

Falkland Islands

Wednesday 6 – Wednesday 20 January 2010

Principal leader: Tim Earl

Local support: Tour: Arlette Bloomfield
Sea Lion Island: Jenny Luxton.
Pebble Island: Allan White
Carcass Island: Rob McGill
West Point Island Michael and Jeanette Clark
Malvina House Hotel: Carl Stroud

The worst winter in 25 years delayed our departure to the Falklands by two days, a disappointing start to an otherwise fabulous wildlife encounter. The RAF at Brize Norton looked after us well – we were comfortable and well fed despite their difficulties. A poor spring had developed into a cold, wet summer in the Falklands but we escaped the worst of the weather in the South Atlantic by being on offshore islands (particularly Sea Lion which was delightful while Port Stanley had torrential rain).

We greatly enjoyed our up-close encounters with so much fearless wildlife – not just penguins as expected, but most of the animals and birds were brilliantly approachable.

The group came together in adversity and enjoyed the trip in each other's company. I hope to travel with everyone again one day.

Highlights

- 1 The Gentoo 'Penguin Parade' on Sea Lion Island in wonderful light.
- 2 Six Orcas early on our first morning in the islands.
- 3 Birthing dramas in the Sea Lion colony.
- 4 A Peregrine killing and eating a Two-banded Plover.
- 5 A mixed Rockhopper and King Cormorant colony which had an albino Rockie.
- 6 The collection of birds around a dead sheep were similar to a Lion-kill in Kenya.
- 7 Black-necked Swans with big cygnets on their backs.
- 8 Silvery and White-tufted Grebes on Big Pond, Pebble Island.
- 9 Rockhoppers coming in and out of the sea.
- 10 The scenery at the west end of Pebble Island.
- 11 Hearing about the events of the Falklands War and visiting memorials.
- 12 Exploring Shedder Pond Beach and finding the remains of a Sei Whale.
- 13 Commerson's and Peale's Dolphins from the land and around the boat.
- 14 Lorraine McGill's account of life in the Falklands.
- 15 The rough sea trip to West Point Island which was great for birds and as an experience (for most!).
- 16 Shearwaters and Petrels on the second boat trip.
- 17 Watching life in the King Penguin colony.
- 18 Crossing 22 miles of wet, boggy moorland without getting stuck.
- 19 Seeing Eurofighter Typhoon jets positioned off Air Tahiti Nui's 'daisy-logo' wing-tips on landing and after take-off from the Falkland Islands.

Bird of the trip (by vote and tied): Penguins generally and Striated Caracara.

Mammal of the trip (by vote and tied): Dolphins generally and Southern Elephant Seal.

DAILY DIARY

Wednesday 6 to Friday 8 January

Brize Norton, Oxford and finally Birmingham

Snow and ice, cool light breeze, -17°C to -3°C

We met, most of us early, at Brize Norton for a long wait as Britain was gripped in one of its coldest winter snaps for 25 years.

The group showed great fortitude and patience as successive ‘estimated times of departure’ came and went. One night (in some cases two) was spent at the Gateway Hotel on the Brize Norton airbase, another in hotels outside Oxford and, finally, 47.5 hours late, we took off from Birmingham airport for Ascension and the Falkland Islands.

Birds seen during our delayed departure are listed at the end of this report.

Saturday 9 January

Ascension Island, 7am to 8:30am

Sunny, some cloud, increasing breeze, +24°C

An uneventful flight dropped into Ascension Island just after daybreak. A little birding was done producing (distant) views of about 15 Ascension Frigatebirds, a few Common Mynas and a lone Masked Booby.

Refreshments, souvenir-shopping, collection of special passport stamps and chatting, saw the time pass easily before we took off again heading for the Falkland Islands.

Mount Pleasant airbase and Sea Lion Island, Falkland Islands 2.30pm

MPA: Thunderstorm / rain. SLI: bright, sunny, light breeze +17°C

At last we arrived in the Falklands (our airbus was struck by lightning as we were on final approach!) and after a few delays flew in two FIGAS Islander aircraft for Sea Lion Island.

We were amazed at the view from the lodge bar which looks out over several rookeries of a Gentoo Penguin colony. Giant Petrels were quartering the landscape accompanied by Brown Skuas and the occasional Dolphin Gull.

A walk to watch the start of the daily ‘Penguin Parade’ put on by Gentoos returning to their rookeries late in the afternoon threw everyone into a state of enchantment.

Many of the islands’ more common birds were seen with South American Snipe, Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese, Blackish Cinclodes (Tussock-birds) being the most notable. South American Terns were flying over frequently, all heading towards the west end of the island.

A few small flocks of White-rumped Sandpipers were seen distantly – Mike investigated and found many Two-banded Plovers among them. Time was short, however, and we were forced back to the lodge for a delicious supper.

The light afterwards was wonderful and, despite tiredness, we went out to search for Short-eared Owls and Orcas, with no success.

Elephant Corner had quite a few Elephant Seals and one sleeping juvenile Sea Lion on its white sand. Our first Falklands Flightless Steamer-ducks and a cute family of Crested Ducks were enjoyed. A second Sea Lion appeared in the sea and we returned to owl-searching to leave him in peace. Snipe were ‘drumming’ overhead as we returned to the lodge.

All things considered, it was clear that we had arrived in a special place and the tribulations of terrible travel travails had been worth putting up with.

Sunday 10 January

Orcas and birthing, Sea Lion Island

Clear and sunny becoming overcast with a strengthening wind 19°C down to 12°C

The hope of seeing Orcas got us out of bed for a cuppa and walk down to Elephant Corner at 5.45am. It was a worthwhile exercise for soon after our arrival three female Orcas, each with a large offspring, appeared off the beach. They came along in front of us hunting for baby Elephant Seals and penguins. Tension was high with

some Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins racing backwards and forwards trapped between the Orcas and the beach-head. After 20 minutes unsuccessful hunting, the world's largest dolphin headed off westwards leaving us elated.

We returned to our former activity – admiring a Sea Lion which was sleeping in the tussock behind us. He was being pestered by a Striated Caracara which left after an intimate investigation of the huge animal. So did we – to the lodge for breakfast which was followed by a tour of the island with Jenny Luxton. We counted 13 newborn Sea Lions beneath Loafers Cliff, watched Rockhopper Penguins come out of the sea at a spot once filmed for a David Attenborough documentary, and saw several Snowy Sheathbills – the only land-birds to nest on Antarctica.

'Smoko' was enjoyed back at the lodge (traditional elevenses of tea/coffee and cake) before we walked to Cow Point with Yellow Violets and Queen of the Falklands Fritillaries in mind, all seen successfully.

Jenny gave us a lift to Long Pond at 1.30pm and we took the afternoon to walk back to the lodge.

Silvery Grebes and Silver Teal were admired on the pond but the afternoon's highlight was the drama of a new birth in the Sea Lion colony.

A female was guarding her minutes-old pup while hungry Giant Petrels, Dolphin Gulls and a Striated Caracara attempted to steal the afterbirth.

She believed that they were after her pup and fended them off but in so doing the female prevented the baby from suckling. A stalemate ensued with the scavengers attempting theft, the female warding them off, and the pup getting nothing.

And, as if all this was not fascinating enough, the big bull beach-master decided that the time was right to make next year's babies with one of his doting females. We were getting cold in the increasing wind by this time and left hoping that the newborn pup would soon get a feed.

Jenny suggested a trip out to the Rockhopper colony after dinner. A huge number of King Cormorants had joined the penguins at the cliff top – some even dropped in at our feet as we watched the spectacle.

Monday 11 January

Farewell Sea Lion Island and an introduction to Pebble Island

An increasing wind, high cloud, cool 14°C

Our 6am visit to Elephant Corner produced no Orcas but we were greeted by the sight of several pairs of male Elephant Seals sparring. The beach look like Weymouth Sands in a sunny summer but instead of people Gentoo and Magellanic penguins were spreading their towels!

Some of us watched an aircraft coming to collect our heavy bags after breakfast: we were to fly out two hours later all in one plane to Pebble Island. (This was due to friends in high places as we were originally scheduled to spend a couple of hours in Stanley airport on the way.)

In the interim we walked to the Neck looking for wintering White-rumped Sandpipers. A good flock was found keeping company with Two-banded Plovers: two species whose breeding ranges were 12,000 miles apart. White-rumps breed in Arctic Canada, the plovers on Sea Lion Island.

The flock suddenly lifted and flew past us in great haste. Behind us, a Peregrine had swooped from the sun and snatched a plover. In the time it took us to turn around the bird had perched on a tussock and was plucking and eating its prey.

Our 35-minute flight was uneventful and we arrived at Pebble Lodge in time for an excellent lunch.

The afternoon was spent around Big Pond where a White-winged Coot had been seen, and on Elephant (Five-mile) Beach.

White-tufted Grebes were common on the pond and quite fearless. The same could not be said of 10 Black-necked Swans which kept their distance. Each adult of one pair had a well grown cygnet on its back. There was no sign of the Coot, however.

Long-tailed Meadowlarks, known in the islands as Military Starlings due to the males' bright red breasts, were seen in small numbers. A dead Pilot Whale was found on the beach. It had been washed up or stranded about 10 months earlier.

We returned for a cuppa before showering. A delicious dinner rounded off the day nicely.

Tuesday 12 January

Pebble's wildfowl ponds and Tamar Point

Sunny, some cloud increasing later, stiff breeze 14°C

An early morning walk to Elephant Beach was a great start to the day. We had no wind, sunshine and gin-clear air. A few Long-tailed Meadowlarks showed little interest in us and we reach the beach relatively birdless.

The surf and tide were up and we spent much time looking for dolphins without luck. Desiccated carcasses of a Fur Seal and Leopard Seal were examined: both had been found by Allan White during the winter. He was keen to have the skulls once Nature had taken her course.

A feral cat was seen hunting along the seashore, happily without success on this occasion, but we were reminded why the island has no Cobb's Wrens or Tussock-birds.

We set off in convoy to explore the eastern end of the island after breakfast.

Elephant Beach had a goodly flock of White-rumped Sandpipers but the first lake (Quark Pond) had only a few Upland Geese and Speckled Teal.

Bett's Pond came up trumps, however, with four Black-necked Swans, three Silver Teal and at least five Silvery Grebes. (A pair of Yellow-billed Pintails was on the pond as we returned in the afternoon.)

Ten Sea Lions were hauled out sunning themselves at Tamar Point where we enjoyed a picnic smoko.

Proceeding onwards to the Tamar Peninsular we stopped at a huge mixed colony of Rockhopper Penguins and King Cormorants. Here we were delighted to see an albino Rockhopper, a rare creature indeed! An Australian professor had told Allan that they were "one-in-a-million" birds and he'd never seen one. A hoped-for Macaroni Penguin was out at sea fishing.

A stop at a huge twin-lobed Gentoo Penguin colony revealed a King Penguin in its midst. The bird was standing head and shoulders above the others and looked as if it was holding court.

The vehicles circled around a dead sheep like minibuses at a Lion-kill for us to watch Kelp Gulls (small), Turkey Vultures (medium) and Giant Petrels (huge) rip bits off it. A female Red-backed (Variable) Hawk watched from afar but did not attempt to join the melee.

Allan found a pair of Flying Steamerducks with five ducklings, a good breeding record for the Falkland Islands. A search of Big Pond for the elusive White-winged Coot was again fruitless.

Our day out in the remote areas of a huge island we had to ourselves was wonderful – stunning seascapes breathtaking views, brilliant light for birding and photography, and fearless, approachable wildlife left us deeply contented.

Wednesday 13 January

A day in the West End: Penguins galore

Overcast with occasional showers and strong wind 11°C

We experienced mixed fortunes today with bad weather and little luck with some hoped-fors but good encounters on others.

An early morning drive to Big Pond and Elephant Beach failed to connect us with the Coot or dolphins.

Plenty of old favourites were seen, however, including Black-necked Swans, White-tufted and Silvery Grebes and an odd sand weevil which turned out to be Rove Beetles in their hundreds.

The day's main excursion along the west end of Pebble started at the HMS Coventry memorial where we learned in detail of her fate and paid our respects. Allan's account was both fascinating and moving.

A male Variable Hawk was found by Cynthia sheltering in the lee of a Large Fern clump.

Middle Mountain hosts a peripatetic Gentoo Penguin colony which was being graced by a royal visitor this year – a beautiful King Penguin was in splendid isolation in the middle of the rookery.

We had lunch at Marble Bay where polished pebbles after which the island is named were hunted. Allan found a lovely opaque stone which is much prized.

The Rockhopper colony near Marble Bay is famous for its vagrant visitors but sadly three breeding Macaroni Penguins seen there regularly were out at sea. It made little difference to the spectacle, however, which was stunning.

Huge numbers of birds were coming in from the sea, leaping out of the water and landing violently on rocks as if made of rubber. They then hopped, both feet together, up a steep 75m-cliff and marched like drilled troops to the colony.

Once there they reunited with their chicks and fed them, all the while being watched by marauding skuas and gulls.

Moving on to a beautiful headland, Green Rincon, where in better weather we had hoped to have lunch, we saw Commerson's Dolphins in the clear blue water. We gasped at the speed of Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins 'flying' underwater to emerge from the waves running up the beach.

The clouds were breaking as we reached the lodge but wind speeds were still ominously high – would we be able to fly to Carcass Island in the morning and could forecast rain prevented us from exploring its north coast?

Thursday 14 January

Dolphin Day: Pebble Island and Carcass Island

Sunny, becoming 'greasy', cold west wind dropping 13°C

Our third attempt at finding Commerson's Dolphins off Elephant Beach was an outstanding success. We saw a few cross the bay and after a 2km walk we reached a group of three loose pods totaling at least 25 animals. They were all between 10m and 100m out and entertained us for about 25 minutes.

During that time the dolphins performed every manoeuvre in the textbooks: leaping, breaching, rolling, logging (lying on the surface) and large group activity (mock fighting or possibly copulation). Many came close to where we were watching them, one even 'spy-hopping' (lying bolt upright with its head out of the water) to get a better view of us! Contact with these wonderful animals was yet another highlight of this tour. We yomped back to the lodge after cutting through the sand dunes at Big Pond, checking out the Black-necked Swans, Chiloe Wigeon, White-tufted and Silvery Grebes.

Our two flights to Carcass were scheduled for late morning and between packing luggage into the Land Rover and flying out, Allan gave us an amazing talk about the SAS raid on Pebble Island, the first land action of the Falklands War.

I had phoned a request for sandwiches to Lorraine and Rob on Carcass Ireland and a big picnic box was waiting for us on arrival.

We went down to the tussock east of Shedder Pond and explored the beach. By far the biggest find was the skeleton of a Sie Whale washed up dead last May. More than 800 Giant Petrels had stripped the carcass, Rob told us, and were unable to fly afterwards due to the weight of their meals!

The animal was 54 feet long and, despite being reduced to mainly bare bones by birds, we were still able to examine its baleen plates – the sieves used to filter krill from mouthfuls of seawater. It was odd to think that our grandmothers wore corsets made out of baleen.

There were many Elephant Seals on the beaches and it was while counting them that I noticed a pod of Commerson's Dolphins, the second group that day.

We returned to the tussock for picnic lunches which for me was followed by an investigation of the inside of my hat while lying in a horizontal position making Zzz noises. A Striated Caracara was encouraged to eat bits of sandwich placed on my boot as I snoozed! Some in the group hoped it would eat me – poor bird.

We walked around the headland in the opposite direction and were amazed, once again, at the number and variety of the islands' approachable wildlife. At one point the group was tightly sandwiched between sleeping Elephant Seals and a Striated Caracara nest complete with complaining residents.

A second group of three dolphins, this time Peale's, proved quite difficult to watch so unpredictable were their movements.

I drove us back to a settlement and we had tea and cakes before exploring the local beach and jetty. A Black-crowned Night-heron's nest was admired before we returned from a shower and delicious dinner. The poor old leader's scope was rescued by Katrina after he left it at the jetty.

Friday 15 January

Carcass Island: North-west Point and Leopard Beach

Sunny, becoming overcast as a cool or westerly breeze got up 12°C

We awoke to a beautiful day – most went out exploring before breakfast. At least 15 Black-crowned Night-herons were found near the jetty.

Our trip out to North-west Point involve crossing the island in a Land Rover borrowed from Rob. This we parked at the western end of the furthest airstrip.

Our walk went out along the west side of the peninsular. Falklands' tradition was kept with a KitKat smoko at 11.15am. By this time we were immersed in sights of the wildlife: sleeping Elephant Seals, Tussock-birds, Striated Caracaras, Sedge and Cobb's wrens. In fact, we counted more than 200 Elephant Seals on the peninsular, found two Striated Caracara nests and a clutch of Kelp Goose eggs.

Squadrons of Imperial Cormorants were flying over in V-formation going to (and later from) their feeding grounds. We also watched a least three Peale's Dolphins that spent most of the late morning to the west of the peninsular.

Lunch was eaten (by us and a Striated Caracara) at the point. We got off lightly – Blackish Oystercatchers mobbed the poor caracara every time it took offerings of tuna and turkey to its chicks.

Big drama came in the form of a Magellanic Penguin which had fallen into a stinking, oily peat-pit used as a wallow by the Elephant Seals. The unfortunate bird could not get out so we mounted a rescue operation. I fished it out using my tripod legs as a scoop (they stank afterwards despite a wash in the sea). Mike shepherded the all-black bird through the tussock to the beachhead, using his tripod, which also stank of seal dung afterwards.

The penguin was pathetic and we looked for something in which to carry it to the sea. Christine had a carrier bag and we put the bird in. It was thus airlifted to the sea where it popped in the water and later bathed. Its ablutions were perfunctory, however, after which the penguin headed back up the beach, still covered in black slime. We will never know its fate but at least we had tried to help.

After a cuppa back at the settlement we set off on the long walk to Leopard Beach which was packed tightly with Gentoo and Magellanic penguins.

A pair of Red-backed Hawks was seen on the walk out, the male distantly over East End Hill. His mate perched on the ground in front of us and took off after posing to give a super 'fly-past' views.

Penguins were watched for some time, porpoising in to the beach and rushing out of the water nervously in the case of the Gentoos. Magellanics were milling around on the beach and in the sea – many appeared to be juveniles. A family of Crested Ducks, which included three adults, was watched while I checked out the nearby Gentoo colony and pond.

Our walk back was easier than expected but we all arrived tired after the five-mile yomp feeling that our delicious fish supper had been well earned.

Saturday 16 January

West Point Island – albatrosses and a bumpy boat trip

Weather poor: heavy showers, strong, cold NW wind 8°C (felt lower)

What was to be one of our best days turned out to be a little disappointing, despite a good pelagic boat trip. The day started beautifully with a lovely sunrise. It had clouded over by breakfast with the first rain storm just after we set off on Condor, Michael Clark's converted fishing boat. Sadly the rain brought wind and although this was good for birdwatching it made conditions uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, we were pleased to see the first of many Black-browed Albatrosses, swiftly followed by good sightings of Diving Petrels. These were plentiful this year and we enjoyed seeing them in flight, little wings a blur, and once or twice settled on the water. Sooty Shearwaters and Slender-build Prions started appearing as we passed Gibraltar Rock by which time the over-falls were quite exciting.

We turned back and were pleased to reach the relative shelter of West Point Island where we nosed under the Devil's Nose cliff. This held the albatross colony we were to visit in the afternoon.

Dolphins featured greatly during the day with several pods of Commerson's racing to ride our bow wave on the way to and at the tide race. Two Peale's also put in an appearance. More Commerson's joined us behind West Point and escorted us into the natural harbour – seven were behind the boat as we berthed at the jetty.

A group of 12 Sea Lions, probably adolescents, were sporting in waves at the base of the cliff, stopping to watch us anxiously with their doleful eyes. We were amazed to see how high up the cliffs the colonies of Rockhopper Penguins were nesting, presumably to escape the reaches of hungry Sea Lions.

Some penguin colonies were mixed with nesting albatrosses as was the case with the colony we visited after landing. Jeanette and Michael Clark hosted smoko and offered their warm dining room to us for a picnic lunch. Michael also made a Land Rover available for us to drive up to the Devil's Nose, a boon as the weather turned filthy on arrival and we could use it as a shelter. As it was, we were forced to beat a retreat after an hour.

The chicks were wet and bedraggled while many of the adult albatrosses and Rockhoppers were splattered with mud... hardly photogenic. It was a disappointing visit to what is normally a pristine and adsorbing colony.

Two Peale's Dolphins raced to escort us into Carcass Harbour after we crossed the channel between the two islands and Michael kindly did a couple of circuits of the bay so that we could enjoy them fully.

Amazingly, the skies cleared after dinner and several of us stayed up until 10.30pm to do a bit of star-gazing, only to find that cloud had returned on dusk. Bah!

Sunday 17 January

To Stanley and Kidney Island

Occasional sun, cold NW wind 11°C

A Red-backed Hawk grabbed people's attention before breakfast but neither it nor its fledged youngster would be photographed later. Instead, we set off for Shedder Pond and a final look at Elephant Seals via another hair-raising drive up over The Saddle, around the 'wall-of-death', down the other side, across a stone-run and finally coming face-to-horns with the island's bull.

We saw plenty of ducks and geese on the pond all of which were now familiar Falklands' friends. A pair of Brown Skuas were protecting two recently-hatched coffee-coloured chicks, charming now but we knew what penguin pests they would grow up to be.

After saying our farewells to the seals, dolphins and Striated Caracaras, Cobb's wrens and White-rumped Sandpipers we returned to the Land Rover for a final drive (or walk for some) to the airstrip.

The one-hour flight to Port Stanley was fascinating as we flew over west Falkland and then along the route (roughly) taken by British forces when they yomped 80 miles to recapture the islands' capital in 1982. Arlette Bloomfield met us and took us down to the Malvina Hotel for lunch followed by free time for shopping and sightseeing.

We left the port on a fast launch at 3.30pm and were soon off Cape Pembroke lighthouse 'chumming' to attract seabirds.

This was amazingly successful for some species – we saw more Great Shearwaters on this trip than on all previous trips put together. Often we see none. White-chinned Petrels were attracted and many Sooty Shearwaters zoomed past us flashing their silvery underwings. Albatrosses failed to show up, however, possibly because the fishing fleet was providing better pickings. It was the first time in several years that we had failed to attract them in ny numbers.

The cold NW wind was making life a little uncomfortable and we turned around and headed for Kidney Island. The wind was not in a good direction for the cliff and its Rockhopper Penguin colony and we could barely make out a Macaroni Penguin among the Rockies.

However, in the shelter of its tussock we were greeted by our last Tussock-birds which flew out to inspect us. Two bull Sea Lions were hauled out on the beach taking no notice of us at all. South American Terns were flying into wind as they searched the kelp beds for fish fry, and a Black-crowned Night-heron flew the length of the beach. A Gentoo colony was spotted on the mainland a few hundred metres away.

We called in to Gypsy Cove, a popular spot with walkers from Stanley and also Magellanic Penguins. We watched people on an observation trail watching penguins on the beach which were watching us motor gently past. Our last call was at the wreck of the Lady Elizabeth at the head of Stanley Sound.

Monday 18 January

Volunteer Point and 700 Kings

Cold NE wind with rain between 11am and 3.30pm 12°C

An 8am start saw the group split between two off-road vehicles fitted with super-wide tyres. A running commentary given by Patrick Watts failed to reach the second vehicle due to an incorrectly set radio but we swapped vehicles for the return journey so that everyone heard his account of the Conflict and the various peaks, passes and battle-grounds we passed through.

Several Red-backed Hawks were seen on the road journey to Johnson's Harbour farm where we had a comfort-break and noticed pens of sheep rounded up for shearing. The cross-country track to Volunteer Point was in a dreadful state due to over-use in a wet spring. We bumped and lurched through deeply rutted bogs for 21/2hrs flushing the occasional Correndera Pipit and Rufous-chested Dotterel.

The sight that greeted us made the trip worthwhile, however. A huge group of King Penguins, maybe 700 in total, were standing as a group with lots more around the outskirts moulting. The main colony was fascinating with a constant bellowing as males raised their heads to trumpet out love songs. Birds were incubating eggs trapped between the tops of their feet and a fold of belly skin which rolled over the shell.

Others had newly hatched chicks wrapped in the same fold, to be seen only occasionally after quite a wait as a naked black head appeared from the depths to be fed. At least 10 of last year's brown fluffy chicks were still in their juvenile plumage, looking like Guardsmen's buzzies slightly faded. A few were just starting to moult into sea-going immature plumage (although I have seen one brown chicks take to the sea and then return to the colony later, possibly to cool off).

Only the weather cast a slight pall over the proceedings. An unseasonal cold front passed through while we were there making the provision of a warm cabin for our picnic most welcome.

The long white-sand beach was quieter than usual with only a few groups of Gentoo and King Penguins loafing after coming ashore. It was probably too cold for concerted sunbathing! Large numbers of White-rumped Sandpipers and Two-banded Plovers were feeding vigorously on sand flies among the clumps of sea cabbage higher up the beach.

We left in time to do a little shopping back in Port Stanley. If anything progress was slower in the rain and it was a wonder the two vehicles did not get bogged. The need for wide tyres was blindingly evident. We still arrived at the farm with enough spare time to watch the sheep shearing for a few minutes. It was a good insight into this vital part of Falklands life.

Stops were made on the road-section to Stanley for photo opportunities (a White-tufted Grebe was on one small pool), to inspect the Falklands' unique stone runs which cascade like rivers of rock down the hillsides, find Fashine bushes and look at the mine fields, one of which was being cleared by a Zimbabwean team.

We just caught the shops before they closed. Later we met to celebrate the successful end to our visit to these fascinating and extraordinary islands which rightly boast 'Where Nature Is Still In Charge'.

Tuesday 19 January

Homeward Bound

Sunny, strong south-westerly wind, clear day 14°C

Waves were being whipped up in Stanley Sound as our minibus pulled away from the hotel at 6.30am. We had eaten cereals and toast to hearten us on the pleasant drive to Mount Pleasant airbase, seeing our last Falklands birds along the way – a White-tufted Grebe, Speckled Teal, Correndera Pipits and White-bridled Finches. The views of East Falklands with its mountain ridge, blue-grey stone runs and White Grass plains were super.

The flight left on time and, unusually, we were given a two-fighter wing-tip escort from the islands, only the second time this has occurred for me.

It was dark on arrival in Ascension Island and we were able to see, at last Orion, the Pleiades (Seven Sisters) and Sirius but my 'discovery' of Crux, the Southern Cross, proved to be incorrect when I checked the charts back home.

Annotated list of species

ASCENSION ISLAND - BIRDS

FRIGATEBIRDS

- 1 Ascension Island Frigatebird *Fregata aquila*

GANNETS AND BOOBIES

- 2 Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*

STARLINGS

- 3 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*

Fregatidae

Distant views of about 15 from the cage.

Sulidae

One drifted past while we watched the Frigatebirds.

Sternidae

About three in total.

FALKLAND ISLANDS - BIRDS

WILDFOWL

- 1 Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melanocoryphus*

- 2 Flying Steamer Duck *Tachyres patachonicus*

- 3 Falkland Steamer Duck *Tachyres brachypterus*

- 4 Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta*

- 5 Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida*

- 6 Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps*

- 7 Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides*

- 8 Chiloe Wigeon *Anas sibilatrix*

- 9 Speckled Teal *Anas flavirostris*

- 10 Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*

- 11 Silver Teal *Anas versicolor*

PENGUINS

- 12 King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

- 13 Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua*

- 14 Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome*

- 15 Macaroni Penguin *Eudyptes chrysolophus*

- 16 Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*

ALBATROSSES

- 17 Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys*

Anatidae

Ten with two cygnets on Big Pond, four on Green Pond Pebble Island.

A pair with five ducklings on Green 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.

Common around the islands.

A pair on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.

A few pairs with ducklings here and there.

Spheniscidae

The colony at Volunteer Point, which had five furry brown youngsters, was a highlight of the tour; a few birds seen moulting in Gentoo colonies on Sea Lion and Pebble.

Colonies on Sea Lion and Pebble, and at Volunteer Point.

Colonies on Sea Lion, Pebble, and Kidney Islands.

A single bird on Kidney Island but extremely difficult to see.

Common in suitable habitats on all islands.

Diomedidae

Many birds were seen at sea around the islands with at least 20,000 on West Point Island.

PETRELS & SHEARWATERS

- 18 Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*

- 19 Slender-billed Prion *Pachyptila belcheri*

- 20 White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*

- 21 Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*

- 22 Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*

Family Procellariidae

Common at sea around the islands, colonies on Sea Lion and Pebble.

Seen in good numbers on our trip to West Point.

Four seen on our pelagic trip.

A good number seen from the islands and on our boat trip out of Stanley.

Up to 25 seen on the Port Stanley boat trip, a record for this tour.

DIVING PETRELS

- 23 Common Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix*

GREBES

- 24 White-tufted Grebe *Rollandia rolland*

- 25 Silvery Grebe *Podiceps occipitalis*

Pelecanoididae

About 25 in the tide race north of Gibraltar Rock.

Podicipedidae

Many on Big Pond, Pebble Island; a few elsewhere.

Up to six on Sea Lion; a maximum of 12 on Pebble.

HERONS, BITTERNS

- 26 Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Ardeidae

Common at most settlements.

CORMORANTS

- 27 Rock Shag *Leucocarbo magellanicus*

- 28 Imperial Shag *Leucocarbo atriceps*

Phalacrocoracidae

Seen daily with a few colonies here and there.

Huge numbers out at sea with colonies on Sea Lion and Pebble.

NEW WORLD VULTURES		Cathartidae	
29	Turkey Vulture	Cathartes aura	Common on all the islands.
FALCONS, CARACARAS			Falconidae
30	Striated Caracara	Phalcoboenus australis	Common on Sea Lion and Carcass where one bird was encouraged to eat the tour leader but turned its beak up at the thought!
31	Southern Crested Caracara	Caracara plancus	Singles on Pebble and Sea Lion; one, possibly two pairs on Carcass.
32	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	A young bird took a Two-banded Plover on Sea Lion; a bird was seen to stoop at a Meadowlark on Carcass.
KITES, HAWKS, EAGLES			Accipitridae
33	Variable Hawk	Buteo polyosoma	A pair on Pebble; another on Carcass with fledged young; two pairs on the Volunteer Point excursion.
SHEATHBILLS & ALLIES		Chionidae	
34	Snowy Sheathbill	Chionis albus	Fairly common this year: recorded on all the islands and at Volunteer Point.
OYSTERCATCHERS			Haematopidae
35	Magellanic Oystercatcher	Haematopus leucopodus	Common throughout.
36	Blackish Oystercatcher	Haematopus ater	Common on beaches.
PLOVERS			Charadriidae
37	Two-banded Plover	Charadrius falklandicus	Common throughout.
38	Rufous-chested Plover	Charadrius modestus	Common on Sea Lion and Pebble, and Volunteer Point.
SANDPIPERS, SNIPES			Scolopacidae
39	South American Snipe	Gallinagoparaguaiae	Common and amazingly approachable; several heard 'drumming' on Sea Lion.
40	White-rumped Sandpiper	Calidris fuscicollis	Common on beaches, a few inland.
GULLS, TERNS, SKIMMERS			Laridae
41	Dolphin Gull	Leucophaeus scoresbii	A few around seabird colonies.
42	Kelp Gull	Larus dominicanus	Common throughout.
43	South American Tern	Sterna hirundinacea	Common all around the coasts.
44	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	One immature: Elephant Beach, Pebble.
SKUAS			Stercorariidae
45	Brown (Subantarctic) Skua	Stercorarius antarcticus	Common throughout.
OWLS			Strigidae
46	Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus	One seen on Sea Lion Island.
TYRANT FLYCATCHERS			Tyrannidae
47	Dark-faced Ground Tyrant	Muscisaxicola maclovianus	Common throughout.
OVENBIRDS			Furnariidae
48	Blackish Cinclodes	Cinclodes antarcticus	Common on rat and cat-free islands: Sea Lion, Carcass, and Kidney.
WRENS			Troglodytidae
49	Sedge Wren	Cistothorus platensis	Common in tussock and marshy areas.
50	Cobb's Wren	Troglodytes cobbi	Common on rat and cat-free island beaches: Sea Lion and Carcass.
THRUSHES			Turdidae
51	Austral Thrush	Turdus falcklandii	Common throughout.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS Passeridae			
52	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	A few in Port Stanley.
WAGTAILS & PIPITS			
53	Correndera Pipit	Anthus correndera	Motacillidae Quite common.
FINCHES			
54	Black-chinned Siskin	Carduelis barbata	Fringillidae Common throughout.
NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS			
55	Long-tailed Meadowlark	Sturnella loyca	Icteridae Common throughout, but absent from Sea Lion Island.
BUNTINGS & NEW WORLD SPARROWS			
56	White-bridled Finch	Melanodera melanodera	Emberizidae Common throughout.
FALKLAND ISLANDS - MAMMALS			
CATS			
1	Wild Cat	Felis silvestris	Felidae Common on Pebble Island.
EARED SEALS			
2	South American Sea-Lion	Otaria flavescens	Otariidae A few among Elephant Seals here and there. A colony of 10 beachmaster males, several contenders, 20 females and pups on Sea Lion Island.
EARLESS SEALS			
3	Southern Elephant Seal	Mirounga leonina	Phocidae Many moulting animals on Carcass but fewer than normal on Sea Lion.
MARINE DOLPHINS			
4	Orca (Killer Whale)	Orcinus orca	Delphinidae Three females, each with calves, off Elephant Corner, Sea Lion.
5	Peale's Dolphin	Lagenorhynchus australis	Seen mostly from the boat to West Point but also inshore on Carcass Island.
6	Commerson's Dolphin	Cephalorhynchus commersonii	Up to 25 in bays on Pebble and Carcass; several seen on the West Point boat trip.
Carcasses seen:			
1	South American Fur Seal	Arctocephalus australis	Singles on Pebble and Carcass: Allan White reported that many starving animals were in Falklands waters last winter.
2	Leopard Seal	Hydrurga leptonyx	Singles on Pebble and Carcass.
3	Sei Whale	Balaenoptera borealis	One 54ft specimen on Carcass.
4	Long-finned Pilot Whale	Globicephala melas	One on Pebble.
FLUTS AND MOTHS			
1	Queen of the Falklands Fritillary	Yramea cytheris	Up to five near their flowering hosts Yellow Violets at Cow Point, Sea Lion.
3	Grass moth	Pareuxonia falclandica	Common on heathland throughout the trip.
OTHER TAXA			
1	Ground beetle	Trechisibus antarcticus	Common in houses and baths.
2	Rove Beetle		Lots on Elephant Beach, Pebble.
2	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.
HEAVENLY BODIES			
1	Orion: Rigel, Betelgeuse, the Orion Nebula		All seen from Ascension Island on the way home.
2	Sirius (the brightest star in the sky)		
3	Pleiades (Seven Sisters)		
4	The Moon rising		

Crux, the Southern Cross

NOT seen – my mistake.

Plants seen on the Falkland Islands

(With thanks to Liz Read for compiling this list. I=introduced, E=endemic)

Tall Fern	Blechnum magellanicum	
Small Fern	Blechnum penna-marina	
Stinging Nettle	Urtica dioica	I
Sea Knotgrass	Polygonum maritimum	I
Curled Dock	Rumex crispus	I
Sheep's Sorrel	Rumex acetosella	I
Field Mouse-ear Chickweed	Cerastium arvense	I
Lesser Sea Spurrey	Spergularia maritima	I
Goosefoot	Chenopodium macrospermum	
Arrow-leaved Marigold	Caltha sagittata	
Native Stonecrop	Crassula moschata	
Yellow Stonecrop	Sedum acre	
Falkland Strawberry	Rubus geoides	
Prickly Bur	Acaena magellanica	
Native Yarrow	Acaena lucida	
Gorse	Ulex europaeus	I
White Clover	Trifolium repens	I
Hop Trefoil	Trifolium campestre	I
Scurvy Grass	Oxalis enneaphylla	
Dove's-foot Cranesbill	Geranium molle	I
Common Storksbill	Erodium cicutarium	I
Native Yellow Violet	Viola maculata	
Field Pansy	Viola arvensis	I
Native Water-milfoil	Myriophyllum elatinoides	
Pig Vine	Gunnera magellanica	
Balsam Bog	Bolax gummifera	
Wild Celery	Apium australe	
Mountain Berry	Gaultheria pumila	
Diddle-dee	Empetrum rubrum	
Native Pimpernel	Anagallis alternifolia	
Falkland Thrift	Aarmeria maritima andina	
Bead Plant	Nertera granadensis	
Elder	Sambus nigra	
Red Dead-nettle	Lamium purpureum	
Lady's Slipper	Calceolaria fothergillii	E
Native Boxwood	Hebe elliptica	
Berry-lobelia	Pratia repens	
Common Daisy	Bellis perennis	I
Marsh Daisy	Aster vahlilii	
Vanilla Daisy	Leucheria suaveolens	E
Christmas Bush	Baccharis magellanica	
Fachine	Chiliotrichum diffusum	
Cudweed spp.		
Yarrow	Achillea millefolium	I
Ox-eye Daisy	Leucanthemum vulgare	I
Sea Cabbage	Senecio candidans	
Falkland Woolly Ragwort	Senecio littoralis	E
Groundsel	Senecio vulgaris	I
Coastal Nassauvia	Nassauvia guadichaudii	E
Falkland Lavender	Perezia recurvata	
Spiny Sow-thistle	Sonchus asper	I
Antarctic Hawkweed	Hieracium antarcticum	
Orange Hawkweed	Hieracium aurantiacum	I
Dandelion	Taraxacum officinale	
Astelia	Astelia pumila	
Buttonweed	Leptinella scariosa	

Native Rush	Juncus scheuchzerioides	I
Short Rush	Rostkovia magellanica	
Tall Rush	Marsippospermum grandiflorum	
Native Woodrush	Luzula Alopecurus	
Tussac Grass	Poa flabellate	
Cocksfoot	Dactylis glomerata	I
Yorkshire Fog	Holcus lunatus	I
Marram Grass	Ammophila Arenaria	I
White Grass	Cortaderia pilosa	
Timothy	Phleum pratense	I
Monterey Cypress	Cupressus macrocarpa	I

Birds seen in the snow and ice in or near RAF Brize Norton

Red Kite	Great Tit
Buzzard	Robin
Sparrowhawk	Blackbird
Peregrine	Redwing
Kestrel	Carrion Crow
Herring Gull	Rook
Black-headed Gull	Jackdaw
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Starling
Pied Wagtail (scores roosting at the RAF base)	Chaffinch
Blue Tit	Greenfinch

Tim Earl
Principal leader
Guernsey

© The Travelling Naturalist and Limosa Holidays