

Fabulous Falkland Islands

25 January to 7 February 2007

Trip Report

Leader:

Tim Earl

Highlights:

- Two Ascension Island Frigatebirds seen as the group waited for their aircraft to be refuelled. Myna-birds and Canaries, both introduced to Ascension, were also seen.
- Our first penguins during a magical afternoon after arriving on Bleaker Island. Only a fall by one group member marred it slightly.
- The Sea Lion colony on Sea Lion Island.
- Commerson's Dolphins swimming along crystal-clear waves and surfing off a Pebble Island beach.
- Commerson's and Peale's dolphins following, alongside and riding the bow-wave on our West Point boat trip.
- A Short-eared Owl in grass a few feet from us.
- Silver Grebes doing their display 'dance'.
- Queen of the Falklands Fritillary on the wing on Bleaker Island.
- The inter-island flights which showed us so much of the Falklands landscape.
- Close encounters with Gentoo Penguins which came out to investigate us when we sat quietly in the grass near their colonies.
- Inquisitive Striated Caracaras on Sea Lion Island.
- The flight-simulator on West Point Island (this for me – Tim).

Best birds by vote:

- South American Snipe.

Best mammal by vote:

- Commerson's Dolphin.

Daily Diary

Thursday 25 January

To Ascension Island

The group led by Neil boarded their Jumbo-jet, chartered because the usual RAF Tri-Star jets were in use elsewhere in the world, and took off a little late at 11.55pm. They had been given three seats between two and this worked well ensuring reasonable comfort and sleep.

Friday 26 January

To the Falkland Islands

The flight landed in Ascension at 8am after making up time overnight. A search eventually resulted in distant views of two Ascension Island Frigatebirds, giving most a sighting of this highly endangered bird. A few Common (Indian) Mynas and Canaries were also seen around the passenger compound.

The group took off at 10am, all well pleased with the visit to one of the world's most remote islands.

The flight landed at Mount Pleasant Airport, East Falkland, at 1.50pm with disappointed passengers as no Tornados had come out to welcome their approach – a major exercise was underway and the aircraft were needed elsewhere.

Jenny Luxton from Falkland Island Holidays, who had organised our visit, Ken and Bonnie Greenland from Darwin Lodge, and I met everyone at the airport and we were soon on our way. Our first birds en-route to Darwin were Upland Geese, grazing on the verges around the military base, with Long-tailed Meadowlark, Turkey Vulture and Kelp Gull for good measure. Darwin is a short distance but we managed to get great views of a pair of Red-backed Hawks and a few Turkey Vultures feeding on a road-kill sheep. Several Magellanic and a lone Blackish Oystercatcher were on the beach overlooking Darwin Lodge which looked beautiful in the afternoon sunshine.

Having settled in, we enjoyed a cuppa and sampled Bonnie's cooking with a delicious range of cakes and biscuits. We were then driven out to Goose Green from where we walked back to the lodge. Black-crowned Night-herons were breeding in an old wooden wreck with Rock Shags for company, the beaches had Kelp, Upland and Ruddy-headed geese and a few Southern Giant Petrels were gliding past breathtakingly close to us. This really was Nature close up.

Our first call-over was at 7.45pm followed by a meal of mushroom and egg fool, lamb, and pavlova.

Saturday 27 January

Darwin Lodge and Bleaker Island

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 at 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.

Mount Osborne was missing in the mist, however, and even with late morning flights delays looked inevitable. Undeterred we walked out after breakfast and samples more of the local wildlife including a timid Hare, two Speckled Teal on the duck pond and five Black-crowned Night-herons. Suddenly a dark raptor lifted from trees in the settlement and there was yet another Red-backed Hawk for us to admire. It was almost completely dark brown illustrating its alternative name of Variable Hawk.

Another raptor shot into view soon after as a Peregrine flashed over a hillside and stooped on something behind one of the houses. We could see its dark plumage and lack of clear 'moustache'. Cassin's Falcon, the Falklands' race of Peregrine, seems to have a balaclava hood instead.

Returning to the lodge, we had just started a tasty lunch when Ken dashed in and said that the first aircraft would be at Darwin International Airstrip in 15 minutes. A scramble was made and the advance party piled into his van with most of the luggage and off we went. Even if the duty-free shop had been built we would not have had time to use it - the aircraft taking us to Bleaker Island landed as we arrived and took off 10 minutes later.

Elaine and Robert were waiting for us and as we said hello the aircraft zoomed off to get the second group. What is better, bread and butter pudding or one's first penguins coming out of a colony to investigate you? 'No competition,' said the second part of our group on arrival: the bread and butter pudding was delicious, but they had not seen the penguins. Tussock-birds were apparent, however, indicating the rat- and cat-free status of the island. A Striated Caracara was seen near a complete Minke Whale skeleton near the modern bungalows where we were staying.

After settling in we drove in a borrowed Land Rover up to a huge colony of Imperial Shags where we started to look for a Rockhopper Penguin colony we knew was in the area. Suddenly there was a shout as one of our party tripped and when sprawling headfirst. A broken nose and swollen lip was

apparent and I took the unfortunate back to the settlement for first aid guided by excellent advice from Dr Kim Grayson who was on duty at the hospital in Stanley.

Returning to more pleasant duties we searched the Rockhoppers in the hope of finding a Macaroni Penguin but without success. Lots of juvenile Snowy Sheathbills were in the cormorant colony and a stunning male Southern Caracara was calling from a fence post. We returned to our lodgings which were being used as navigational aids by hundreds, maybe thousands, of Imperial Shags returning from a day's fishing. It was a wonderful end to the wildlife part of our day.

But not the day itself. After a fabulous meal of eggs mayonnaise, roast Bleaker lamb and apple crumble (plus trifle) we enjoyed a clear evening with views of the retreating Earl's Falklands Comet (aka Comet McNaught) Southern Cross, complete with Coalsack Dark Nebula and the Jewel-box, Orion with Rigel and Betelgeuse, Saturn with its moon Titan, plus the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds – a brilliant array of southern hemisphere celestial wonders.

We turned in excited by the day's adventures and looking forward to a good day on the morrow.

Sunday 28 January

Bleaker Island and its penguins

Whoopie! Decent weather for a change. Indeed, the Falklands at their best as we slipped out at 6.30 for a pre-breakfast walk in glorious sunshine. Sedge Wren was a new bird for the trip and we had fun watching Imperial Shags and Snowy Sheathbills.

Breakfast was followed by a day out on our own private island. We were given the use of a Land Rover and pottered around Big and Little Pond, walked the dazzling white beach of Sand Bay and tramped across Gentoo Penguin Hill to the airstrip.

Our first stop was at a large Kelp Gull colony which was a hive of activity and tension. Birds were squabbling, chicks fleeing in the melee, and a cacophony of calls rose every time one of us made a pace too close. Little Pond had five Chiloe Wigeon which we were admiring when Chris found three White-rumped Sandpipers in the diddle-dee. They were close to a fine Two-banded Plover and we were able to study the two species well.

A good number of Silvery Grebes were feeding among the red water-weed of Big Pond presenting a super photo-opportunity for the photographers. While they were clicking away we watched a hunting Peregrine – yet another all-dark bird. We were then drawn off by distant views of a Silver Teal and a White-tufted Grebe which we stalked. The grebes turned up and eventually paddled past us but the lone teal had vanished, sadly.

We need not have worried for on a nearby pool we found a flock of 37 Silver Teal which gave a delightful show for us. Lunch was a picnic eaten overlooking Sandy Bay where many Gentoo Penguins were coming ashore with a few Magellanics. It was bliss except that we had been given chocolate Penguin bars to eat in front of the birds. I had a snooze but am pretty sure it was not my own snores I could hear.

A search for a moulting King Penguin among probably 1,000 Gentoos was a tall order and proved unsuccessful. Perhaps it had gone out to sea once more. The search did give us an opportunity to watch busy penguin communities in a relaxed manner.

We dropped down from penguin hill to walk along Bleaker Island's airstrip where a few Rufous-chested Dotterel were found among large flocks of Two-banded Plovers and a few White-rumped Sandpipers. Black-browed Albatross and Giant Petrels were passing over the sea and everyone settled down to watch the abundant wildlife while I returned to fetch the Land Rover. A large female Elephant Seal was seen in the sea on our way back to the settlement.

We met at 7pm for the call-over followed by a delicious meal of Bleaker Island mushroom soup, Bleaker Island beef and Bleaker Island rhubarb sponge.

Monday 29 January

Sea Lion Island and its namesakes

An early morning walk around the settlement beach gave us a delightfully peaceful time before breakfast watching oystercatchers, Black-throated Finches, terns and vast numbers of Imperial Shags on an island all our own. Magellanic Penguins had gathered in groups after coming ashore, others were bathing off peat stains after leaving their nest burrows. Sooty Shearwaters were offshore while newly-hatched fluffy Brown Skua chicks sat at our feet.

A new mammal was added to our list when a pair of Peale's Dolphins were spotted at the entrance to a bay. We were able to watch their progress through my scope and noted the scimitar-shaped dorsal fins.

Our flights were not scheduled until about 12.30pm and we spent the morning in 'go as you please' style. Our injured group member was shown the Rockhopper colony where birds were seen dithering about entering the water. Once in, however, they swam like bullets as we watched from above. How predators catch them is a mystery.

A last look at the Silver Teal was made before we drove to the airstrip and caught the plane to Sea Lion Island. It was with some sadness that we said goodbye to Bleaker Island which had given us so many wonderful memories (apart from the fall, that is).

The place was busy with film crews, there because the 25th anniversary of the Falklands War was looming, a helicopter picking up guests, plus groups coming and going. We had a late lunch before being taken on an orientation tour of the island.

The first stop was to watch a colony of Sea Lions beneath Loafers Cliff. About five 'beachmaster' males could be seen stretched out on the rocky shore, each surrounded by a harem of about seven females. The males were very dark brown with huge gingery manes while the females had dried out to a light golden colour. Each harem had seven or eight all-black newly born pups which bleated like lambs. In the shallow water a few yards away were would-be beachmasters growling at each other and intercepting females returning to the beach... with no success, their would-be mates were interested only in getting ashore.

It was with reluctance that we dragged ourselves away (as the brochure says) to be taken up to the Rockhopper Penguin colony. Here we were able to follow the course of about ten penguins which approached their traditional landing spot at the base of a wickedly steep slope leading up the 150ft cliff. They finally appeared at the top of the cliff and hopped on around to pass us before joining the colony. We were relieved. Returning to the lodge we passed diddle-dee areas crammed with Rufous-chested Dotterel and Two-banded Plovers.

Our last activity of the day was to go out looking for Short-eared Owls after dinner. Success was achieved when a pair was found and watched (with some difficulty in the fading light) near the island's vegetable gardens.

Tuesday 30 January

Exploring Sea Lion Island

A strong cold wind was blowing when we left for an early morning Orca watch. The huge dolphins did not turn up but there was lots of compensation. Several huge Elephant Seals were hauled up on the thick decomposing mats of kelp, some males occasionally growling and rearing up to spar with each other. Other younger animals were in the water on a tide-washed shelf, again testing each other in preparation for the days when they would compete as beachmasters.

Huge numbers of Black-browed Albatrosses were passing, a feature of the day which continued, so much so that by the evening great white lines of birds sitting on the water could be seen with the naked eye from the lounge. Gentoo Penguins were leaving in large numbers for a day at sea, forming queues to enter the sea at the end of their long migration lines from the colonies.

An early breakfast to accommodate several film crews (including James Mates from ITV News) was followed by a delightful walk down to Cow Point where we spent some time watching the natural world go about its business. One of the features of a Falklands holiday is that we time to sit and watch. One this occasion it was a pair of Striated Caracaras with two recently fledged young which were entertaining. One bird swooped down, slowed over Neil Arnold's head and gently plucked off his woolly Shetland hat, flying off with it. The use of such an article for nest-lining was clearly limited and the bird dropped it on rock some yards away, to Neil's relief. Did the bird not recognise a Great and Glorious Principal of the Travelling Naturalist? Perhaps it did.

After filming swirling kelp and snoozing Elephant Seal pups we bimbled along the beach each adsorbed in their experience. Mary doffed her heavy walking boots in favour of sand between the toes and even paddled in the cold sea... most refreshing. We studied Black-chinned Siskins feeding on the seeds of Falklands Sea Cabbage, sat and waited for Gentoo chicks to come up and investigate us, photographed Tussock-birds sitting on our own boots and searched for a King Penguin, without success. It was a surprise to learn that the morning had gone, we had missed Smoko (morning tea and cakes) and it was time for lunch.

The group was dropped at East Loafers where we watched the colony of Sea Lions for some time. Two new experiences occurred – a group of black pups (with brown tummies) was playing at the edge of the sea and a heaving female was sick a few times, both events I have never seen before. The pups were a delight as they frolicked in the water, mock-fighting, leaping on each other and generally behaving like happy children. Their games came to an abrupt end when a big would-be beachmaster emerged around a rock and scared them off up the beach. Several returned to their mums for a feed. Some of the younger males became a little aggressive with each other but the big boys slept through it all with the confidence only a beachmaster can display.

Eventually we left them to it and strolled back to the lodge, a short walk for some, but a great photo-opportunity for others.

Our last expedition was to see the owls again but we had left it too late and although they were close to us and displaying there was too little light for a really good show. It mattered not as the day had been wonderful.

Wednesday 31 January

Eastenders, Pebble Island

Little did we imagine that an owl would start the day's activities too. Walking towards Cow Point to look for Orcas before breakfast we flushed first a South American Snipe and then a Short-eared Owl. The bird settled in grass a few feet away and studied us while we took amazing pictures of it. Falklands' wildlife can never be described as dull... The bird pierced us with bright yellow eyes and when it looked away we could see its tiny ear-tufts. It was a wonderful experience.

No Orcas showed and we had to contend ourselves with wonderful views of Black-browed Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters close to the shore.

Breakfast was followed by yet another scramble for the flight as we were given less than 20 minutes notice before the front party was off to Pebble Island. After settling in and enjoying Smoko (delicious chocolate cake) we were joined by the second party who had come across via a Fox Bay – the scenic route and typical of a Falklands internal flight.

We were away by 11.30 on one of the most exciting trips of the tour – down to the east end of Pebble, Point Tamar and the duck ponds. No less than 23 Black-necked Swans were on Bett's Pond along with 15 Yellow-billed Pintails and 25 Silver Teals.

Even the ducks were caught unawares when a Peregrine flashed past looking for lunch. (We found Speckled Teal wings at a Peregrine plucking spot later in the day.) It was gone in a second but we still had time to be aware of its dark appearance and balaclava head pattern.

Lunch called for us too and we drove off to Tamar Point to find shelter from the strong wind. We dropped down a section of cliff used by Travelling Naturalists groups before and enjoyed a pleasant

45 minutes, although we had to take care not to get sunburnt. I collected a prion wing – probably from a Slender-billed Prion – which had been plucked and eaten by a Peregrine.

Moving on we reached a brilliant Rockhopper Penguin colony where we watched the birds going about their daily duties, harassed by Brown Skuas, keeping the company of Imperial Shags and having dropped food stolen by Dolphin Gulls. The penguins were watched coming in from the sea, bathing in rock pools, and preening on the rocky shore before hopping along ancient routes up the cliffs to join the colony.

Allan and I found a family of Peregrines on the cliffs – 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. All the photographers managed to get excellent shots before we left for the lodge.

Thursday 1 February

A day in the West End

An early morning walk down to Elephant Beach in the hope of finding Commerson's Dolphins proved fruitless, except for a Brown-hooded Gull which dropped in close to our team of sea watchers, revealing its much heralded (by me) pink underparts.

The drive out west was stunning despite drizzly rain for the first hour. That simply added atmosphere to the memorial to HMS Coventry which we visited. Allan gave an account of the terrible day on 25 May, 1982, when she was sunk by Argentinean warplanes 13 miles north of the island.

Gradually the rain stopped – we watched a male Red-backed Hawk for some minutes – and the sun began to shine. It was pleasant despite a strong wind, by the time we reached a headland overlooking a Giant-petrel colony which had 33 white fluffy chicks. Most of the group walked across the dazzling white-sand beach while Allan and I drove to a Gentoo Penguin colony at the far end. I spotted a pod of Commerson's Dolphins in the surf and dropped down to alert the group. The animals were watched for 90 minutes as they surfed, surfaced, swam inside crystal-clear waves and really put on a great show. They were still around as we ate lunch on Green Rincon (Green Corner) one of the most idyllic spots in the islands for a picnic.

Penguins had taken a lesser roll during the Dolphin Sea-life Show and it was with difficulty that we switched our attention back to birds. The beach was packed with adult and baby Gentoos and Magellanic Penguins. We decided to follow the adult Gentoos back to their colony almost 2km from the sea. Here some folk sat near a lobe of the colony and, sure enough, a bunch of well-grown chicks came out to investigate. They are the most charming creatures and many delightful pictures were obtained.

Moving on, we drove down to a Rockhopper colony in the hope of seeing an Erect-crested Penguin which got lost six years ago and has been turning up on Pebble Island occasionally each summer. It should have been on islands south of New Zealand, on the other side of the world. Perhaps it was. It certainly did not appear for us, despite searching the hundreds of penguins which were returning. Nor too were a couple of Macaroni Penguins we hoped to find. So, with no King Penguins on the island at the moment we were reduced from a possible six species in a day to just three. Such is (wild) life.

We returned to the lodge for supper and call-over followed by an early night. Some were nodding off before leaving the lounge, despite an increasing gale. Our flights to Carcass Island were scheduled for 1.15 and 2.15pm (most annoyingly) and already there was talk of no flying tomorrow.

Friday 2 February

Eastenders again

A howling overnight gale developed into 60-knot wind this morning and our plans for later in the day were in doubt from the start. However, determined to make the most of it we returned to the

Rockhopper colony on Tamar Point in search of an elusive Macaroni Penguin. It was not to be, although we were compensated by the sight of penguins almost flying. Indeed, we had to be careful on the cliff-tops.

The colony is mixed with Imperial Shags which were coming in fast and low to avoid marauding Brown Skuas. These would escort a shag on its approach and force the unfortunate bird to the ground where inevitably it regurgitated krill and fish for the pirates. Some shags were clearly stronger than others and landed at their nest-sites despite the attention whereupon the skuas broke away and sought another victim more likely to be intimidated.

We returned to the lodge at a sedate pace as the news had come through from Jacqui that flying had been scrubbed for the day. A few Black-necked Swans and Speckled Teal were seen on the way back. On reaching Elephant Beach the group enjoyed a fast drive (high tide had diverted us on the way out) reaching speeds of 50mph – the fastest we would travel on land anywhere in the islands. Sunshine on a white-flecked ocean produced the most beautiful scene with white beach and surf set off by turquoise sea and sky.

We returned to the beach after lunch but the wind was so strong that walking with our backs to it was difficult and talking impossible. Returning into the gale filled our lungs like balloons making even breathing difficult. It was still worth the effort with views of Long-tailed Meadowlarks and Black-chinned Siskins. A puffball was admired but attempts to walk on the beach were abandoned due to sand which found its way into binoculars and scopes within seconds. While some walked around the bay others sat in the shelter of gorse bushes and admired the scenery, now bathed in afternoon sunshine. It was a wonderful experience despite the inconvenience of being marooned.

Saturday 3 February

Carcass and West Point

What a difference one night can make. By morning the weather was almost still, the sea had lost its white-tops and we were booked on the first flight. Getting to Carcass and our boat trip to West Point Island seemed on. But fate has a funny way of changing things and we arrived at Carcass to find that the engineer of the boat was no other than FIGAS pilot Derek Clark. He had been asked to work all morning helping to catch up yesterday's backlog. Derek arrived at 12.30pm and we set off immediately on the belated trip. Our sturdy vessel was the MV Condor, a converted German 35ft fishing boat.

It turned out to be one of the best ever with fairly light seas and lots of birds. First on the agenda was to eat a good lunch provided by Rob McGill to an order phoned through from Pebble Island. Michael Clark, the boatman, took us up the side of Carcass. We were among a few Black-browed Albatross almost immediately and Neil showed his great expertise by picking up Diving Petrel and Slender-billed Prion. A small pod of Commerson's Dolphins sported alongside the boat and under the bows.

A huge flock of albatrosses could be seen along a tide race which stretched from West Point Island to Gibraltar Rock and beyond. Once we came out of the sheltered waters of Carcass the boat cut across to motor down this tide race towards West Point and it was here that things really hotted up. Prions (Dove and Slender-billed) were seen occasionally as were a few Sooty Shearwaters and a Diving Petrel was seen close to the boat. By this time we were accompanied by a few Commerson's Dolphins and choices had to be made between looking down at them or up to see the albatrosses. Happily, I did the latter and picked up a large albatross with an all-white underwing. We all had good views of only the second Royal Albatross to be seen on a Travelling Naturalist Falklands boat trip (the first in 1998).

Hundreds of Black-browed Albatrosses were performing their silent but beautiful sea ballet as they corkscrewed over the tide race looking for food. It was an awe-inspiring scene. Finally, we crossed the reef which causes the race and headed along the north-east coast of West Point, a most spectacular set of cliffs, inlets and outcrops festooned with albatross nests and Rockhopper Penguin colonies.

The boat went past the Devil's Nose marking the colony we would visit later in the afternoon, sections of rock which had an almost vermilion colour, huge indents where the cliffs had collapsed in

some earlier epoch and several landing sites for penguins. Here, concentrations of Rockhoppers had gathered and were following long-established routes up the cliffs to their colonies, some of which were huge.

But it was mammals which stole the trip... about 20 Commerson's Dolphins accompanied us to be joined by six or seven Peale's. The animals were largely riding the bow-wave or racing towards the boat, but occasionally a Peale's Dolphin leapt out of the water just below us, flipped onto its back and dropped back in. How they managed to avoid being struck is a mystery.

I have omitted to mention the weather which was teeming with rain eventually driving us into the warm cabin for the last 15 minutes before we arrived at the pretty West Point harbour. Here Land Rovers took us up to Michael's home where his wife Jeanette had tea and cakes for us – most delicious and welcome.

After a warm up we drove to the rain-lashed albatross and penguin colonies to find a scene of some peace and tranquillity. True, the birds were wet and some Black-browed Albatross chicks looked cold, but the area was sheltered and for a while we enjoyed the scene. Eventually, with pictures taken, we returned to the boat and crossed to Carcass in just 55 minutes.

It had been a most memorable afternoon despite the delay and weather. Seeing hosts of dancing albatross, the magnificent Royal Albatross, and all in the company of puffing Commerson's and leaping Peale's dolphins made the trip one to remember.

Sunday 4 February

Stanley and another boat

Perhaps yesterday's trip had been too good. Today's did not match it for excitement but we did see lots of albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters, some close to the boat. Kidney Island's beach had been deserted by Sea Lions, probably due to the strong, cool wind. We did find a couple of Peale's Dolphins, one of which was repeatedly breaching in a sandy bay before discovering the boat, but as these trips go ours was quiet.

The day had started with two flights from Carcass, one via Pebble Island, and the group was finally reunited at the Malvina Hotel at 12.30pm, in time for lunch. The boat trip was followed by a pleasant evening with Neil and I hosting dinner for Jenny Luxton who had organised our trip.

Monday 5 February

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 8.30am and driven over a rough unmetalled road to Johnson's Harbour, enjoying excellent views of the countryside. Two King Penguins which had hauled onto a beach to moult were seen on the way.

The vehicles were driving across raw camp – tussock and diddle-dee bog – as we approached Volunteer Point. 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 Neil and 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 25 White-rumped Sandpipers up in the dunes. Eventually we met at the portacabin shelter for hot coffee and our packed lunches before setting off back to Stanley.

Sadly, fog and thick wet drizzle had set in marring the views. We had just set off when an amazing sight confronted us: about 300 South American Terns were nesting on an island in a moorland pool and with them were at least 25 Brown-hooded Gulls. It was a fascinating spectacle.

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 6 February

Homeward bound

The incoming aircraft to take us home had arrived 14 hours late at 4am and its departure was delayed until 6pm. We spent the morning in and around Stanley, visiting shops and the museum as the wind increased. I worried that the flight might be delayed again but all was well and we took off at 6.30pm, delayed slightly by a lost passport which threatened to hold the flight up for hours.

The aircraft was almost full and we had less space as a result, but most got a few hours sleep before we arrived in RAF Brize Norton at 3.45pm.

SPECIES CHECKLIST

BIRDS

ASCENSION ISLAND

	FRIGATEBIRDS	Pelecaniformes	Fregatidae
1	Ascension Island Frigatebird	<i>Fregata aquila</i>	Distant views of two from the enclosure.
	STARLINGS	Passeriformes	Sturnidae
2	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Several flying around the base.
	FINCHES	Passeriformes	Fringillidae
3	Island Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	A few from the compound.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

	PENGUINS	Sphenisciformes	Spheniscidae
1	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>	About 700 pairs at Volunteer Point.
2	Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	Colonies on Bleaker, Pebble, Sea Lion and Volunteer Point.
3	Rockhopper Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	Colonies on Bleaker, Pebble, West Point and Sea Lion.
4	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Abundant on Bleaker, Pebble, Carcass and Sea Lion, a few elsewhere.
	GREBES	Podicipediformes	Podicipedidae
5	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>	Recorded on four days only.
6	Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>	About 15 on Big Pond, Pebble, one at Long Pond, Sea Lion.
	ALBATROSSES	Procellariiformes	Diomedidae
7	Royal Albatross	<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>	One at sea off Gibraltar Rock.
8	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>	Common out at sea - seen from Bleaker, Pebble, Carcass and Sea Lion; a colony visited on West Point Island; hundreds on the boat to West Point; a few around the boat on our trip from Port Stanley.
	SHEARWATERS & PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Procellariidae
9	Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Common at sea and across the camp.
10	Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	One seen on the boat trip to West Point.
11	Antarctic (Dove) Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	One on the boat trip to West Point Island.
12	Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	Ten on the boat trip to West Point Island.
13	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Seen on six days with hundreds off Cow Point, Sea Lion Island; a few on the way to West Point; 40 from the Stanley boat trip.

	STORM-PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Hydrobatidae
14	Wilson's Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	One on the boat trip from Stanley.
	DIVING-PETRELS	Procellariiformes	Pelecanoididae
15	Common Diving-petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>	Ten on the boat trip to West Point Island.
	CORMORANTS	Pelecaniformes	Phalacrocoracidae
16	Rock Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax magellanicus</i>	Common on most coasts.
17	Imperial Shag (King or Blue-eyed Cormorant)	<i>Phalacrocorax atriceps</i>	Common at sea in large flocks; colonies (some mixed with Rockhopper Penguins) on Carcass, Pebble, and Sea Lion islands.
	HERONS	Ciconiiformes	Ardeidae
19	Black-crowned Night-heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Common, seen on most days.
	WILDFOWL	Anseriformes	Anatidae
20	Black-necked Swan	<i>Cygnus melanocorypha</i>	About 23 on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island; odd ones seen from inter-island flights
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 two days.
26	Speckled Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>	Common, seen on eight days.
27	Crested Duck	<i>Anas specularioides</i>	Common daily.
28	Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>	Seen only once - 15 on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.
29	Silver Teal	<i>Anas versicolor</i>	An amazing 37 on Bleaker Island; 25 on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.
	NEW WORLD VULTURES	Falconiformes	Cathartidae
30	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Common daily.
	HAWKS	Falconiformes	Accipitridae
31	Variable (Red-backed) Hawk	<i>Buteo polyosoma</i>	Quite common - a total of 16 over eight days.
	FALCONS & CARACARAS	Falconiformes	Falconidae
32	Striated Caracara	<i>Phalcoboenus australis</i>	Common daily on Bleaker, Carcass and Sea Lion islands, (where one snatched Neil's hat and flew off with it) seen nowhere else.
33	Southern Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	A total of seven seen on Bleaker, Pebble and Carcass islands.
34	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	A total of 11 recorded at Bleaker, Pebble, Carcass and Volunteer Point.
	OYSTERCATCHERS	Charadriiformes	Haematopodidae
35	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>	Common daily.
36	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>	Common, recorded almost daily.
	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.
39	South American Snipe	<i>Gallinago paraguaiensis</i>	Common and tame, seen almost daily.
40	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	Common - seen at Bleaker, Sea Lion and Volunteer Point.
	SHEATHBILLS	Charadriiformes	Chionidae
41	Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis alba</i>	Surprisingly few with 15 on Bleaker, eight on Pebble, and only two on Sea Lion Island.
	SKUAS	Charadriiformes	Stercorariidae
42	Brown (Southern) Skua	<i>Catharacta antarctica</i>	Common daily.
	GULLS	Charadriiformes	Laridae
43	Dolphin Gull	<i>Larus scoresbii</i>	Common daily.
44	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Common daily.
45	Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Larus maculipennis</i>	Seen on Bleaker (6) Sea Lion (8) Stanley (12) and 12 in a mixed colony with South American Terns near Volunteer Point.
	TERNs	Charadriiformes	Sternidae
46	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>	Common daily.
	PIGEONS & DOVES	Columbiformes	Columbidae

47	Rock (Feral) Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Five seen at Goose Green.
	OWLS	Strigiformes	Strigidae
48	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	Two near the garden on Sea Lion Island; one stunningly roosting in grass the following day.
	OVENBIRDS	Passeriformes	Furnariidae
49	Blackish Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>	Abundant on Carcass Island, common on Sea Lion Island; three flew to the boat when we stopped close to shore at Kidney Island - all places where there are no cats or rats.
	TYRANT FLYCATCHERS	Passeriformes	Tyrannidae
50	Dark-faced Ground-tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola macloviana</i>	Common daily.
	WAGTAILS & PIPITS	Passeriformes	Motacillidae
51	Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>	Common daily.
	WRENS	Passeriformes	Troglodytidae
52	Cobb's Wren	<i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>	Common at the top of beaches on Carcass and Sea Lion islands where there are no cats or rats.
53	Sedge Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>	Small numbers seen on Bleaker and on the way to Volunteer Point.
	THRUSHES	Passeriformes	Turdidae
54	Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falcklandii</i>	Common daily.
	OLD WORLD SPARROWS	Passeriformes	Passeridae
56	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Not so common, a few around Darwin Lodge and the hotel at Stanley.
	FINCHES	Passeriformes	Fringillidae
57	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Carduelis barbata</i>	Common daily.
	TRUE BUNTINGS	Passeriformes	Emberizidae
59	Canary-winged Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>	Common daily.
	TROUPIALS & ALLIES	Passeriformes	Icteridae
60	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella loyca</i>	Common everywhere except Sea Lion Island where they were absent.

MAMMALS

	RABBITS & HARES	Lagomorpha	Leporidae
1	European Hare	<i>Lepuseuropaeus</i>	Several around Darwin; two road-kills at Johnson's Harbour on the way to Volunteer Point.
	CATS	Carnivora	Felidae
2	Wild Cat (Feral Cat)	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	Seen on Pebble Island and in Stanley
	EARED SEALS	Carnivora	Otariidae
3	South American Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus australis</i>	One in the harbour at Carcass Island.
4	South American Sea-lion	<i>Otaria byronia</i>	Singles seen on Bleaker and Pebble islands, a colony of 14 males, 20 females and eight pups (much reduced by an onshore gale) on Sea Lion Island; surprisingly, none on Kidney Island.
	EARLESS SEALS	Carnivora	Phocidae
5	Southern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>	Maximum of 25 on Sea Lion Island.
	MARINE DOLPHINS	Cete	Delphinidae
6	Peale's Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus australis</i>	Two at Bleaker Island; seven on the boat trip to West Point; two on the boat trip out of Port Stanley.
7	Commerson's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>	Six off Green Rincon, Pebble Island, three on the boat trip to West Point Island.

FLUTS AND MOTHS

1	Queen of the Falklands fritillary	<i>Yramea cytheris</i>	One seen at the ponds on Bleaker Island.
2	Brocade moth	<i>Pareuxonia falklandica</i>	Common on heathland throughout the trip.
3	Pug moth	<i>Eupithecia anguligera</i>	Common on heathland throughout the trip.

PLANTS

Small Fern	<i>Blechnum penna-</i> <i>marina</i>	Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>
Tall Fern	<i>Blechnum</i> <i>magellanicum</i>	Arrow-leaved 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>Chilotrimum</i> <i>diffusum</i>	Daisy (introduced)	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Cushion Plant sp	<i>Nassauvia</i> <i>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>Hierochlœ redolens</i>
		Tussac Grass	<i>Parodiocloa flabellate</i>

HEAVENLY BODIES

EARL'S FALKLAND COMET

A great comet with a vast long tail was seen in the south-west from Bleaker 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.

MOON

A waxing half-moon was seen briefly from Bleaker Island before it set on 29 January.

SATURN

Seen, complete with rings and Titan, its moon, from Bleaker Island.

ORION'S BELT

Seen, with sword pointing upwards, from Bleaker 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 Bleaker Island. The bottom star of the cross was always indistinct.

THE JEWELBOX OPEN CLUSTER (NGC 4755)

A small group of stars just under Mimosa, the bottom right-hand star of Crux, this is a young cluster only 7 million years old.

COALSACK DARK NEBULA

Seen just to the side of 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 Bleaker 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 Bleaker Island. We made a wish and I hope they all come true.

Tim Earl

Principal leader

© The Travelling Naturalist