

Falkland Islands

Wednesday 21 January - 4 Wednesday February 2009

Principal leader: Tim Earl

Local support: Tour: Arlette Bloomefield
Darwin: Ken Greenland
Pebble Island: Allan White
Carcass Island: Rob and Lorraine McGill and Ramon 'Boy' Miranda
Sea Lion Island: Jenny Luxton.

Highlights

- 1 All the Rockhopper Penguin colonies we saw.
- 2 Tame Tussockbirds (Blackish Cinclodes) which sat on shoes and shoulders during the trip.
- 3 The many encounters with Elephant Seals on Carcass and Sea Lion Islands.
- 4 Our amazing seabird boat trip with Royal Albatross, Wilson's Storm Petrel and Northern Giant Petrel among many more. My delight at seeing those rarities pleased many.
- 5 Exploring the back of West Point, including the Devil's Nose, on the Condor boat trip.
- 6 Seeing penguin colonies on West Point and Kidney Island from the sea.
- 7 The drama of a dead penguin being eaten by Striated Caracaras and later a melee of Giant Petrels.
- 8 A Short-eared Owl which flew towards and around a couple, unexpectedly, on the 'go as you please' day.
- 9 Our picnic on the idyllic Green Rincon, Pebble Island – the beach, sea, birds, dolphins and sunshine were wonderful.
- 10 Five species of penguin in an afternoon on Pebble Island.
- 11 Gentoo Penguins coming to people sitting near their colonies.
- 12 A bad tempered Sea Lion close to the group.
- 13 The fair, balanced history of the Falklands Conflict given by Ken Greenland and Allan White.

Bird of the trip was Rockhopper Penguin closely followed by King Penguin. Royal Albatross came third, with Long-tailed Meadowlark, Short-eared Owl, Cobb's Wren, Striated Caracara and Black-browed Albatross as close contenders.

Mammal of the trip was Southern Sea Lion followed by Peale's and Commerson's Dolphins.

Daily Diary

Wednesday 21 January

Brize Norton to Ascension Island

Sunny, some cloud, hot, wind dropping, 25°C

The flight to the Falklands cannot be described as exciting but the group had good seats and excellent views of Ascension Frigatebird and Sooty Terns on the stop-over.

Tuesday 22 January

Ascension to Mount Pleasant Airport and Darwin

Windy; arrived in a near-gale, overcast but sunny, warm and a gentle breeze by early evening, 15°C

A warm welcome to the islands was provided by Ken Greenland (and Bonnie too, when we arrived at Darwin House), Peter Wakefield and, of course, me. I had spotted some white birds when driving to the Mount Pleasant Airport to meet everyone and on investigation these proved to be 100 Black-necked Swans, a great surprise. Rufous-crested Dotterel, Falklands Steamerducks, Upland Geese and Long-tailed Meadowlarks were seen on the 45-minute drive.

Our arrival in the idyllic Darwin settlement (population seven) was marked by rapid-fire calling of birds' names. Ruddy-headed Geese, Austral Thrush, more Meadowlarks and flocks of House Sparrows (not to be seen again until we reached Stanley).

After settling in we walked around the settlement looking at lobster krill (washed up on the shore inches deep), Rock Shags, Crested Ducks, Kelp Geese and Dark-faced Ground Tyrants. A Magellanic Penguin swam past us (a first in Darwin for me) and Giant Petrels kept Kelp Gulls and South American Terns company. One lone Dolphin Gull was spotted before we turned back for a delicious dinner and well-earned rest.

Friday 23 January

San Carlos, Goose Green, a battle and sheep shearing

Calm, overcast, warm, light breeze pm, 16°C

The day started early for some with a quiet walk around Darwin settlement, watching birds and taking pictures. A pair of Black-crowned Night Herons was obligingly tame while other highlights included another Magellanic Penguin (or maybe the same one as yesterday) swimming past the jetty, and Giant Petrels searching for anything edible.

We set off for San Carlos at 9.15am stopping almost immediately to watch a dark Peregrine some distance away. It may have been the same bird seen later in the afternoon carrying an unfortunate victim and close enough for us to see its black balaclava.

After visiting the Argentine war cemetery where we saw our first White-bridled (Black-throated) Finch, we drove off to San Carlos with stops to see Speckled Teals and a stone-run, one of the Falklands' unique geological features.

A rare event occurred high above us when we watched in-flight refueling of a Tornado, an operation usually carried out over sea.

Chris found a grebe on the sea off San Carlos beach – my initial excitement at the prospect of a Great Grebe was dampened when I realised it was a Silvery Grebe. King Cormorants (Blue-eyed Shags) were roosting on the jetty as we started our return.

A female Red-backed Hawk was devouring a European Hare close to the road. Disturbed by our interest in her, she flew to a nearby slope giving us great 'scope views. A pair of Black-necked Swans with cygnets were seen in the creek nearby.

With a tight timetable we left soon after a delicious lunch for a quick tour of the Darwin/Goose Green battlefield with a fascinating account given by Ken. We all saw Argentinean trenches and the spot where Col H. Jones was killed.

A sheep-shearing gang was busy in Goose Green and we were fortunate to be able to watch the busy operation.

Most of us walked back to Darwin House enjoying a feast of sightings. Magellanic Penguins coming ashore on a tussock island; two minefields; a female Red-backed Hawk joining its chick on a telephone mast; octopus bodies which had the legs eaten off by gulls and a pair of Speckled Teals on a little pond.

We arrived at the lodge in time for a shower and the call-over before dinner.

Saturday 24 January

To Pebble Island; Elephant Beach

Windy, overcast, cool, light showers clearing later, 12°C.

With split flights, we spent our last morning at Darwin further exploring the settlement (visits to the 2nd Para Goose Green battle memorial were especially popular). A stunning female Peregrine made a low-level, slow pass over the settlement, across the chicken runs and away behind some cupressus trees.

The flights to Pebble Island were shorter than expected at 20mins and thrilling for all as we enjoyed our own low-level passes over Falklands' settlements, hills and valleys. One hilltop we passed close to was above the level of our aircraft.

The first group to arrive at Pebble enjoyed 'smoko' while we waited for the second to arrive.

After a light but good lunch we walked down to Elephant Beach where we enjoyed an invigorating walk, watching birds we now knew well. Highlights included poor views of a small pod of Commerson's Dolphins, distant Black-browed Albatrosses and a juvenile Red-backed Hawk. We returned via a small pond where there were about 30 Speckled Teal and Crested Ducks.

Allan and Jacquie met us on the way back and gave some folk a lift to the lodge.

We became aware of gulls gathering near one of the sheds as the rest entered the settlement. Tid-bits from a slaughtered lamb had been thrown out for them and we enjoyed great views of Dolphin and Kelp Gulls. However, bird of the afternoon was a female Red-backed Hawk sitting on a pole waiting for her turn at the feast. The day ended with a delicious supper and the call-over. Sadly, rain had set in.

Sunday 25 January

Duck ponds and Cape Tamar

Overcast and squalls clearing to sunny with few clouds, 30kn, 14°C

'Pebble wildfowl day' had barely begun when we stopped our convoy of four-wheeled drive vehicles firstly to watch a Black-browed Albatross off the jetty and seconds later to admire a dozen Brown-hooded Gulls feeding at the edge of the water on insects washed out of kelp piles by the high tide.

They were super birds: similar to our Black-headed Gulls but with dark under-wings, pink bellies and no raucous call. In fact, we saw all three Falklands' gulls together as they were joined by green-legged Kelp and grey-bodied Dolphin Gulls.

Elephant Beach was spectacular giving opportunities for photographers to get images of some of the more common species. Towards the far end of the beach we found quite a few White-rumped Sandpipers in the company of Two-banded Plovers.

Our first good views of penguins for the trip came as we swung inland where a small colony of Magellanic Penguins delighted us. Adults were out of their burrows with chicks, many of which were moulting from fluffy brown juvenile plumage to well-dressed immature garb.

I was a little surprised when Allan set off for Wreck Point Beach. All was revealed when he pointed out a pair of moulting King Penguins which posed for the photographers. Those without cameras found the rib, skull and vertebrae bones of several dolphins and a Pilot Whale as we combed the beach.

Albatrosses and Sooty Shearwaters were passing at some distance (and speed in the wind) and we hoped for good views on reaching Cape Tamar. That was far in advance however, as the wildfowl ponds had to be

explored. About 12 Black-necked Swans greeted us as we arrived (by paddling to the other side) but an inlet had many ducks.

We were manoeuvring into the wind (to save the doors from being ripped off), when I noticed a pair of Red Shovelers. Jumping out of his vehicle Allan confirmed the sighting, the first record for Pebble since 2006 when again they were found by a Travelling Naturalist group).

The birds were in great company and we enjoyed a masterclass in Yellow-billed Pintail, Silver Teal, Chiloe Widgeon, Speckled Teal and Silvery Grebe, the latter with two nests containing single eggs. Excitement continued with two high-speed passes by a Peregrine and the discovery of four cygnets with the swans.

A picnic lunch was enjoyed at the head of Ship Harbour Inlet, made the more so by a Queen of the Falklands Fritillary which flitted happily among us. A queen and two kings in one morning was a good record.

Pulses increased as our first penguin colony came into view. The site was shared with 2,000 pairs of King Cormorants (more royalty... Ed) and was alive with activity.

About 1,000 pairs of Rockhopper Penguins (plus hundreds of chicks) clung to the cliff-top – we were able to see them coming ashore, climbing the cliffs, hopping along ‘penguin highway’ and feeding chicks.

Moving on we visited a rather quiet Gentoo Penguin colony (our fourth penguin species of the day) but cut it short to look for White-tufted Grebes in Big Pond. Successfully! Two were approachable and we had brilliant views of this attractive bird before moving down the pond where more were found, including one on a nest.

There were about a dozen Silvery Grebes and 10 Black-necked Swans too, so our great wildfowl day ended on course. The skies had cleared enough to warrant a star-gazing session at 11 pm. However I cancelled it due to cloud at 9.30 pm only to see the Southern Cross an hour later.

Monday 26 January

Penguin Day – West Pebble and five-in-a-day

Sunny, lenticular cloud, cool wind 20kn, in shelter, 20°C

Pebble Island is the only place on Earth one can see five species of penguin in a day. (It used to be six but the failure of an Erect-crested Penguin to appear this season has knocked it down by one). This boast is well supported by people who have seen Magellanic, Gentoo, King, Rockhopper and Macaroni but a degree of luck is needed. However, we have always enjoyed good luck on this tour and she did not desert us.

Our quest started at the airstrip where Allan told us about the SAS raid which destroyed more than 20 aircraft at the start of the Conflict. We then continued to the HMS Coventry Memorial which marks the sinking of that ship. He gave us a detailed account of the action on 22 May, 1982, which brought about her demise.

Two Sedge Wrens were seen on the way up to the memorial but little more until we reached Green Ricon where our first stop was to admire about 60 white, fluffy Giant Petrel chicks. The beach below was inviting with lots of loafing Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins so some of the group set off to walk across it while the drivers took our vehicles the long way around.

No sooner had the first shoe touched white sand than those of us left with the vehicles saw Commerson's Dolphins surfing the big rollers. The show continued after we reached the meeting point but to our relief the walkers had spotted them too. It was brilliant. The squat, black and white dolphins were body-surfing, breaching, and doing high looping jumps while swimming at great speed along the waves.

They continued to entertain us through our picnic lunch on the idyllic Green Rincon headland. And for added excitement flocks of Black-browed Albatrosses flew their axial version of Swan Lake and a dark Peregrine mooched around for a short while.

The journey to Marble Point (home of a Rockhopper colony) was broken by a visit to the memorial of seven poor Argentinean souls who died when their Lear spy-jet was shot down from 41,000 ft by a missile during the Conflict.

Rockhopper Penguins are a firm favourite and the big colony did nothing to change that among this group.

Birds were coming to and from the colony, feeding chicks and roaring their 'I'm home' calls at full volume. Venturing to a vantage point we watched the birds hurling themselves ashore, bathing, preening and hopping up the cliff.

Many non-breeding birds were moulting at the cliff-top where Black-browed Albatrosses and Giant Petrels cruised past.

Allan had pointed out two Macaroni Penguins in the colony (our five-in-a-day achieved in just two hours of the afternoon) and I found an immature among those moulting. To his delight a fourth appeared in the colony – a new record for this species on Pebble Island.

A few Gentoo Penguins were also seen swimming ashore there to walk up a steep slope and across the camp to their colonies. Here they were chased by hungry chicks until adult exhausted, the young were fed. This action strengthens the chicks' legs and prepares them for their eventual trek to the sea.

Well satisfied with our day we set off back to the lodge but threw in a visit to another Gentoo colony two miles inland. Here, curiosity went through the birds and a wave marched out to investigate those members of the group who were seated on the ground near the colony. They were endearing and made a fitting finale to our penguin quest. We had seen almost one third of the world's penguin species in an afternoon and four Macaronis as a new record for Pebble.

Our second attempt at star-gazing that evening was a great success. Starting at 10.30pm we were able to see a number of celestial objects including the Magellanic Clouds and Southern Cross (see Heavenly Bodies in the annotated list).

Tuesday 27 January

Pebble Harbour and Carcass Island

Sunny, hot, cool breeze later, 22°C

Late flights messed up the day but we got around the problem by ordering a sandwich lunch which we ate in the tussock near Big Pond after arriving on Carcass Island.

Entertainment on Pebble before we left was provided by the supply ship Concordia Bay which brought a container of goods plus fuel for the farm and lodge.

Nine Black-crowned Night Herons were fishing around the harbour while almost as many Dark-faced Ground Tyrants were enjoying calm warm fly-catching conditions.

The first wave of our group went off to Carcass after walking to Pebble International Airport while the second part of our group had an extra drive with Allen.

Once we were all assembled on Carcass we had a late lunch in the tussock, watching Blackish Cinclodes, Cobb's Wren and Peale's Dolphins while Southern Elephant Seals made rude noises from their kelp pile sunbathing mats.

Several groups were examined – many contained a few large males, each weighing about four tons. We counted more than 100 in a half-mile stretch of beach. The low tide allowed us to find White-rumped and one Baird's Sandpiper and a nearby Kelp Gull colony had many chicks.

Returning to collect our bags we found two Striated Caracaras investigating them. A small female Sea Lion was found close to huge Elephant Seal and we were able to compare the two. Driving to the settlement after our all too brief exploration of the north of Carcass we saw a Southern Crested Caracaras.

More Striated Caracaras were seen around the settlement – mostly juveniles – and little flocks of Black-chinned Siskins were commonplace.

After a delicious dinner of Carcass Island lamb, fruit pie and cheese we went for a walk (much needed judging from the dinner menu... Ed) in the hope of finding Short-eared Owls but with no success.

Wednesday 28 January

Gibraltar Rock reef, West Point Island

Perfect conditions: a light wind, calm seas, warm on land, 17°C

The Concordia Bay had caught up with us and we enjoyed watching a 'sea truck' ferry goods onto Carcass jetty before we boarded the converted trawler Condor for our journey to West Point.

A few Common Diving Petrels were seen as we headed for the Gibraltar (Slipper) Rock reef but things became a little more exciting as we reached overfalls and found flocks of Slender-billed Prions and Black-browed Albatrosses feeding on lobster krill.

The scenery was dramatic behind West Point, a journey which can be done only in perfect weather. Steep cliffs topped with tussock and albatross colonies, deep valleys full of Rockhopper Penguin colonies and fringed with yet more albatrosses, the occasional Sea Lion sleeping off its penguin breakfast – all these sights were common.

Peale's Dolphins had sported around the boat on the way out from Carcass and another pod found us as we nosed gently towards the Devil's Nose, an outcrop we were to visit later. The dolphins put on a show before disappearing.

We saw the rock-shelves which penguins use to leave the sea before hopping along traditional routes up the cliffs. We were to see the very same birds later.

About 20,000 pairs of Albatrosses breed on West Point and we saw each and every colony. Many birds were in flight along the cliffs, others were bathing in the sea after a stint of babysitting. There are even greater numbers of Rockhoppers and we saw many of their huge colonies.

West Point is a towering island and the majestic views we had of its peaks were inspirational. The wildlife spectacle from the boat was brilliant too. Landing at the settlement we were loaned a Land Rover and I drove us all to the colony overlooking the Devil's Nose. Penguins were hopping along their major highway path after a steep climb up the cliff.

But it was the close proximity to nesting albatrosses which stole the show. The Falklands provide a sensational wildlife experience and today among the albies and rockies was one of the best.

It was with sadness we withdrew two hours later but our spirits were lifted by the warm hospitality of Jeanette and Michael Clarke as we had a cuppa, cakes and biscuits in their sitting room. The wildlife fun was not over, however. Michael took the boat close to a shingle beach where scores of Genoo Penguins were hauling out and setting off on the march to their colony.

We had just got our eyes in to the porpoising flocks of penguins leaping out the water towards us when bigger splashes appeared. A third pod of Peale's Dolphins played around the boat for 10 minutes – riding our shock-wave, leaping out of the sea gracefully and doing backward belly-flops disgracefully. The nine smiles of our group might well have stretched to the Moon.

Our crossing back to Carcass was smooth and had a good few bird sightings thrown in. The last albatrosses of the day came to say goodbye, a Common Diving Petrel was seen well and some of us saw a Sooty Shearwater shoot past. It was all over too soon but we were tired, nevertheless.

Tuesday 29 January

Carcass north end, Sea Lion Island

Hot and sunny all day, light NW breeze, 25°C

Dreadful flight timings left four of the group eating sandwiches in the tussock on Carcass while the rest were in their new accommodation on Sea Lion Island. We made the most of it, however, with a walk around Big Pond before flying out. The high tide had forced a Lesser Yellowlegs (the second I have ever seen in the islands) onto the pond to roost and we had good views.

Elephant Seals were in the water, forced off their kelp sun-loungers by the tide, some mock-fighting in preparation for the battles which will occur if they reach adulthood. A Peregrine was seen as we returned to the airstrip.

The group who stayed behind for three hours saw Peale's Dolphins, had Tussockbirds standing on their shoes and Cobb's Wrens collecting crumbs. Those who arrived early on Sea Lion went in search of Short-eared Owls without success. We did see a Queen of the Falklands Fritillary, however.

Finally reunited we all went down to watch the amazing penguin parade – thousands of Gentoo Penguins returning to their colonies after a day at sea. Sadly, we were a little early and things had just started moving when it was time to leave for dinner.

Our second attempt at finding a Short-eared Owl was successful and we enjoyed great views of one bird. After sitting on a post for some time allowing us to get close to it, the bird flew straight at us, rose over our heads and settled on a stone building just behind us. We decided to retire and leave it in peace.

A Peregrine was seen while we were looking for the owl – today's two birds maintained our average of one per day on this trip. After a late call-over we retired to bed with hopes of seeing Orcas in the morning.

Friday 30 January

Island tour and East-end bimble

Sunny, some cloud, NW wind 25kn, 20°C

A 6am start saw us marching to Elephant Corner (after a warming cuppa) to look for Orcas. None appeared but we had an enjoyable time watching the beach soap-opera.

Four Sea Lions caused panic among the Gentoo and Magellanic flocks waiting to go out to sea for the day. Scores of Gentoos fled up the beach while the normally timid Magellanic Penguins merely retreated to the tide-line. The Sea Lions eventually gave up their taunting and swam past us like naughty teenagers. Other highlights included a vast flock of feeding Black-browed Albatrosses, sadly at a long distance and fighting Elephant Seals.

Breakfast was followed by a drive around the island stopping at the major wildlife spots which were explained by Jenny.

We saw about 10 huge bull Sea Lions on their breeding beach, each with a small harem of females. The colony had a crèche of about 20 pups. A nearby beach was interesting for a flock of 40 Dolphin Gulls until we discovered a bull Sea Lion sleeping in the tussock.

We crept up quietly but someone made a sound, the animal reared up, roared at us and made a step or two towards the group. Even though we were 10m away it really caused us all to have a surge of adrenaline. We left the animal to its slumbers (no brain needed for that decision... Ed) and drove up to the Rockhopper Penguin colony.

Jenny went off mushrooming while we walked to the cliff-top above the penguins' landing stage. None was coming in but several hopped down into the sea for a much needed bathe and feed.

Huge numbers of unidentifiable prions were streaming past out at sea, probably Slender-billed, along with quite a few albatrosses.

A huge King Cormorant colony nearby was visited and we were delighted to see about 60 Snowy Sheathbills, our first of the trip (apart from a few distant ones earlier in the morning).

Long Pond was quiet with a few Chiloe Widgeon, Speckled Teal and Silvery Grebes, but the moorland top of the island had many Rufous-chested Dotterels and Two-banded Plovers.

Lunch was followed by a great walk in search of a King Penguin. It took us down to North Beach, along the rocky strand (accompanied by lots of Cobb's Wrens and Tussockbirds) to Cow Point, down to the penguin parade and up into Gentoo Penguin city.

A stunning King Penguin was eventually found and as we sat admiring it a score of Gentoo chicks came over to inspect us. It was a magical encounter. The walk back was hard against an increasing wind but the temptation of cake and afternoon tea got us back.

Saturday 31 January

Go as you please day

Sunny, cool SW wind 25kn, 17°C

Another abortive Orca-watch did bring rewards for the early risers. A dead Magellanic Penguin on Elephant Beach provided breakfast for two Striated Caracara chicks whose parents started the job of butchering the carcass. They alone had the job during the time a photographer was standing near the corpse getting pictures (as did we) of fighting Elephant Seals.

Once he left the task was taken over by a giant petrel which eventually tugged the dead bird into the sea. Its feeding technique was gross but interesting – the petrel stuck its whole head into the cadaver to get to the easy meat. It was soon joined by at least 10 more Giant Petrels and there was much squabbling.

Another group of petrels had gathered 400m away – we could only assume that a Gentoo Penguin had been taken by a Sea Lion.

Hundreds of Black-browed Albatrosses were feeding in tide-races going past the island. Using my telescope we were able to see thousands of prions streaming past, too far away to identify but almost certainly they were largely Slender-billed.

I acted as chauffeur after breakfast dropping folk at the Rockhopper Penguin colony and the Gulch (eventually – I heard that you got lost!... Ed).

People came back with tales of derring-do: Short-eared Owl flying overhead, Silver Teal on Long Pond, a leucistic Two-banded Plover and encounters with Elephant Seals. Some of us walked to the Giant Petrel colony where we counted at least 33 chicks, and onwards to get pictures of huge Elephant Seals basking in the sunshine.

Sunday 1 February

To Stanley and Kidney Island boat trip

Overcast, light wind suddenly increasing pm, showers, 17°C

Orcas proved our only failure of the trip. Elephant Seal numbers on Sea Lion Island were down this year and the world's largest dolphin was not seen despite another 6am vigil. We flew (in dribs and drabs) to Stanley in time for a little shopping before our Kidney Island boat trip.

In what had been a gold-plated tour I was doubtful that the pelagic off Kidney Island would succeed. I was wrong. It proved perfect but for a nasty chop which built up with the wind during the late afternoon. From the moment we left Stanley Sound there were thousands of Sooty Shearwaters in the air plus a few in rafts. One such raft had a Great Shearwater among the Sooties although views were difficult. Three Brown-hooded Gulls were also seen.

Towing a huge block of frozen chum (an idea I had given the skipper Mike Russell) proved a winner and soon numbers of Black-browed Albatrosses built up. Several were immature birds. They were joined by quite a few White-chinned Petrels which were most obliging.

Mike called for a Northern Giant Petrel (there were a few Southern around) but nobody got on to it... a sadness as I had never seen one in the Falklands.

That disappointment was forgotten when I saw a 'white albatross'. The enormous bird came closer and we were able to identify it as a Southern Royal Albatross – a great find. The bird stayed with us for quite a while and on one occasion dropped into a pile of Giant Petrels. As we approached it left but there among them was not one but two Northern Giant Petrels. I was elated and the group seemed to be enjoying things too.

Next up was a Wilson's Storm-petrel, a rare bird in these parts despite said to be the most numerous bird on the planet, found by Correen. By this time Mike was on the bow where he spotted a Slender-billed Prion which gave us exceptional views.

With five rare birds in the bag I decided we should seek shelter from the uncomfortable swell and we headed for Kidney Island. Sadly conditions there were little better and I asked Mike to take us around the back where there would be shelter.

This improved the lot of those who were looking a little green and we gathered our spirits before coming out into rougher water, but with the wind behind making life easier. There were still thousands of Sooty Shearwaters milling around but we slipped down close to cliffs on which Rockhopper Penguins were coming ashore.

They almost flew out of the tops of waves and hurriedly clawed their way up the rock-faced cliff out of the reach of waves. Then started the trek up into the colony. It was not all Rockhoppers, however. With a bit of guidance we were all able to see a pair of Macaroni Penguins at the summit of the cliff, nesting among the Rockies.

Having said our farewells to the most charismatic of penguins we returned to Stanley. Nobody had been ill although it was a close call for a few. We all agreed, however, that the trip and its sights – six rare Falklands birds – had been wonderful.

Monday 2 February

Volunteer Point and 700 Kings

Sunny, 5/10 cloud, cold wind, occasional showers, 11°C

An 8am start saw us on the three hour trip to Volunteer Point – the second half over raw moorland terrain.

Views of East Falkland were terrific but only a few Variable Hawks, Falklands Pipits and a moulting King Penguin made the bird list. Lots of Commerson's Dolphins were feeding in an inlet.

Once we were at the King Penguin colony things changed – the birds were terrific; some fed chicks tucked in a pouch over their feet, males brayed their delightful (in penguin terms) love songs, and there was even one of last year's 'buzbie babes' covered in brown fluff. Many of the penguins had chicks nestled between their feet, covered to protect them from the cool wind by a warm flap of skin.

The stunning half-mile white-sand beach with its rollers creaming in from an aquamarine bay was littered with Magellanic, Gentoo and King Penguins. Some were moulting or asleep on their bellies but most slowly shuffled up towards their colonies on the sandy plain 50ft up a slope.

Four large male Peale's Dolphins were in the bay, their falcate fins slicing through the surface. Albatrosses, thousands of King Cormorants and a few Brown-hooded Gulls were feeding over the kelp beds.

We were pleased to receive a message that the aircraft taking us home had left for the islands despite heavy snow in the UK arriving in the Falklands on time.

After a picnic lunch we left for the long drive back to Stanley (15 miles as the crow flies, 54 by our route). There some went around the museum while others finished the souvenir shopping. We had a drink during our final call-over voting Rockhopper Penguin as bird of the trip while Sea Lion topped the mammal list.

Runners up were: 2nd King Penguin, 3rd Royal Albatross, 4th equal Long-tailed Meadowlark, Short-eared Owl, Cobb's Wren, Striated Caracara and Black-browed Albatross; mammals: 2nd equal Commerson's and Peale's Dolphins.

Tuesday 3 February

To Ascension and home

Overcast, cool wind, 9°C

Our 6am departure for the one-hour bus drive gave us a final opportunity to spot Falklands Steamerduck, Upland Goose, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Crested Caracara, Variable Hawk, Kelp Gull, House Sparrow and our aircraft on the apron at Mount Pleasant Airport. We left on time despite more tales of heavy snow back home, arriving on time at Brize Norton which was covered in 3in of snow.

I enjoyed leading this tour which was quite outstanding even by our high standards set over 20 years. Thanks to everyone for making my job easy. I can end this report best by quoting one group member who came down despite having only a passing interest in wildlife:

"I came to see nothing in particular. Everything has been wonderful: the wildlife, scenery, history, local people we met, added together to make this a most memorable trip."

Tim Earl

Guernsey, March 2009

Annotated list of species

ASCENSION ISLAND

BIRDS

FRIGATEBIRDS

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Ascension Island Frigatebird | Fregata aquila |
|---|------------------------------|----------------|

Fregatidae

Good views of about five from the cage.

GULLS, TERNS, SKIMMERS

- | | | |
|---|------------|----------------|
| 2 | Sooty Tern | Sterna fuscata |
|---|------------|----------------|

Laridae

About 50 on their way to the Ascension Island colony.

STARLINGS

- | | | |
|---|-------------|----------------------|
| 3 | Common Myna | Acridotheres tristis |
|---|-------------|----------------------|

Sternidae

About four in total.

FINCHES

- | | | |
|---|---------------|----------------------|
| 4 | Yellow Canary | Serinus flaviventris |
|---|---------------|----------------------|

Fringillidae

A couple seen from the cage.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

BIRDS

WILDFOWL

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Black-necked Swan | Cygnus melanocoryphus |
| 2 | Falkland Steamer Duck | Tachyeres brachypterus |
| 3 | Upland Goose | Chloephaga picta |
| 4 | Kelp Goose | Chloephaga hybrida |
| 5 | Ruddy-headed Goose | Chloephaga rubidiceps |
| 6 | Crested Duck | Lophonetta specularioides |
| 7 | Chiloe Wigeon | Anas sibilatrix |
| 8 | Red Shoveler | Anas platalea |
| 9 | Speckled Teal | Anas flavirostris |
| 10 | Yellow-billed Pintail | Anas georgica |
| 11 | Silver Teal | Anas versicolor |

Anatidae

One hundred on our way to Darwin; a pair with two cygnets on Swan Inlet; 20 with four cygnets on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.

Common on the sea around all the islands.

Common around the islands.

Common in coastal areas.

Seen commonly with Upland Geese.

Common around the islands.

Fairly common, a few seen each day.

A pair on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.

Common around the islands.

About nine birds with five ducklings on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.

Nine on Bett's Pond; several on Long Pond, Sea Lion Island.

PENGUINS		Spheniscidae
12 King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>	The colony at Volunteer Point, which had one furry brown youngster, was a highlight of the tour; a few birds seen moulting in Gentoo colonies on Pebble.
13 Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	Colonies on Pebble and Sea Lion and at Volunteer Point.
14 Rockhopper Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	Colonies on Pebble, Sea Lion and Kidney Islands.
15 Macaroni Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysolophus</i>	A pair and two singles on Pebble Island, two on Kidney Island.
16 Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Common in suitable habitats on all islands.
ALBATROSSES		Diomedidae
17 Royal albatross	<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>	One, possibly two, on the pelagic trip out of Stanley, a highlight of the tour.
18 Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophrys</i>	Many birds were seen at sea around the islands with at least 20,000 on West Point Island.
PETRELS & SHEARWATERS		Family Procellariidae
19 Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Common at sea around the islands, colonies on Pebble and Sea Lion.
20 Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>	Two on the pelagic trip out of Port Stanley: the first recorded on this tour.
21 Antarctic (Dove) Prion	<i>Pachyptila desolata</i>	Two on the trip to West Point; one identified from a picture taken on the Stanley pelagic.
22 Slender-billed Prion	<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	Two on our trip to West Point; large numbers from Sea Lion Island.
23 White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	One on the trip to West Point; 10 on our Stanley pelagic trip.
24 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.
25 Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>	One on the Stanley pelagic.
STORM PETRELS		Hydrobatidae
26 Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	One on the Port Stanley pelagic trip.
DIVING PETRELS		Pelecanoididae
27 Common Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>	About seven on our way to West Point.
GREBES		Podicipedidae
28 White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>	Eleven and a chick on Pebble Island.
29 Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>	A few on Pebble and up to 20 plus chicks on Sea Lion.
HERONS, BITTERNES		Ardeidae
30 Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Common at most settlements.
CORMORANTS		Phalacrocoracidae
31 Rock Shag	<i>Leucocarbo magellanicus</i>	Seen daily with a few colonies here and there.
32 Imperial Shag	<i>Leucocarbo atriceps</i>	Common out at sea with colonies on Pebble and Sea Lion.
NEW WORLD VULTURES		Cathartidae
33 Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Common on all the islands.
FALCONS, CARACARAS		Falconidae
34 Striated Caracara	<i>Phalco boenus australis</i>	Common on Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion.
35 Southern Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	two on Carcass, one on Sea Lion.
36 Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Almost daily with eight sightings.
KITES, HAWKS, EAGLES		Accipitridae
37 Variable Hawk	<i>Buteo polyosoma</i>	Several seen on East Falklands – Darwin and the Volunteer Point excursion.
SHEATHBILLS & ALLIES		Chionidae
38 Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis albus</i>	Amazingly, seen only on Sea Lion – 60 at the King Cormorant colony.
OYSTERCATCHERS		Haematopidae
39 Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>	Common throughout.
40 Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>	Common on beaches.
PLOVERS		Charadriidae
41 Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>	Common throughout.
42 Rufous-chested Plover	<i>Charadrius modestus</i>	Common on Pebble and Sea Lion islands; a few at Darwin and Volunteer Point.

SANDPIPERS, SNIPES

- 43 South American Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiae*
- 44 Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*
- 45 White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*
- 46 Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*

GULLS, TERNS, SKIMMERS

- 47 Dolphin Gull *Leucophaeus scoresbii*
- 48 Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*
- 49 Brown-hooded Gull *Larus maculipennis*
- 50 South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea*

SKUAS

- 51 Brown (Subantarctic) Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*

TYPICAL OWLS

- 52 Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

- 53 Dark-faced Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola maclovianus*

OVENBIRDS

- 54 Blackish Cinclodes *Cinclodes antarcticus*

WRENS

- 55 Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis*
- 56 Cobb's Wren *Troglodytes cobbi*

THRUSHES

- 57 Austral Thrush *Turdus falcklandii*

OLD WORLD SPARROWS *Passeridae*

- 58 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

WAGTAILS & PIPITS

- 59 Correndera Pipit *Anthus correndera*

FINCHES

- 60 Black-chinned Siskin *Carduelis barbata*

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS

- 61 Long-tailed Meadowlark *Sturnella loyca*

BUNTINGS & NEW WORLD SPARROWS

- 62 White-bridled Finch *Melanodera melanodera*

MAMMALS

RABBITS & HARES

- 1 European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

CATS

- 2 Wild Cat *Felis silvestris*

EARED SEALS

- 3 South American Sea-Lion *Otaria flavescens*

EARLESS SEALS

- 4 Southern Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonina*

MARINE DOLPHINS

- 5 Peale's Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus australis*
- 6 Commerson's Dolphin *Cephalorhynchus commersonii*

FLUTS AND MOTHS

- 1 Queen of the Falklands *Yramea cytheris* One at Cow Point, Sea Lion; one at the picnic on Pebble Island.
- 2 Brocade moth *Pareuxonia falclandica* Common on heathland throughout the trip.
- 3 Ochre Shoulder Moth *Caphornia ochricraspia* Common on heathland throughout the trip.

Scolopacidae

- Common throughout.
- One on Big Pond, Carcass.
- Common on beaches, a few inland.
- One on Carcass Island.

Laridae

- A few around seabird colonies.
- Common throughout.
- Quite common in coastal areas.
- Common all around the coasts.

Stercorariidae

- Common throughout.

Strigidae

- Three sightings on Sea Lion Island.

Tyrannidae

- A few here and there.

Furnariidae

- Common on rat and cat-free islands: Carcass and Sea Lion.

Troglodytidae

- Common in tussock and marshy areas.
- Common on rat and cat-free island beaches: Carcass and Sea Lion.

Turdidae

- Common throughout.

- A few in Darwin and Port Stanley.

Motacillidae

- Common throughout.

Fringillidae

- Common throughout.

Icteridae

- Common throughout, but absent from Sea Lion Island.

Emberizidae

- Common throughout.

Leporidae

- A few on East Falkland.

Felidae

- Common on Pebble Island.

Otariidae

- Some with Elephant Seals; a colony of 10 beachmaster males, 20 females and pups on Sea Lion Island.

Phocidae

- Many moulting animals on Carcass but fewer than normal on Sea Lion.

Delphinidae

- Seen mostly from the boat to West Point but also inshore on Carcass Island.
- Seen on the boat trip to West Point on the Stanley pelagic trip.

OTHER TAXA

1	Metalic beetle	Metius blandus	Common in houses and baths.
2	Eight-spotted Ladybird	Coccinella 8 punctata	One or two found on Pebble and Sea Lion.
3	Green Spider	Araneus cinnabarinus	One in the conservatory on Pebble.
4	Amphipod sp		This common shrimp-like marine crustacean was found on the beaches but also under stones a long way from the sea, for example at the Rockhopper colony on Sea Lion.
5	Lobster Krill	Munida gregaria	Huge numbers washed up on the beaches around Darwin, inches deep in places.
6	Octopus	Octopus sp	Five found dismembered on the beach at Darwin.

HEAVENLY BODIES

1	Orion: Rigel, Betelgeux, the Orion Nebula	All the bodies below were seen from
2	Crux, the Southern Cross	Pebble late in the evening.
3	The Coalsack and Jewelbox, seen close to Crux	
4	Large and Small Magellenic Clouds	
5	Mars	
6	The Milky Way	
7	Sirius (the brightest star in the sky)	
8	Pleiades (Seven Sisters)	
9	Venus	
10	The Moon rising	

From Stargazing by Patrick Moore: "Rigel is a true celestial searchlight. It is so remote that it takes its light around 900 years to reach us, so that we are now seeing it as it used to be in the time of William the Conqueror. Yet even at this immense distance Rigel still appears as the seventh brightest star in the sky; its true luminosity is 60,000 times that of the Sun.

"It is hard to appreciate the amount of energy being radiated by this titanic star. The Sun is a glow-worm by comparison; were Rigel as close, say, as Sirius it would be visible in broad daylight, and even at 900 light-years – well over 5,000 million, million miles – it is still striking. It is pure white and because it is so energetic its lifetime will be much shorter than that of our Sun.

"Betelgeux is completely different; it is a huge red supergiant with a diameter of 250 million miles, large enough to swallow up the whole of the Earth's orbit around the Sun. Like so many red stars betelgeux is variable with a very rough period of about five years. Sometimes it almost equals rigel while at others it is little brighter than Aldebaron in the Bull."

PLANTS SEEN ON THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

(With thanks to Sheila Stead from the first group for compiling this list.)

Astelia (soft camp-bog)	Almond Flower
Arrow-leaved Marigold	Field Mouse-ear
Balsam Bog	Prickly Burr
Wild Celery	Falkland Thrift
Diddle-dee	Common Violet
Buttonweed	Water-milfoil (Pond weed)
Christmas Bush	Scurvy Grass
Sea Cabbage	Monterey Cypress
Marsh Daisy	Cinnamon Grass
Fachine	Marram Grass
Groundsel	Tussac Grass
Antarctic Hawkweed	White Grass
Orange Hawkweed	Native Woodrush
Coastal Nassauvia	Short Rush
Sheep's Sorrel	Tall Rush
Boxwood	Tall Fern
Pig Vine	Small Fern
Gorse	

