	Rock Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax magellanicus</i>	Common on most coasts.

18	King (Blue-eyed) Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax atriceps</i>	Colonies (some mixed with Rockhopper Penguins) on Pebble, and Sea Lion islands.
	HERONS	Ciconiiformes	Ardeidae
19	Black-crowned Night-heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Seen on only four days with a maximum of five on Carcass Island.
	WILDFOWL	Anseriformes	Anatidae
20	Black-necked Swan	<i>Cygnus melanocorypha</i>	Thirty on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.
21	Upland (Magellanic) Goose	<i>Chloephaga picta</i>	Abundant daily.
22	Kelp Goose	<i>Chloephaga hybrida</i>	Common daily.
23	Ruddy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>	Common daily.
24	Falkland Steamerduck	<i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>	Abundant daily.
25	Chiloe Wigeon	<i>Anas sibilatrix</i>	Not common this year: seen on only five days.
26	Speckled Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>	Common, seen on seven days.
27	Crested Duck	<i>Anas specularioides</i>	Common daily.
28	Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>	Seen on two days with 15 on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.
29	Silver Teal	<i>Anas versicolor</i>	Nine on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island; two pairs on Long Pond, Sea Lion Island, one with two ducklings.
	NEW WORLD VULTURES	Falconiformes	Cathartidae
30	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Common daily.
	HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES	Falconiformes	Accipitridae
31	Variable (Red-backed) Hawk	<i>Buteo polyosoma</i>	One female on the way to San Carlos; a dark-phase female and a pair on Pebble Island; one on the way to Volunteer Point.
	FALCONS & CARACARAS	Falconiformes	Falconidae
32	Striated Caracara	<i>Phalco boenus australis</i>	Common daily on Carcass and Sea Lion islands, seen nowhere else.
33	Southern Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	One near the vegetable gardens on Sea Lion Island; a pair beside the main Mount Pleasant road: the male displaying to his mate.
34	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Adult female with young bird at Tamar Point, Pebble Island.
	OYSTERCATCHERS	Charadriiformes	Haematopodidae
35	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>	Common daily.
36	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>	Seen on six days with a maximum of 10 on Carcass Island.
	LAPWINGS & PLOVERS	Charadriiformes	Charadriidae
37	Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>	Common daily on diddle-dee camp.
38	Rufous-chested Dotterel	<i>Charadrius modestus</i>	Common daily on diddle-dee camp.
	SANDPIPERS	Charadriiformes	Scolopacidae
39	South American Snipe	<i>Gallinago paraguaiaiae</i>	Common and tame almost daily.
40	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	Common - seen on seven days with lots at Pebble Island, Sea Lion and Volunteer Point.
41	Baird's Sandpiper	<i>Calidris bairdii</i>	One seen on Carcass Island appeared to be of this species.
	SHEATHBILLS	Charadriiformes	Chionididae
42	Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis alba</i>	Surprisingly few with seven on Pebble island, and only four on Sea Lion Island.
	SKUAS	Charadriiformes	Stercorariidae
43	Brown (Southern) Skua	<i>Catharacta antarctica</i>	Common daily.
	GULLS	Charadriiformes	Laridae
44	Dolphin Gull	<i>Larus scoresbii</i>	Common daily.
45	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Common daily.
46	Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Larus maculipennis</i>	A maximum of 15 on Elephant Beach, Pebble Island; 40 in a mixed South

	TERNs	Charadriiformes
47	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>
	PIGEONS & DOVES	Columbiformes
48	Rock (Feral) Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
	OWLS	Strigiformes
49	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
	OVENBIRDS	Passeriformes
50	Blackish Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>
	TYRANT FLYCATCHERS	Passeriformes
51	Dark-faced Ground-tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola macloviana</i>
	WAGTAILS & PIPITS	Passeriformes
52	Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>
	WRENS	Passeriformes
53	Cobb's Wren	<i>Troglodytescobbi</i>
	Sedge Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>
	THRUSHES	Passeriformes
55	Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falcklandii</i>
	OLD WORLD SPARROWS	Passeriformes
56	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
	FINCHES	Passeriformes
57	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Carduelis barbata</i>
	TRUE BUNTINGS	Passeriformes
58	Canary-winged Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>
	TROUPIALS & ALLIES	Passeriformes
59	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella loyca</i>

MAMMALS

	RABBITS & HARES	Lagomorpha
1	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
	MICE & RATS	Rodentia
2	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
	CATS	Carnivora
3	Wild Cat (Feral Cat)	<i>Felis silvestris</i>
	EARED SEALS	Carnivora
4	South American Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus australis</i>
5	South American Sea-lion	<i>Otaria byronia</i>
	EARLESS SEALS	Carnivora
6	Southern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>
	MARINE DOLPHINS	Cete
7	Peale's Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus australis</i>

American Tern colony near Volunteer Point.
Sternidae
 Common daily.
Columbidae
 Common in towns and villages.
Strigidae
 Two near the garden on Sea Lion Island.
Furnariidae
 Abundant on Carcass Island, common on Sea Lion Island; one flew to the boat when se stopped close to shore at Kidney Island - all places where there are no cats or rats.
Tyrannidae
 Common daily.
Motacillidae
 Common daily.
Troglodytidae
 Common at the top of beaches on Carcass and Sea Lion islands where there are no cats or rats.
 Small numbers seen on Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
Turdidae
 Common daily.
Passeridae
 Not so common, a few around the hotel and in the occasional village.
Fringillidae
 Common daily.
Emberizidae
 Common daily.
Icteridae
 Common everywhere except Sea Lion Island where they were absent.

Leporidae
 Several around Darwin; one at Johnson's Harbour on the way to Volunteer Point.
Muridae
 One killed by a Red-backed Hawk on Pebble Island.
Felidae
 Seen on Pebble Island and at Volunteer Point.
Otariidae
 One in the harbour at Carcass Island.
 Seen on Pebble and Carcass islands, a colony of 14 males, 20 females and eight pups (much reduced by an onshore gale) on Sea Lion Island, plus 57 juveniles on Kidney Island.
Phocidae
 Lots on Carcass but down to just a few on Sea Lion Island.
Delphinidae
 At least 10 on the pelagic boat trip out of Port Stanley.

- 8 **Commerson's Dolphin** *Cephalorhynchus commersonii* Six off Elephant Beach, Pebble Island, three on the boat trip to West Point Island.

INSECTS

CRICKETS

- 1 Falklands Camel Cricket** *Parudenus falklandicus* One in a timber stack at the farmhouse on Carcass.

Orthoptera

MOTHS

- 1 Brocade Moth** *Pareuxoina falklandica* One seen in the lounge on Sea Lion Island was released from a window.

PLANTS

We are all grateful to Mark Blackburn who spent a good deal of time on his knees collecting this list of plants seen:

Small Fern	<i>Blechnum penna-marina</i>	Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>
Tall Fern	<i>Blechnum magellanicum</i>	Arrow-leafed Marigold	<i>Caltha sagittata</i>
Native Box	<i>Hebe elliptica</i>	Prickly Burr	<i>Acaena magellanica</i>
Gorse (introduced)	<i>Ulex europea</i>	Thrift	<i>Armeria macloviana</i>
Fachine	<i>Chiliotrichum diffusum</i>	Daisy (introduced)	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Cushion Plant sp	<i>Nassauvia gaudichaudii</i>	Sea Cabbage	<i>Senecio candicans</i>
Diddle-dee	<i>Empetrum rubrum</i>	Groundsel	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>
Mountain Berry	<i>Pernettya pumila</i>	Falkland Lavender	(blue + white forms) <i>Perezia recurvata</i>
Pig Vine	<i>Gunnera magellanica</i>	Sheep's Sorrel (intr'd)	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>
Mouse-eared Chickweed	<i>Cerastium arvense</i>	Wild Celery	<i>Apium graviolens</i>
Stonecrop	<i>Crassula moschata</i>	Christmas Bush	<i>Baccharis magellanica</i>
		Whitegrass	<i>Cortaderia pilosa</i>
		Cinnamon Grass	<i>Hierochlœe redolens</i>
		Tussac Grass	<i>Parodiochloa flabellate</i>

HEAVENLY BODIES

EARL'S FALKLAND COMET

A great comet with a vast long tail was seen in the south-west from Sea Lion Island. We discovered later that the stunning object's rather boring name was **Comet McNaught** but we preferred that given above. It was the brightest comet for 30 years and had never been seen in recorded history – being discovered only last year.

THE SPACE STATION

This went tanking through the northern sky from Sea Lion Island too fast for scope views.

MOON

A thin new moon was seen briefly from Sea Lion Island before it set on 21 January.

SATURN

Seen, complete with rings and moon, from Sea Lion Island.

ORION'S BELT

Seen, with sword pointing upwards, from Sea Lion Island. **Rigel** was seen in the top left corner, **Betelgeuse** in the bottom right and the **Orion Nebula**, with its huge blue gas cloud, in the centre of the sword.

SOUTHERN CROSS

Perhaps the most sought after heavenly body, this was seen from Sea Lion Island. The bottom star of the cross was always indistinct.

COALSACK DARK NEBULA

Seen just under Crux, this is the body aboriginal Australians though was the head of an Emu.

LARGE MAGELLANIC CLOUD (LMC)

This was clearly seen as was the **Tarantula Nebula (30 Doradonis)** on its upper edge. This is a stellar nursery like the Orion Nebula but much larger – 5,000 light years wide. It is 1/10th the size of the Milky Way (our galaxy) and is close at only 180,000 light years away. A southern hemisphere body, it was unknown to Europeans until Ferdinand Magellan (he of the straits, penguin, oystercatcher et al fame) discovered it in 1519. A star in the LMC exploded in 1987 becoming the nearest supernova in 400 years.

SMALL MAGELLANIC CLOUD (SMC)

Also seen clearly from Sea Lion Island, this globular cluster containing an estimated 2 billion suns, was just beneath the LMC. Its shape is distorted by the gravitational pull of the Milky Way and the LMC despite being 200,000 light years from them.

MILKY WAY

The LMC and SMC are satellite galaxies to our **Milky Way Galaxy**, which dominated the night sky like a huge scarf of stars.

SIRIUS

The brightest star in the sky seen from Sea Lion Island. We made a wish on it and I hope they all come true.

Tim Earl

Principal leader

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