

Falklands for Veterans

15 – 29 October 2008

Trip Report

Principal leader: Tim Earl

Local support: Arlette Bloomfield, Falkland Island Holidays

Highlights

1. Waking up to a multi-coloured dawn in a superb setting - purple mountains, off-white grass, multi-colours reflecting on the inlet's waters.
2. A huge bull elephant seal which had two harems 100m apart and did not know which to protect.
3. Being approached by a Johnny Rook on Carcass Island - it came within a metre, quite fearlessly. Little did we know one would fly off with a pair of Pam's gloves later in our stay.
4. Steeple Jason, one of the most amazing or wild life sites any of us have ever visited. Half a million Black-browed Albatrosses agreed with us.
5. The boat trips to and from a Steeple Jason in on which we saw an Orca breach twice, a Peregrine catch one of the thousands of prions we encountered, Pintado Petrels and Southern Fulmars, a huge Southern Fur-seal colony, and countless Peale's and Commerson's Dolphins which escorted us at times.
6. Being deliberately splashed by a Peale's Dolphin.
7. The continuous wildlife programme as we potted around the north end of Carcass Island after checking in for the flight to Pebble.
8. Red Shoveler, Yellow-billed Pintail, Macaroni Penguin and the remoteness of Tamar Point on Pebble Island.
9. Gentoo Penguins - chased out of the sea on Pebble Island by a Sea Lion; the late afternoon parade of penguins on Sea Lion Island.¹⁰
10. Visiting the memorials to HMS Coventry and HMS Sheffield.
11. "Communion" with the Penguins at various colonies.
12. Encounters with dolphins – on a boat trip to and from Steeple Jason; surfing in the waves on Pebble Island.

Best birds by vote:

Black-browed Albatross and King Penguin (tied)

Best mammal by vote:

Elephant Seal

Daily Diary

Wednesday 15 October

We are off (nearly)

Sunny and autumnal 18°C

We met at RAF Brize Norton and checked in. I was told at 5.30pm that the flight was leaving, not at 11pm

but midnight (which is 23.00 Zulu). By the time we had checked in this had slipped to 2am and we finally took off at 4.15am.

The evening was spent at the Gatehouse Hotel within the camp where we enjoyed a meal, much improved on previous years, and the usual NAFI-priced drinks.

Tuesday 16 October

To Ascension and the Falklands

Ascension Island: cloudy, some sun, 25C; Falklands: overcast 10°C

We dropped into Ascension at noon (GMT -1) and went to 'the cage' from which about 10 distant Ascension Island Frigatebirds were seen along with a couple of Masked Boobies and several Sooty Terns.

Our passports were stamped, we bought postcards and a few souvenirs, enjoyed a coffee and wash-up.

The flight to Mount Pleasant Falkland Islands was uneventful with good food. Sadly we were too late for the Tornado escort. We landed at 7.10 pm (GMT -4).

Arlette Bloomfield and Ken Greenland were waiting for us and with help from Peter and Caroline who were also driving, we reached the Darwin by 9pm. Bonnie Greenfield was on great form and we enjoyed a delicious meal of pasties, lamb shank with vegetables and then a magnificent (in taste and proportion) pavlova. We retired after a brief talk about tomorrow's itinerary at 10.45pm

Friday 17 October

Un-named pond, Bodie Creek bridge, Goose Green and two bimbles

A clear and sunny spring day, 12°C

What a beautiful morning and setting. Most of us thought the sunrise over blue mountains and 'just being in such a wonderful place' were the best possible start to a holiday.

People were up and about at 5 am, seeing Magellanic Penguins, Giant Petrels, Steamer Ducks and much more. Everyone had their own favourite.

We drove to an un-named pond on the Mount Pleasant road, via the Argentine Cemetery where some of the soldiers who died in 1982 are buried.

A great walk around the pond gave us the exercise needed after a day getting to the islands. Highlights included White-tufted Grebes carrying chicks on their backs, a pair of Flying Steamerducks and two Silver Teals. A snoozing Magellan Snipe allowed close views. Southern Crested Caracaras and Variable Hawks were seen on the short drives to and from the pond.

A sumptuous lunch was followed by a drive out to Lafonia and the extraordinary Bodie Creek suspension bridge, built in the 1920s to provide a short cut for sheep being taken to Goose Green. Here Judy found a male and two female Kelp Geese and a pair of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants.

We stopped at Goose Green community hut where 115 people had been incarcerated by the Argentineans for 29 days. Many were children and the incident was one of the most frightening for islanders during the conflict.

Gulls and skuas had gathered around the settlement's slaughter house leading us to the discovery of several Brown Skuas and Brown-hooded Gulls. The latter were stunning with pale-pink underparts. They are difficult to find in January but about 20 were seen during the afternoon.

Pam found two Black-crowned Night-herons roosting among the timbers of a wrecked ship before we set off on the walk to Darwin. This led us to the discovery of four Southern Fulmars a long way off shore but identified when they flew. Pictures were taken of a Crested Caracara sitting on the fence of a mine-field and we examined Argentinean trenches and British mortar-holes left over from the Battle of Goose Green.

The afternoon was warm in the sunshine and our leisurely pace left us with the surprise that it was 7pm when we arrived at the lodge – a speed of _ mile per hour.

Another of Bonnie Greenland's wonderful dinners was followed by the call-over and a spot of star-gazing for some. We found both Magellanic Clouds, the Southern Cross with its associated Jewel-box and Coalsack, Orion with the spectacular nebula in the middle of its sword (check this) and Jupiter. During dinner we had heard the 'flights broadcast' on local radio. Both of ours were due at 10.50 am. We were weighed, as were our main cases and hand luggage. All was set for the next leg of our Falklands adventure. But...the weather forecast was not good. Would we make it to Carcass Island?

Saturday 18 October

Carcass Island and Elephant Beach

Wind gusting to 30 knots, overcast, 9°C but felt colder

We did make it thanks to some good flying by FIGAS pilots Derek Clark and Troid. The aircraft touched down within minutes of each other at 11.40 and we were greeted warmly by Rob McGill... and half a dozen Blackish Cinclodes, our first new bird of the day and an 'indicator species' for rats and cats. Islands with these predators have no Blackish Cinclodes (Tussock Birds).

I had phoned a sandwich order through to Rob and armed with our picnics we set off down to Elephant Bay with me at the wheel of one Rover.

My folk saw a few Snowy Sheathbills among a Kelp Gull colony and a Striated Caracara was seen soon after we arrived. We all walked down to a sheltered tussock stand through fields of fearless Kelp and Upland Geese, past ponds full of Speckled Teals, Crested Ducks, and singing Sedge Wrens. After a quick investigation of the beach we decided to eat before the great excitement started.

Southern Elephant Seals were roaring during the picnic and a Striated Caracara came up seeking scraps. It sat boldly about 2ft away from us, quite unconcerned. Yet this was one of the rarest birds of prey in the world.

Highlight of the afternoon was watching the Elephant Seals. We were careful not to get between them and the sea but were caught out by a huge bull which decided to visit the other members of his harem 100m away. This meant passing us and the four-ton beachmaster was a fast mover. We scattered up the beach grabbing tripods on the way as the love-crazed animal thundered past. It was funny but still had our hearts racing. The beach shuddered as he passed us by, stopping every 30m to get his breath back. So did we.

Another huge male came up to chance his flipper with the ladies but was slightly smaller than the beachmaster which had to go all the way back to see off his rival which fled.

The females were quite unmoved by them or us and continued to suckle their bleating black pups.

A few Southern Sea Lions were also on the beach, the most impressive a young male whose head made up a third of his body.

Birds were evident too with Cobb's Wren, a Falkland endemic also singing, Black-crowned Night-herons fishing around the bay and Black-browed Albatrosses passing out at sea.

Three Peale's Dolphins surfaced just beyond the kelp, their scimitar dorsal fins flashing in the good sunshine. A Peregrine put up two flocks of White-rumped Sandpipers – Rob managed to find a Baird's Sandpiper among them.

We were all absorbed in our studies, aware of a sense of freedom within Paradise. The place seemed like the Garden of Eden. It was truly wonderful.

All too soon we had to return to the Rover as Rob's handyman 'Boy' had come in a second vehicle to help take us to the lodge. My folk enjoyed seeing several Striated Caracaras feeding off the remains of a steer which had been shot the evening before – its meat was destined for New Island but the offal was gratefully received by the birds.

Afternoon tea (not technically 'smoko', a morning break) was followed by a rest and an excellent dinner. Good news of the day was that our trip to Steeple Jason was on for the morning, although the sea was likely to be rough.

Sunday 19 October

Monday 20 October

Steeple Jason

Wind N for the outward leg (perfect) and W for the return (perfect), max 13°C sunny and clear

This trip was everything I expected and hoped it would be plus a great deal more. We were all at a loss to describe the vast Albatross colony. Mile upon mile of densely-packed birds were sitting, each on its own mud egg-cup (literally – many were incubating a single egg), exactly a beak-jab distance away from its neighbour.

But the spectacle was all here. Hundreds, if not thousands of birds were in the air at one time. Even more were on the sea, recovering from their stints as egg-sitters. The scene was one of an almost magical looking island rising from a blue sea, skirted by green tussock with vast white patches of nesting albatrosses on each lobe of the colony.

The birds had run out of building plots on the flat coastal areas – too few mud caps to meet demand, a familiar tale of woe on small islands – and many had set up home in the less desirable tussock, even high up on ridges near the peak of Steeple Jason's escarpment. Everywhere we went there were albatrosses overhead. Sitting in the tussock near parts of the colony birds passed over our heads missing taller group members by only an inch or two (no kidding).

Our first encounter with the birds was soon after landing at the island's neck. We had a cuppa in the comfortable house before driving to the west end of the island.

Many albatrosses were on and over the sea flying to and from the tussock stand in front of us. Moving carefully to avoid sleeping Sea Lions we pushed our way through the dense tussock, finally emerging at the colony.

What a sight.

Acres of bare soil had disappeared under Black-browed Albatrosses' nests. It was a sea of black and white birds, all intent on domestic duties. The sound of the colony was amazing too as the birds called their bubbling 'ughooooo' greetings.

It took a while to get one's eye in to the scene. The colony was surrounded by non-breeding birds which barely noticed us. As we skirted the area they moved out of our way, big webbed feet flip-flopping on the ground. Moving meant just a foot or two, never far, unafraid.

Black-browed Albatrosses are gentle, turkey-sized birds. On arrival, usually after a bad landing, they call loudly to nearby nesting birds which jab at them as they weave through the colony. Reaching their nest and mate an intricate greeting occurs with one bird fanning and raising its grey tail, much billing and mutual preening.

Many birds were sitting on large pink-white eggs, others doing what was necessary to make them.

Gradually we became aware of other residents in this vast seabird city. Rockhopper Penguins were sitting happily between nests on higher ground, presumably on eggs themselves although we saw none. Males bellowed loudly with calls reminiscent of our Gannets at home.

Dolphin Gulls and Striated Caracaras were patrolling or sitting on tussocks waiting for the albatrosses to drop undigested krill or squid (acid-reflux seems common among the birds).

Wanting to see the full extent of the colony we walked around the edge, parting a way through the non-breeding birds. A few deep muddy ponds forced us into the tussock (we avoided entering areas with nests).

The ponds also proved entertaining as albatrosses were using them to bathe or as take-off pads. Some birds flopped around in deep mud becoming filthy – no wonder so many dropped into the sea to wash after a spell of time ashore.

Eventually we reached a spot where the nests spread several hundred yards up a ridge and around the base of a distant mountain. Counting the huge numbers was impossible – estimating them futile. The colony was simply mind-boggling in its extent.

By now the sun was setting, temperatures dropping and we were tired and hungry. We retraced our steps and walked back to the house where Rob McGill had prepared a delicious meal (the chili con carne had been brought with us along with a mountain of food and sleeping bags). We divided accommodation into ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ and a good night’s sleep was had after a few minutes star-gazing.

Breakfast was early, we did not want to waste time on this precious spot, watching albatrosses in droves over the sea seen from the dining area.

We spent the morning on the cool south side of Steeple Jason where ‘our colony’ of the night before could be seen coming around the mountain and stretching two miles past us and on towards the Neck. People with more time than us have estimated the numbers at 175,000 pairs and 150,000 non-breeding birds – a total of 500,000. Steeple Jason was a wildlife wonder of a place, unequalled anywhere for most of us.

Our boat journeys to and from the island were just as fascinating although five hours each way tested a few constitutions. We watched a Peregrine chasing prions miles off shore until one was snatched and carried away – there were thousands for the falcon to choose from. Rob and I tried to sort out the prion species but from a small pitching and rolling boat it was not simple. A Blue Petrel, Pintado Petrels, Southern Fulmars, a few Sooty Shearwaters and a Wilson’s Storm-petrel were easier however.

After passing South Jason and Elephant Jason we went in close to Grand Jason to see Gentoo and Rockhopper Penguin colonies and (what was then) our first huge albatross colony – 30,000 pairs are thought to breed on the island.

Grand Jason petered away into a series of long low rocky islets on the last of which was a superb Southern Fur Seal colony of 300 or more animals. I was about to say that it could attract predators (such as Great White Shark) when a male Orca breached 200 yards in front of our boat... it was amazing. It then repeated the stunt twisting as it descended back into the sea.

We watched it close in on the Fur Seal colony, its 6ft triangular fin and back clearly visible several times. As it patrolled the base of the rocks another male joined it.

This account of my most outstanding wildlife event in 20 years of visits to the Falklands is a mere taste of the Steeple Jason experience. We all came away from the island amazed at what we had seen and done, thrilled to have made the trip.

Tuesday 21 October

Carcass explored

Heavy rain lasting all day due to little wind 8°C

The heavens smiled on a group of weary naturalists – the rain lasted all day giving us an opportunity to relax after our strenuous trip to Steeple Jason.

We did go out for the morning, walking all the way to Seal Beach in filthy conditions. We made the most of it too watching Magellanic Penguins at their burrows, Upland Geese with goslings – one female incubating six eggs – and several male South American Snipe singing their love songs to females hidden in grass. A Sea Lion was seen hunting near the settlement and further on we found a Southern Fur Seal practising its synchronised swimming routine, alone.

The afternoon was spent snoozing, chatting and drinking endless cups of tea accompanied by cakes and biscuits. Our forecast for tomorrow was better but the flight times would make visiting Tamar Point on Pebble Island difficult.

Wednesday 22 October

Carcass Island and Tamar Point

Overcast, cool wind, 8°C

What a relief – our flights were together and although we did not get to Pebble Island until noon, we managed a visit to the Tamar Point seabird colony.

The day started well with a walk around the large pond next to Carcass airstrip. Silvery Grebes were feeding young: one bird had a chick on its back, wrapped deep in feathers, the other was diving and passing food to the youngster. Pam found a Magellanic Oystercatcher chick and we all enjoyed seeing Magellanic Penguins. A large bull Elephant Seal had ‘crashed out’ between three young females, each suckling a calf.

Peale’s Dolphins were next on our wildlife spectacular. Three came close in to the bay, leading us to three young male Elephant Seals which were engaged in a fight-training session.

Out at sea were unidentifiable prions, Sooty Shearwaters and a few Black-browed Albatrosses. A flock of six White-rumped Sandpipers contained a Baird’s Sandpiper and we all took the opportunity for a master-class in identifying the two species.

A Peregrine shot across the pond as we returned to the Landrover, over a marshy area jinking at anything that moved and finally perched on a fence-post posing for us.

We left Pam behind to commune with Nature during which time she became victim to the first robbery of any client I have had. A Striated Caracara came down, picked up both of her gloves and flew off with them to its nest deep in a tussock bed. She was outraged.

After our flights and ‘smoko’ in the Pebble Lodge sitting room we set off in three vehicles to explore the island’s ponds. Our first stop was to admire four Black-necked Swans. These are always timid but the scopes brought them in close.

Soon afterwards I found a female Red Shoveler which is quite a rarity in the Falklands. We admired her but were unable to find her mate (if indeed she was accompanied).

Another pond had a good number of Yellow-billed Pintails, a beautiful species which breeds in small numbers in the islands. We saw a couple of ducklings.

A bird walking between ponds looked like a Flying Steamer Duck – sure enough, it took off to complete the journey on the wing.

Our late picnic lunch was followed by a fascinating drive across the island to Tamar Point where each went their separate ways watching the breeding Rockhopper Penguins and King Cormorants. The colony had one Macaroni Penguin among the thousands of breeding birds. Eventually the carrot-topped punk was located, drawing quite a crowd of admirers.

Actually, the crowd was just our group. Besides us there were just seven other people on the 19-mile long island. As we looked across at West and even part of East Falkland the sense of isolation and remoteness was felt strongly. It is one of the most unexpected features of these far-flung islands.

We were back at the lodge for 6pm and enjoyed a fun evening as Sue elected to do the call-over.

Tuesday 23 October

Pebble Island and the penguin challenge

Rough and windy, some showers early on, 6°C

This was meant to be a fun day as we hoped to see six species of penguin but it turned out to have a serious wildlife event.

We started by chasing a rainbow towards the memorial to HMS Coventry which was sunk off Pebble Island with 19 men killed. Alan White told us the story as we stood, heads bowed, by the monument.

Our first wildlife was spotted over ‘smoko’ when two Dark-faced Ground Tyrants hopped by. A Gentoo Penguin colony, visited soon after, had a King Penguin among its members. Most were incubating an egg.

Our main stop was at a Rockhopper Penguin colony which has been home to an Erect-crested Penguin for the last 10 years. No more, however. It failed to return this year.

We did see and hear three Macaroni Penguins, however, which brought our total number of penguin species to five for the day and trip. This amazing statistic – almost a third of the world's penguins in an afternoon can be achieved only on Pebble Island.

We spent a long time at the colony watching the birds come out of the sea, bathe, preen and then hop up the 100ft cliff and walk off into the milling throng. The penguins were photographed from every angle as they went about the serious business of breeding.

Even so, it was with reluctance that we left them and headed back towards home. A stop was made at the 'Lear-jet memorial' which marked the spot where an Argentinean spy-plane had been shot down during the conflict.

Dolphins were surfing in and on waves at a stunning white-sand beach and we hopped out of the vehicles to get up close. The Commerson's Dolphins could be seen clearly swimming along waves or surfing in on them only a few feet away from us.

A comfort stop at Green Rincon provided the next sighting which turned out to be a major contender for 'event of the tour'. The stunning blue-sea bay was dotted with several large rafts of Gentoo Penguins all heading for shore and the long walk to their breeding colonies.

These were not behaving normally, however. They sped around the bay in confusion, sometimes heading for the beach, often changing course and scattering around the bay. Suddenly we saw a Sea Lion break the surface, rise up looking for the birds and chase off after them. Once found we could watch the animal as it sped underwater and the penguins fled in front of it.

The numbers of birds built up until there were hundreds in the bay, none daring to enter shallow water where lines of escape were limited. Eventually one made a fatal mistake, was grabbed by the Sea Lion and killed. Giant Petrels swooped down on the spot to fight over the remains once the Sea Lion had eaten.

The group went down onto the beach for a walk while we drove the three vehicles to meet them at the other end.

As we parked and looked back everyone was standing looking out to sea – a huge flock of Gentoos was heading for the shore with the Sea Lion in pursuit.

The birds – between 150 and 200 in this flock – raced in through the waves until there was no water left to swim, raised up onto their feet and raced up towards the onlookers.

The thwarted Sea Lion turned around and headed out to chase one of the other flocks in the bay. 'Our penguins' did not stop running. They raced across the beach and up the path the group had walked down.

It was the end of a stunning, exciting and at times emotional encounter with wildlife. No television programme could have reproduced the drama of Green Rincon Gentoos and we left for the lodge in awe at what had occurred.

Friday 24 October

Elephant Beach and off to Sea Lion Island

Sun and showers early on, cold wind. 10°C

A lecture by Alan about the SAS raid on Pebble airstrip was interesting but held us up by half-an-hour. We left for Elephant Beach at 9.45am.

Gulls and terns were roosting on the sand and we soon had a pink Brown-hooded Gull in the scope to admire. A group of South American Terns included one immature bird which was sleeping next to a Common Tern. This was also immature and we were able to compare the two birds.

A few Commerson's Dolphins were seen before it was time to head back to the Lodge for 'smoko' and our departure for the airstrip. One flight went via Stanley Airport where we had an hour's wait for the next shuttle, the other direct to Sea Lion Island.

There we all met up and after a late lunch had a two vehicle tour of the island. The wind was too strong for us to stand on cliffs above the Sea Lion colony but luckily only one male had returned so we did not miss much.

Onwards, stopping to look at Roufous-chested Dotterel and Two-banded Plovers we reached the Rockhopper Penguin colony with its associated King Cormorants.

The site was chosen to mark the sinking of HMS Sheffield and we had a look at that memorial too.

After visiting Beaver Pond, where float-planes of that name once landed, we went on to the Gulch where all the island's goods used to be brought ashore, and watched a colony of nesting Rock Shags.

After a cuppa we went out to explore the area close to the lodge but got no further than Elephant Corner. We were treated to another wildlife spectacular with two harems of Elephant Seals.

Big males were mating with their concubines, a female was chasing off Giant Petrels, Kelp Gulls and Striated Caracaras which wanted to eat the placenta she had dropped after giving birth.

Lots of albatrosses, Southern Fulmars, Sooty Shearwaters and prions were passing making sea-watching an interesting past-time. We were made all the more weary by a glass of wine or two but managed a bit of stargazing before falling into bed.

Saturday 25 October

Go-as-you-please day Sea Lion Island

Overcast and cold early, clearing and less windy later, 10°C

The alarms were needed for a 5.45am cuppa and bibble for some of us to the Neck to watch Elephant Seals. A cold wind had come around so we crossed to Elephant Corner and hunkered down in the tussock to resume our insights into their social lives.

After breakfast I drove those who wanted a walk up to the Rockhopper colony (to walk back) while others went to watch Gentoos and Elephant Seals. There were around 6,000 Gentoo Penguins and 450 female seals, with about 40 bulls.

I spent the early afternoon investigating Short-eared Owl pellets in the garden and looking for the birds in grassy areas around the lodge, without success.

Later we all went down to watch the penguin parade. This is the influx of Gentoo Penguins returning to their colonies for the night. Hundreds were gathering off the Neck, bathing and swimming through the waves excitedly.

Once every 20 minutes or so a wave of hundreds came surging up the beach where they gathered, then to march, in long lines across the Neck and up into their colonies. It was a fabulous sight as we sat close to their route and watched them file past. Once again the Gentoos had put on a show for their eager Travelling Naturalist audience.

Judy had bought a couple of bottles of bubbly and we had a little reception to toast the Falklands at the end of our 'camp' section of the holiday. More excitement was to come over in Stanley but this was our last evening in the wild yet hospitable countryside of the islands.

Sunday 26 October

Sea Lion Island and off to Stanley for a boat trip

Sunny, calm and warm early, 11°C

Once again we went our own ways around the island – some to Elephant Corner, others up to the Rockhopper colony with me.

Our 3pm flights were inconvenient. We left luggage in the Stanley Services minibus (it was delivered an in our rooms by the time we checked in – thanks to Arlette) and got straight onto the launch for our trip to Kidney Island.

My friends Mike and Steve on the 'John Byron' had a can of mashed fish, Rice Crispies and cooking oil to make a chum slick. Within a few minutes of chucking the stuff over the side a crowd of birds began to gather.

Pintado Petrels were in large numbers – more than I have ever seen attracted around a boat anywhere. Southern Fulmars were in good numbers too with Slender-billed and Fairy Pirons joining the melee.

A few Black-browed Albatrosses had joined the Giant Petrels when a black bird with an ivory-coloured bill flew past the stern

"White-chinned Petrel," I hollered. It was the first of about six we saw. Hearts leaped and raced when a Snow Petrel joined the throng – a pure white bird with a heavy, gull-like flight.

It was some minutes before the sad truth began to bubble up in our minds – "heavy, gull-like flight?" Could this be an albino Southern Fulmar? The pink bill was a give-away. No delicate wanderer from the Antarctic ice this, it was a Fulmar... Ah well, it was a lovely sight nevertheless. A few Wilson's Storm-petrels completed the brilliant tally of birds before we reluctantly turned around and headed for Kidney Island.

What a sight greeted us. Tens of thousands of Sooty Shearwaters were gathering before flying to their nesting burrows on the island after dark. We drifted towards the huge rafts so as not to alarm the birds and wondered at the spectacle.

I spotted a brown and white bird among the throng – our first (and only) Great Shearwater. We had great views too before it flew, showing us the finer points of identification.

Going in close to the island we watched fulmars on the sea, colonies of Rock Shags and Rockhoppers on the cliffs.

Suddenly Kate spotted a Macaroni Penguin among the Rockhoppers – a brilliant find with a second close by.

Motoring around the island young Sea Lions were seen in the tussock with more in the water. Again we drifted to get a better view with a final tally of 10.

We checked into the Malvina Hotel elated by our successful trip.

Monday 27 October

Volunteer Point to meet the Kings

Sunny, some cloud, strong wind (25 knots) 12°C

An early start saw us leave in three vehicles for Volunteer Point. There was little of note on the way except minefields, fantastic views, stone runs and a very poor track over the last 10 miles.

The penguin colonies were worth the bumpy ride. Kings were tops with about 150 'Guardsmen's bearskins' – young penguins as tall as their parents, fat as barrels and covered in brown down which made them look like Guardsmen's busbys. Adults without chicks were either molting or claiming a territory.

On the dazzlingly white sandy beach, Kings and Gentoo Penguins were coming out of or going into the sea. The Gentoo colonies were large but most birds were lying down incubating their eggs so we spent time with the Kings.

It was almost like being with royalty. They move slowly, with dignity and an aura of aloofness. The general consensus was that our audience with them was a fitting way to end the trip here. Many stories of the Falklands were told to and from the colonies, making the rough and dusty journeys pass quickly.

We were back in Stanley at 4pm in time to do some souvenir hunting before our final dinner together which was something of a party despite the need for an early night.

Tuesday 28 October

Homeward bound

Clear, sunny, great visibility: -64°C at 36,000ft and 560mph

This was to read 'we took off an hour late and arrived at RAF Brize Norton after an uneventful flight'.

However, to my astonishment a Tornado appeared near the port wing soon after take-off, the pilot waving to us. It was a bit of an insult really, the first time in 16 trips I have been escorted off the premises. As we missed the treat inbound due to our late arrival, the group was delighted especially as the pilot did a barrel-roll after switching to the starboard side.

We arrived at Brize Norton after an otherwise uneventful flight.

Acknowledgements: Rob McGill, who arranged and organised every minute detail of our trip to Steeple Jason, and the charity MRC who own the island and gave us permission to stay overnight; Arlette Bloomfield, Falkland Island Holidays, who organised our itinerary and dealt with occasional problems which arose during the tour; my mother Di West who typed these notes from my horribly scribbled diary.

Footnote: This was the best wildlife experience of my many years as a tour leader. Almost daily we experienced a highlight which would have stood out on any other tour. Of those, the trip to Steeple Jason and the experience of watching many thousands of albatrosses was amazing and for me along-held ambition realised. We benefitted from an enthusiastic group who revelled in this adventure and I hope to have the pleasure of travelling with all of you again one day.

ANNOTATED LIST OF SPECIES

ASCENSION ISLAND - BIRDS

FRIGATEBIRDS

1 Ascension Island Frigatebird *Fregata aquila*

Fregatidae

Distant views of about 10 from the cage.

GANNETS & BOOBIES

2 Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*

Sulidae

Two on Ascension Island.

GULLS, TERNS, SKIMMERS

3 Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*

Laridae

About 10 on their way to the Ascension Island colony.

FALKLAND ISLANDS - BIRDS

WILDFOWL

1 Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melanocoryphus*

Anatidae

About 10 in the ponds on Pebble Island.

2 Flying Steamer Duck *Tachyeres patachonicus*

Seen twice – one pair on Pond Without Name, one in flight on Pebble Island.

3 Falkland Steamer Duck *Tachyeres brachypterus*

Common on the sea around all the islands.

4 Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta*

Common around the islands.

5 Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida*

Common in coastal areas.

6 Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps*

Seen commonly with Upland Geese.

7 Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides*

Common around the islands.

8 Chiloe Wigeon *Anas sibilatrix*

Fairly common, a few seen each day.

9 Red Shoveler *Anas platalea*

A female on Pebble Island.

10 Speckled Teal *Anas flavirostris*

Common around the islands.

11 Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*

About 10 birds with two ducklings on Pebble Island.

12 Silver Teal *Anas versicolor*

A few pairs here and there.

PENGUINS

13 King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

Spheniscidae

The colony at Volunteer Point, which had about 150 furry brown youngsters, was a highlight of the tour; two birds seen moulting in Gentoo colonies on Pebble Island.

14 Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua*

Colonies on Grand and Steeple Jason (where they hopped up a cliff like Rockhoppers), Pebble and Sea Lion Islands, and Volunteer Point.

15 Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome*

Colonies on Grand Jason, Pebble, Sea Lion and Kidney Islands.

16 Macaroni Penguin *Eudyptes chrysolophus*

A pair and two singles on Pebble Island, two on Kidney Island.

17	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Common in suitable habitats on all islands.
	ALBATROSSES		Diomedidae
18	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophrys</i>	Many birds were seen at sea around the islands but the colony of half a million on Steeple Jason was a highlight of the trip.
	PETRELS & SHEARWATERS		Family Procellariidae
19	Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Common at sea around the islands, colonies on Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
20	Southern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Surprisingly common at sea around the islands -- this species is rarely seen in January. An albino seen on our pelagic trip to Kidney Island.
21	Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>	A few seen to and from Steeple Jason, large numbers on the pelagic trip to Kidney Island.
22	Blue Petrel	<i>Halobaena caerulea</i>	One seen on the way to Steeple Jason.
23	Antarctic Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	These three species were seen in large numbers to and from Steeple Jason
24	Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	and on the pelagic trip to Kidney Island.
25	Fairy Prion	<i>Pachyptila turtur</i>	
26	White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	Six seen on our pelagic trip to Kidney Island; one "Shoemaker" heard on Steeple Jason.
27	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Many thousands congregating before entering their nest burrows on Kidney island; a few seen at sea from the northern islands.
28	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>	One in a flock of Sooty Shearwaters off Kidney Island.
	STORM PETRELS		Hydrobatidae
29	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	Three on our way to Steeple Jason; at the least 10 on the Kidney Island pelagic trip.
	DIVING PETRELS		Pelecanoididae
30	Common Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>	About 20 on our way to Steeple Jason.
	GREBES		Podicipedidae
31	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>	A few on Pond Without Name; about 10 pairs on Pebble Island.
32	Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>	A few seen on Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion Islands.
	HERONS, BITTERNES		Ardeidae
33	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Common at most settlements.
	CORMORANTS		Phalacrocoracidae
34	Rock Shag	<i>Leucocarbo magellanicus</i>	Seen daily with a few colonies here and there.
35	Imperial Shag	<i>Leucocarbo atriceps</i>	Common out at sea with colonies on Steeple Jason, Pebble and Sea Lion Islands.
	NEW WORLD VULTURES	Cathartidae	
36	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Common on all the islands.
	FALCONS, CARACARAS		Falconidae
37	Striated Caracara	<i>Phalcooboenus australis</i>	Common on Steeple Jason, Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
38	Southern Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	A few on Grand and Steeple Jason, Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
39	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	One snatching a prion off Carcass Island was a highlight of this trip; one or two seen on Steeple Jason, Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion Islands.
	KITES, HAWKS, EAGLES		Accipitridae
40	Variable Hawk	<i>Buteo polyosoma</i>	Up to five seen on Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion Islands and four on the Volunteer Point trip.
	SHEATHBILLS & ALLIES	Chionidae	
41	Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis albus</i>	Common around the various seabird colonies.
	OYSTERCATCHERS		Haematopidae
42	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>	Common throughout.

43	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>	Common on beaches.
PLOVERS			
44	Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>	Common throughout.
45	Rufous-chested Plover	<i>Charadrius modestus</i>	Common on Pebble and Sea Lion islands; a few at Darwin and Volunteer Point.
SANDPIPERS, SNIPES			
46	South American Snipe	<i>Gallinago paraguaiae</i>	Common throughout.
47	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>	Common on beaches, a few inland.
48	Baird's Sandpiper	<i>Calidris bairdii</i>	Singles on Carcass and Sea Lion Island.
GULLS, TERNS, SKIMMERS			
49	Dolphin Gull	<i>Leucophaeus scoresbii</i>	A few around seabird colonies.
50	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Common throughout.
51	Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Larus maculipennis</i>	Quite common in coastal areas.
52	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna South Africandvicensis</i>	One seen on the Kidney Island pelagic trip.
53	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>	Common all around the coasts.
54	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Singles (both juveniles) seen on the way to Steeple Jason and on Elephant Beach, Pebble Island.
SKUAS			
55	Subantarctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	Common throughout.
TYRANT FLYCATCHERS			
56	Dark-faced Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola maclovianus</i>	A few here and there.
OVENBIRDS			
57	Blackish Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>	Common on rat and cat-free islands: Steeple Jason, Carcass, Sea Lion and Kidney.
SWALLOWS, MARTINS			
58	Chilean Swallow	<i>Tachycineta meyeri</i>	One seen on the way to Volunteer Point.
WRENS			
59	Sedge Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>	Common in tussock and marshy areas.
60	Cobb's Wren	<i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>	Common on rat and cat-free island beaches: Steeple Jason, Carcass, Sea Lion and Kidney.
THRUSHES			
61	Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falcklandii</i>	Common throughout.
OLD WORLD SPARROWS			
62	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	A few in Darwin and Port Stanley.
WAGTAILS & PIPITS			
63	Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>	Common throughout.
FINCHES			
64	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Carduelis barbata</i>	Common throughout.
NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS			
65	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella loyca</i>	Common throughout, but absent from Sea Lion Island.
BUNTINGS & NEW WORLD SPARROWS			
66	White-bridled Finch	<i>Melanoderes melanodera</i>	Common throughout.

FALKLAND ISLANDS - MAMMALS

RABBITS & HARES			
1	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Leporidae A few on East Falkland.
CATS			
2	Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	Felidae Common on Pebble Island.
EARED SEALS			
3	South American Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus australis</i>	Otariidae A big colony on Grand Jason, one in the settlement bay on Carcass Island.

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|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 4 | South American Sea-Lion | Otaria flavescens | A few among Elephant Seals here and there. One beachmaster male on Sea Lion Island. |
| EARLESS SEALS | | | Phocidae |
| 5 | Southern Elephant Seal | Mirounga leonina | Harems and breeding males on Carcass and Sea Lion Islands. |
| MARINE DOLPHINS | | | Delphinidae |
| 6 | Killer Whale | Orcinus orca | Two hunting around the Fur Seal colony on Grand Jason. |
| 7 | Peale's Dolphin | Lagenorhynchus australis | Seen mostly from the boat to Steeple Jason but also inshore on Carcass Island. |
| 8 | Commerson's Dolphin | Cephalorhynchus commersonii | Common inshore but also good numbers on the boat trip back from Steeple Jason. |

HEAVENLY BODIES

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|---|---|---|
| 1 | Orion: Rigel, Betelgeuse, the Orion Nebula | Seen from Darwin late in the evening. |
| 2 | Jupiter with its moons Io, Europa, Callisto | Seen from Darwin, Steeple Jason and Ganymede Sea Lion Island. |
| 3 | Crux, the Southern Cross | Seen from Darwin, Steeple Jason and Sea Lion Island. |
| 4 | The Coalsack and Jewelbox, seen close to Crux | Seen from Darwin, Steeple Jason and Sea Lion Island. |
| 5 | Large Magellanic Cloud | Seen from Darwin late in the evening. |
| 6 | Small Magellanic Cloud | Seen from Darwin late in the evening. |

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