

Falkland Islands

Friday 4 – Saturday 19 February 2011

Principal leader: Tim Earl

Local support: Tour manager: Arlette Bloomfield
Darwin Guesthouse: Graeme and Fiona Didlick
Carcass Island: Rob and Lorraine McGill
West Point Island: Michael and Jeanette Clark
Pebble Island: Allan White and Jacquie
Sea Lion Island: Jenny Luxton
Bleaker Island: Elaine and Robert Short
Malvina House Hotel: Carl Stroud

This late season tour was planned to give us an experience of the Falklands in early Austral autumn and we had a whale of a time as a result. The great whales were migrating past the islands and we had wonderful weather in which to watch them. The start was inauspicious and we missed our day at San Carlos and Goose Green as a result but extra nights on Bleaker Island due to essential work on the Falklands' main run-way more than compensated for that. We enjoyed excellent hospitality, great wildlife, adventures on and off-road and each other's company. All in all, it was a near perfect Falklands experience.

Highlights

- 1 The whole West Point Island experience – quaint cottage, 1960s music playing as we enjoyed 'smoko', the wonderful shared Rockhopper Penguin and Black-browed Albatross colony.
- 2 Rockies descending down steep cliffs and then leaping, falling or walking into tremendous seas.
- 3 Commerson's Dolphins bow-riding under the boat coming back from West Point Island, Peale's Dolphins on the Kidney Island trip, huge numbers of whale blows, backs and fins off Bleaker Island, Antarctic Minke Whales surfacing and blowing next to the fast launch out of Stanley.
- 4 Our first taste of Falklands' wildlife on the jetty at Goose Green where Black-crowned Night-herons watched enviously as an angler pulled out big mullet caught with bits of mutton as bait.
- 5 The 'cormorant cities' – huge colonies of Imperial Shags – on Carcass, Pebble and Bleaker Islands were utterly absorbing and we had the time to enjoy them to the full. The flight paths to and from the colonies, particularly on Bleaker Island took thousands of birds over our heads.
- 6 Shedder Pond Beach on Carcass Island with its Sei Whale remains in which Cobb's Wrens had nested, our first Sea Lion, tern and gull colonies and Magellanic Penguin crèche was perfect.
- 7 Striated Caracaras and Blackish Cinclodes seen from the diningroom window on Carcass Island.
- 8 Driving past throngs of penguins along No Name Beach on Pebble Island – the black birds looking like commuters waiting for a train on a gleaming white-sand station – which was so busy with birds yet not a person in sight (within miles in fact!).
- 9 White-tufted and Silvery Grebes in numbers on Big Pond, Pebble Island, and the following day's 'smoko break' at Bett's Pond which had so many exotic ducks close to us.
- 10 Brilliant views down into a Sea Lion colony (on the island of that name) with its huge maned beach-master bulls, golden females nursing bleating black babies and contenders roaring in the shallows – all so unexpected.
- 11 Sea Lion Island's wildlife in the shape of Orcas, Sedge Wrens, the 'penguin parade', King Penguins and a late evening Short-eared Owl sighting (actually, it flew around our heads!).
- 12 Stars, drumming South American Snipe, communing with Gentoo Penguins, Dolphin and Kelp Gull chicks, all made Sea Lion Island special.
- 13 Contact with Falklands farm life, especially on Bleaker Island.
- 14 The King Penguin colony at Volunteer Point which had yet another stunning white-sand, blue-sea beach (complete with marauding Sea Lion hunting penguins).

Bird of the trip (by vote): Rockhopper Penguins with King Cormorants a close second.

Mammal of the trip (by vote and tied): Peale's Dolphins and Southern Sea Lions.

Daily Diary

Thursday 3 to Saturday 5 February

RAF Brize Norton, Oxford – twice!

We met at Brize Norton at 7.30pm, were allocated rooms at the Gateway Hotel on the base, and went to the village for supper. Our flight was called at 3.30am due to a delay and we took off for Ascension at 7am on Friday... only to turn around over Senegal as an altimeter had broken down. With no spares on Ascension we were forced back to Brize Norton arriving at 4.30pm for a second night in the Gateway Hotel as the repair and other essential maintenance was carried out. Our 5am start on Saturday was pushed back and back until we finally took off at 10.15am arriving in the Falklands 29 hours late. We fell into our beds at 2.30am on Sunday morning! What a start.

Saturday 5 February

Ascension Island, 6pm to 7.30pm

Sunny, some cloud, light breeze, 28°C

An uneventful flight dropped into Ascension Island just before dusk. Just one Ascension Frigatebird flew over our heads as we walked from the aircraft and a few Common Mynas were seen.

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, arriving at 1.10am Sunday and getting to our rooms at Darwin by 2.30am. One European Hare was seen in the headlights on the drive down to Darwin.

Sunday 6 February

Darwin, Goose Green and Shedder Pond Beach, Carcass Island

Sunny, some cloud, good breeze 14°C

We awoke to the rewards of our disrupted journey – wonderful views over the jetty and Darwin Sound to Mount Osborne and the blue hills of the Wickham Heights. Rock Shags were feeding young on the jetty where they nest, Ruddy Headed and Upland Geese wandered across the green behind the lodge while Falklands (Austral) Thrushes and Dark-faced Ground Tyrants flitted around the garden. Falkland Flightless Steamerducks were watched in the sound, our first of the islands' two endemic species of bird. Grand characters they were too with many fascinating behavioural traits to observe.

I borrowed a vehicle after breakfast and we drove out to Goose Green a mile away to see the schoolhouse where 130 people were imprisoned by Argentinean forces and to walk along another jetty looking for Black-crowned Night Herons, with success.

A Goose Green resident turned up with a rod and a few bits of mutton and within minutes was pulling out large fish. Three were kept for the pot in about five minutes, to our amazement.

We finished our short tour at Darwin International Airport (check-in and weighing – bags and bodies – had been done at the lodge the night before) where work on the new air terminal has yet to start. After a short delay a red FIGAS Islander aircraft swept in, landed on the grass strip and off we went to Carcass Island. Already the sense of adventure was well established.

A phone call to Rob and Lorraine McGill had placed a sandwich order and after putting cases into Rob's vehicle to be taken back to the lodge we walked off into the tussock grass behind Shedder Pond Beach for a picnic lunch and our first close up encounters with Falklands' wildlife.

This was prompted by some rather rude sounding noises coming from the tussock behind us. Investigations revealed two Elephant Seals basking on the beach, occasionally snorting. More were found in the tussock, the occasional animal opening its eyes to look at us as we passed.

A fine lunch was followed by exploration of the beach which was slow due to a great deal to see. Our second endemic bird – Cobb's Wren – was watched poking around in the skull of a Sei Whale which had been washed up two years ago. Its skeleton and the baleen plates were a little different from the beach-combing finds we have back home, that was certain! That fact was reinforced by the sight of a young male Sea Lion on the beach.

A walk in the tussock after lunch revealed several large parties of Elephant Seals lounging on seaweed sun-beds and in the tussock. We watched South American snipe, Black-chinned Siskins and White-bridled Finches before returning to the Land Rover Rob had left for us and drove the cross-country route over a saddle-back ridge to the settlement, stopping for a picture-shoot as we came over the top.

After finding our rooms, and enjoying a fine dinner we took a short stroll on the beach before turning in early.

Monday 7 February

West Point Island and Gibraltar Rock reef

Sunny, some cloud, good breeze 14°C

Some of us got up before breakfast to explore the settlement and its fearless wildlife. Michael Clark arrived on his boat Condor and at about 9.30 we left for West Point Island. The breeze was fair and against us making for an interesting crossing.

Once ashore we went to the pretty little cottage and explored its warm, sheltered garden before entering to enjoy our first proper Falklands 'smoko' lovingly prepared and served by Jeanette Clark. Falklands radio was playing 60s music in the background making for an almost surreal experience, displaced as we were by 50 years or more.

I drove us to the albatross colony at the Devil's Nose where we beheld an enchanting scene. Large Black-browed Albatross chicks were sitting in huge mud egg-cups (or at least they had been earlier in the season) surrounded by bellowing Rockhopper penguins looking for their chicks and the occasional proud adult albatross. The breeze was blowing in from the sea and a constant stream of albatrosses passed only a few millimetres above our heads on 'final approach'. Those travelling fast made a terrific whooshing sound as they flew past us.

We settled into the surrounding tussock to take pictures and study the mixed colony. Some watched Rockies hopping down to the sea way below us there to wait for a safe moment to enter the sea while terrific swells crashed at their feet.

Two and a half hours slipped past quickly and it was, as the brochure says, 'with some reluctance that we tore ourselves away'.

We sailed out of the sheltered bay and back into quite large seas as Condor made her way down towards and beyond Gibraltar Rock. We watched with interest as unusual seabirds made an appearance – large numbers of Prions at first with the occasional Sooty Shearwater, White-chinned Petrel and hundreds of albatrosses for company.

After turning for Carcass Island we were joined by schools of both Commerson's and Peale's Dolphins which sported under the bows of the boat to everyone's considerable delight.

Diving Petrels started to appear as we neared the island; they were mostly Common Diving Petrels but subsequent examination of a picture taken showed that one had the white collar of a Magellanic Diving Petrel.

We were tired by the time Carcass's sheltered mooring was reached and retired to the lodge for showers before another huge and delicious dinner.

Tuesday 8 February

Carcass explored

Sunny and warm with a light breeze and some cloud, 14°C

We went back out to the airstrip this morning on a double mission – to find the huge group of Elephant Seals we saw two days ago and look for Peale's Dolphins, a school of which is resident along the adjacent shore.

Both were successful as we spent a pleasant morning in the tussock exploring the beaches, admiring the many somnolent seals and eventually finding a couple of Peale's Dolphins cruising in close to the shore.

Returning to the settlement for a so-called light lunch we put plans for a walk to the Gentoo Penguin colony on hold as a cruise ship with 80 people on board was due to visit.

Instead we set off over the southerly ridge to an area which was new to me. It was another world of large sheep-grazed plains and a steep valley down to the sea.

Following our noses we left the Land Rover and walked along the coast towards the site of an Imperial Shag colony Rob had told us about. It was huge with thousands of pairs of birds, most with well-grown chicks.

The colony was like a huge city with two routes – one of shags flying in the other had birds leaving. There were attendant species too with Brown Skuas and Dolphin Gulls taking advantage of food spilled in the transfer from adult to chick. A highlight, at least for me, was a small flock of Snowy Sheathbills, the only land-bird to breed in Antarctica. These individuals were youngsters of last season who were staying in the Falklands for their first summer before returning to Antarctica to breed for the first time. [See Pebble Island account for a touching story about these birds.]

We returned to the settlement to join the cruisers in an enjoyable, if rather busy, afternoon tea, cakes and buns before they left on their ship. There was little envy among our group for their rather frenetic visit.

We retired after dinner to pack and have an early night.

Wednesday 9 February

To Pebble Island and Big Pond

Hot and sunny, 22°C

The day dawned hot and sunny, one of the best I have enjoyed in the islands. We went out to the airstrip after a leisurely start but sadly our flight was delayed and we had to amuse ourselves with spotting Tussock-birds although I think it was they who had most fun sitting on us, our equipment, bags and vehicles.

The FIGAS plane eventually swooped in to collect us but rather than take us directly to Pebble Island Captain Derek Clark flew us around a pod of Sei Whales off the north of Saunder's Island. These were the first great whales I had seen in the islands and were a great thrill for us all.

We were still exhilarated as the aircraft flew in low over Elephant Bay, Pebble Island, where we could see Commerson's Dolphins sporting in the surf and above the white sandy bottom. Seconds later we landed well pleased with our mornings.

Our picnic lunch was eaten in the lodge lounge before I was loaned a vehicle to explore the beach we had flown over and Big Pond where I hoped to spring a surprise on the group – two Neotropical Cormorants had been in residence for three months – the first ever recorded in the islands.

Of course, rarities mean nothing to folk for whom every bird seen is a new species and thus the rather ordinary cormorant we found attracted far less interest than say White-tufted Grebes, Black-necked Swans or the pretty Speckled Teal roosting on the bank. It did not help that the bird was sitting among roosting Kelp Gulls (which look like many of our gulls back home) although the Brown-hooded Gulls and South American Terns drew more comment.

Elephant Beach was enchanting, not just for its spectacular beauty with pure white sand contrasting with the deep blue sea and white rollers lapping at its edge. I think it was the sense of remoteness and isolation, the

fact that we had the place entirely to ourselves and perhaps the discovery of this morning's school of dolphins surfing the waves that made it so special.

We explored the rock pools and mussel beds finding White-rumped Sandpipers (with a few Baird's) which were 12,000 miles south of their breeding grounds in Arctic Canada, Blackish and Magellanic Oystercatchers and a flock of 50 feeding terns fishing in a lagoon. We went out after an early dinner to explore the settlement and record our (near-) daily Black-crowned Night-heron at the jetty.

Thursday 10 February

West End, the mountains, Coventry point and the Lear jet memorial

Warm and disappointingly foggy, 16°C

An early start saw us bimbbling down to Elephant Beach across peat beds which had supplied fuel to the lodge for many years in its earlier role as the island's farm. I had hoped to find the dolphins again but we had to content ourselves with shell-spotting and a hearty walk.

Setting off for the three peaks dotted down the west end of the island we stopped at the airstrip where Allan White told the fascinating story of an SAS raid to destroy 13 Argentinean aircraft at the start of the 1982 Conflict.

Our searches for Sedge Wrens on the south side of First Mountain were hindered by the fog which made their likely habitats dripping wet and accounted for the birds' failure to show. We carried on past Middle Mountain and down towards Pebble Mountain where we stopped at the remains of a Gentoo Penguin colony where the young birds still in residence came along and surrounded the group. It was a close and intimate encounter, a fitting introduction to this fascinating and charismatic species.

Lunch was eaten among residents of another penguin colony – this time Rockhoppers which were coming up a low but steep cliff to feed their well-grown young or, alternatively, standing around in deep moult (an itchy stage of their lives, one imagines). We spent a long time here watching the birds in all the intimate detail of their lives. They watched us too but with no regard for us at all. We meant no more to them than did the Upland Geese grazing quietly nearby. It is this immersion among the things we came to see which makes the Falklands such an outstanding wildlife encounter.

Our next stop was at the Lear jet memorial where five senior Argentines had perished when their spy-plane was shot down during the conflict. As with most of the memorial sites in the islands equal reverence was shown to the Argentines as British casualties.

Moving on we visited Beach With No Name which was packed. I have never seen a Falklands Beach being used by so many. At a distance the crowd looked like hundreds of people but closer examination showed them to be penguins, thousands of birds spread over the beach from the water's edge to cliff tops and beyond. It was an amazing sight and an exhilarating highlight of the day's outing. Most were Gentoos but there were good groups of moulting Magellanic Penguins too.

Time was pressing by now and we decided to cut out the visit to HMS Coventry's memorial returning directly to the lodge.

Friday 11 February

Coventry memorial, Bett's Pond and Tamar Point

Warm and sunny, some cloud later 17°C

Doubling back on yesterday's route we drove up to the Coventry memorial to learn in detail from Allan the tragic circumstances of her sinking and the miraculous saving of so many people forced to abandon her. It was amazing that in such cold seas and at a remote spot miles from anywhere only 14 of the 200 people on board died after she was bombed by Argentinean jets.

Passing through the settlement afterwards we hit Pebble's main road – Elephant Beach – and drove inland from its farthest point to stop at a shingle beach where there were 17 Snowy Sheathbills gathered for no apparent reason – no snoring Elephant Seals or clamorous cormorant colonies.

Allan told us of the habit these birds have of congregating on ships far out to sea between the islands and Antarctica – with tragic results during the Conflict. More than 300 accumulated on the aircraft carriers *Invincible* and *Hermes* threatening the safety of aircrews using the flight decks. Everything in their power was used by the Royal Navy to discourage and remove the birds with no success and eventually the decision was taken that they had to be culled.

Hundreds of birds died as Nature's contribution to the war effort and to the genuine sadness of many naval people. Their role was recognised after the landing at Port San Carlos which became the British HQ and where a metal landing strip was installed for Harrier aircraft. This was immediately named Sheathbill Airstrip in honour of the birds which had died at sea.

With this sad but heart-warming story ringing in our ears we drove on for smoko at Bett's Pond.

What an event! Little could be seen as we arrived but slowly the wildfowl nearby started to show themselves and we sipped coffee, ate cakes and almost choked with ooohs and aaahs muttered through full mouths. Time was spent sorting out Yellow-billed Pintail from Speckled Teal, Chiloe Wigeon versus Silver Teal, White-tufted and Silvery Grebes, with a few Black-necked Swans in the distance. All looked unsettled as a Peregrine flew over but it did not hang around.

Once more we dragged ourselves away with difficulty stopping an hour later at Cape Tamar where we found a pair of Peregrines. The female was studied by each of us through the telescope to see her black Balaclava-style hood which replaces the more familiar moustachial stripe in Cassin's Falcon – the Falklands' race of Peregrine.

We snuggled down in bright sunshine at Ship Harbour Inlet for a picnic before going on to a big Imperial Shag colony where there were still lots of Rockhopper Penguins among the more numerous cormorants. The place was again alive with Brown Skuas and Dolphin Gulls harassing the breeding birds.

Allan searched long and hard for a Macaroni penguin finally hearing one braying. When he found the bird it turned out to be a hybrid Macaroni / Rockhopper showing features of each which we all had pointed out to us.

Pleased with our day, we returned to the lodge via Big Pond where I found the missing Cinnamon Teal, a beautiful and uncommon duck. The Neotropical Cormorants were absent.

Saturday 12 February

To Sea Lion Island (eventually and via Port Stanley)

Warm, foggy clearing later 17°C

The day started well with a drive down to and right along Elephant Beach where we saw White-rumped Sandpipers, Rufous-chested Dotterel, Two-banded Plovers and both species of Oystercatcher but the dolphins could not be found. Eventually we turned around and went to the end closer to the settlement where lo and behold there were the Commerson's Dolphins in the surf – not brilliant views but we were able to enjoy them nevertheless.

We returned to the settlement via Big Pond where both Neotropical Cormorants were on view. We went up to the airstrip after smoko and were flown out almost immediately.

Unusual weather conditions were producing clear sunshine in the normally foggy northern islands but dense sea mist in the south. Our pilot Andrew flew down so close to Sea Lion Island that we could see tussock stands but not the airstrip after our 50-minute flight from Pebble. He took us up to 3,000ft and headed off to Stanley which was clear. There we waited for three hours as I made arrangements for overnight accommodation in the islands' capital.

A phone call to Sea Lion alerted me to a clearance and within minutes we were flown back for a successful landing... phew!

There was time for an orientation tour of the island with Jenny Luxton to see the main sites including the famous Sea Lion colony, Long Pond and a super beach which was guarded by a huge old bull Sea Lion. After dinner (on a whim aided by an unreliable tip-off) we went down to Elephant Corner where five Orcas were close inshore.

It was a great tip-off after all!

We watched the two males, two females and a calf slowly work their way along the beach until they went out through a distant kelp-bed and disappeared.

We found two King Penguins on the way back to the lodge, beautiful birds which may have just completed a moult so pristine was their plumage. [This was backed up the following two days when we could not find them – the birds had probably returned to the sea.]

Elated by our good fortune we returned to the lodge for a celebratory drink and early night.

Sunday 13 February

Sea Lions, Imperial Shags, Sheffield memorial, Bull Hill, the Gulch and Cow Point

Misty, penetrating drizzle on a strong (F6) wind, 10°C

Most of the group decided to come with me on this 'go as you please' day as I searched the island for rare birds and some of my favourite places. We took a picnic lunch and were driven to the Imperial Shag colony via the Sea Lion cliff by Jenny.

The lions were terrific and we spent some time watching the drama of huge beach-masters guarding harems and growling at contenders to their thrones. The pups were entertaining too.

Moving on to the Imperial Shags we were greeted by an amazing sight: the colony was made up of hundreds of cup-shaped nests, each with a tiny chick inside. This contrasted with the one on Carcass Island where the chicks were close to fledging. Sea Lion's colony had been hit by a tremendous gale in December when 120ft waves had rolled up the cliffs and washed the nests away. These we were seeing were the birds' second attempt at breeding. We wondered if there was enough time for them to raise the chicks. Snowy Sheathbills were in attendance with Dolphin Gulls and a few Brown Skuas.

Walking around to the Sheffield memorial (she was sunk 30 miles off Sea Lion Island) we were greeted by a forlorn group of moulting Rockhopper Penguins. Their colony had been hit by the same gale and waves as the shags but the birds had not attempted a second brood. The normally busy ledges where they come in and out of the sea, made famous by Sir David Attenborough in *Life On Earth*, were deserted.

We started the long walk back to the lodge walking up over Bull Hill and across the two grass airstrips, used only in exceptional weather conditions, towards Beaver Pond. I was looking for an Arctic Skua which had been seen in the area a few days earlier, a rare visitor from northern Europe which I had never seen in the Falklands, but there was no sign of it.

The drizzle was penetrating and after a stop in the lee of the air terminal (a small tin hut containing emergency fire equipment) we diverted towards the Gulch. This took us across Diddle-dee moorland where we watched Dark-faced Ground Tyrants, Rufous-chested Dotterel, Two-banded Plovers and a few White-rumped Sandpipers.

Tussock around the Gulch protected and warmed us as we ate our picnics before going down onto rock ledges just above the entrance and new jetty built to land all the goods required by the island.

Our yomp back to the lodge was uneventful but pleasant as the drizzle had stopped. We had a cuppa before going out again down to Cow Point where a huge male Elephant Seal was found at the top of a steep 70ft high cliff grunting and snorting in the tussock. Cobb's Wrens were watched on the beach and I pointed out the distinctive ballet-like undulations of passing Sooty Shearwaters far out to sea.

Gulls and terns were nesting near the 'penguin parade' beach and we watched their chicks with interest. The daily parade of Gentoos had not started and as the rain set in again we headed for a shower before dinner.

A walk out to see the Orcas again after dinner proved fruitless so I led the group up to the garden area where we were joined by a Short-eared Owl which flew up to inspect us, flying around for a minute or so.

Monday 14 February

Elephant Corner, flight to Bleaker Island, Gentoo colony, the Concordia Bay's visit

Windy with sun and some cloud 12°C

We nipped down to Elephant Corner before breakfast in the hope of seeing the Orcas before leaving but without luck. Our flight to Bleaker left at 10.30 to be met by hosts Elaine and Rob Short with the island's owner Mike Rendell there too.

Elaine prepared sandwiches and we set off in a borrowed Land Rover back towards the airstrip, calling in on Small Pond and on to the Gentoo Penguin colony which was thrilling.

Situated on a hillside, it was crammed with young birds, their parents and masses of moulting penguins. We searched the flocks in vain to find stray Kings but were pleased with a few small groups of Magellanic Penguins.

The islands' supply-ship, which doubles as a ferry between East and West Falkland, Concordia Bay was making a visit to drop off freight (food and building supplies for a new bungalow Mike is building to accommodate groups like ours) and take away cattle and lambs for slaughter in Stanley.

The jetty was crammed with Imperial Shags which had moved down from the colony higher up behind the settlement and these had to be chased off before the unloading could start. Goods were swung from the ship onto a small boat which then motored in to the jetty preceded and followed by lots of Commerson's Dolphins which were clearly enjoying their duties as escorts.

Elaine came into our self-catering bungalow with a cooked meal for us and we washed the dishes afterwards before going up to the shag and penguin colonies. We found thousands of Imperial Shags but I could not remember which gate to use as access to the penguins and we left them for the morning.

Tuesday 15 February

Rockhoppers, whales and Sandy Bay

Sunny, some cloud 16°C

Setting off to see the Rockhoppers at 6.30am we did not know this was to be a whale-watching day. The first hint came as I pulled up at the correct gate to see spouts out beyond the kelp. We gradually got our eyes into the exhalations of whale breath learning to see the backs and fins of these biggest of creatures. The majority were Sei but they were accompanied by a few Fin and Antarctic Minke Whales. This was a huge thrill as it is rare to see great whales from the land anywhere in the world.

There were few Rockies in residence and those that were sat hunched up in moult. Lots of Snowy Sheathbills were around, however, and an Arctic Skua shot past giving some of us a brief view. This was probably the bird we had looked for on Bull Hill, Sea Lion Island, two days before.

After a breakfast cooked by John we went south in the borrowed Land Rover exploring parts of the island I had never visited. Highlights included lots of Peale's Dolphins seen close in from the cliff tops, Red-backed (now Variable) Hawks and masses of whales. They must have been migrating along the island's coast and we became expert in spotting blows and backs.

The scenery was super but in contrast to other islands, like Carcass and Pebble, rather flat. We ate picnics watching the dolphins and went for a walk along a headland soon afterwards. A small Southern Giant Petrel colony was admired from the vehicle on the way back as we did not want to disturb these timid birds.

Our afternoon cuppa was welcome and we went out immediately afterwards to Sandy Bay where large numbers of Gentoo penguins come ashore in the late afternoon to visit the colony. This was a super choice as penguins were porpoising purposefully towards the beach before suddenly appearing in the breaking waves

where they immediately stood up and raced ashore through the shallow water. This was done by small groups of up to 40 birds at a time and gave great opportunities for us to study and take pictures. A good few minutes of Attenborough-standard film was also taken – watch out Sir David!

Bleaker Island lamb featured for an excellent supper.

Wednesday 16 February

To Port Stanley, shopping and a whale-watching cruise

Sunny, some cloud, warm, 19°C

We were lucky to have a 10.30am flight direct to the capital which left time for shopping before and after lunch at the comfortable Malvina Hotel. It was odd to be back in civilisation with paved roads, houses and crowds of people. And what crowds they were. Two cruise ships had dropped off about 3,000 passengers between them and the place was packed. (I stayed in my room hiding under the bed while the group went off sightseeing and shopping!)

We met at 3.45pm and went out to catch the Mara-B launch owned by Beauchene Fishing Company and skippered by director Peter Roberts. The plan was to motor out to sea, throw 'chum' over the side to attract seabirds, visit Kidney Island and return by 7pm.

It all changed... the lack of wind meant that the enticing aroma of rotting fish was not spread over the ocean and few birds turned up to our bait. We had good views of White-chinned Petrels and about five Great Shearwaters – two exciting species to find – but the hoped for albatrosses showed no interest.

What we did find turned disappointment into a great thrill. Whales were spouting in the huge entrance to Berkley Sound.

Peter took the boat into the middle of the bay and we watched as the great animals surfaced and blew some way off. However, patience was rewarded when a Sei whale surfaced quite close to us giving excellent views and then suddenly there was a loud 'whoosh' and an Antarctic Minke surfaced close to us. Even its second appearance was close and our hearts raced being so near to the whale.

We ended the session by motoring down to Kidney Island passing two huge flocks of Sooty Shearwaters gathering in rafts prior to entering their nest burrows on the island after dark.

A search of the cliffs failed to turn up a hoped-for Macaroni Penguin but we did see a few Rockhoppers, two of which seemed to be fighting as they fell part way down the cliff where they gained a foothold before returning to the small colony.

We motored around to the land-ward side of the island where we were joined by a school of Peale's Dolphins which seemed excited to meet us. Peter put the launch into reverse and they left the bows and came to the stern where we had superb views of them racing under and around the boat. It was yet another highlight of this fascinating trip.

Our final wildlife encounter, not mentioning the Brown-hooded Gulls feeding in the kelp bed, was with about 50 young Sea Lions which had spent the day, like Enid Blyton gang members, on the beach. Several took to the water to inspect the boat and us. It was yet another example of the fearlessness and inquisitiveness of Falklands' animals.

We returned to the harbour to find the city deserted at last and enjoyed our stroll down memory lane (all those pictures from the Conflict almost 30 years ago had come to life) back to the hotel.

Thursday 17 February

Volunteer Point and a meeting with Kings

Sunny, little cloud, cool breeze, 16°C

An 8am start saw the group split between two off-road vehicles fitted with super-wide tyres. Nobby Clark was the principle driver and he gave a running commentary plus stories of his time on Pebble Island during the

SAS raid Allan White had told us about. 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 drove through.

A couple of Red-backed Hawks were seen on the road journey to Johnson's Harbour farm where we had a comfort-break. The cross-country track to Volunteer Point was in a poor state. We bumped and lurched over deeply rutted bogs 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 800 in total, were standing 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.

The weather was stunning making the long white beach look amazing. We all did our own thing which resulted in pictures of a group of King Penguins on the beach with a hungry-looking Sea Lion in the waves behind them, for John.

It was with sadness that we left the colony knowing that our time in the islands was almost finished and that this was the last encounter we would have with penguins.

We met in the bar later to celebrate the successful end to our visit to these fascinating and extraordinary islands which rightly boast "Where Nature Is Still In Charge".

Friday 18 February

Homeward Bound

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

Stanley Sound was like a mirror 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. The views of East Falklands with its mountain ridge, blue-grey stone runs and White Grass plains were super.

The flights were uneventful: it was dark and cloudy on arrival in Ascension Island and we were just able to see Orion. Clouds over and downwind of Green Mountain were illuminated brilliantly by a full Moon. We arrived at RAF Brize Norton at 7.30am and said our sad farewells.

ANNOTATED LIST OF SPECIES

FALKLAND ISLANDS

BIRDS

WILDFOWL

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

PENGUINS

12	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>
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Family Anatidae

About 10 in the ponds on 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 most days.
One on Big Pond, Pebble Island.
Common around the islands.
About 10 birds on Bett's Pond, Pebble Island.
A few pairs here and there.

Family Spheniscidae

The colony at Volunteer Point, which had about 1,000 birds, was a highlight of the tour; two birds seen in Gentoo colonies on Sea Lion Island.
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13	Gentoo Penguin	Pygoscelispapua	Big colonies on Carcass, Pebble, Sea Lion and Bleaker Islands, plus thousands at Volunteer Point.
14	Rockhopper Penguin	Eudyptes chrysocome	Colonies on Pebble, Sea Lion (where most had been washed away in a tremendous December gale) Bleaker and Kidney Islands.
15	Macaroni Penguin	Eudyptes chrysolophus	A hybrid of this species and Rockhopper Penguin was seen at the Tamar colony on Pebble Island
16	Magellanic Penguin	Spheniscus magellanicus	Common in suitable habitats on all islands; forming creches in many places.
	ALBATROSSES		Family Diomedidae
17	Black-browed Albatross	Thalassarche melanophrys	Many birds seen at sea around the islands; the colony on West Point Island was a highlight of the trip.
	SHEARWATERS		Family Procellariidae
18	Southern Giant Petrel	Macronectes giganteus	Common at sea around the islands, colonies on Pebble, Sea Lion and Bleaker islands.
19	Northern Giant Petrel	Macronectes halli	One at Elephant Corner on Sea Lion Island was my first on-shore and third ever in the Falklands.
20	Broad-billed Prion	Pachyptila vittata	The most common Prion seen. One seen on the pelagic trip out of Stanley.
21	Antarctic Prion	Pachyptila desolata)
22	Slender-billed Prion	Pachyptila belcheri) These three species were seen in small numbers as we
) returned from West Point Island.
23	Fairy Prion	Pachyptila turtur)
24	White-chinned Petrel	Procellaria aequinoctialis	One at sea off Gibraltar Rock, three on the boat trip out of Stanley.
25	Sooty Shearwater	Puffinus griseus	Many thousands congregating before entering their nest burrows on Kidney island; a few seen at sea from the northern islands.
26	Great Shearwater	Puffinus gravis	Five in flocks of Sooty Shearwaters off Kidney Island.
	DIVING PETRELS		Family Pelecanoididae
27	Magellanic Diving Petrel	Pelecanoides magellani	One identified from an image taken off Gibraltar Rock was the first ever recorded on this tour.
28	Common Diving Petrel	Pelecanoides urinatrix	Five as we returned to Carcass Island from West Point.
	GREBES		Family Podicipedidae
29	White-tufted Grebe	Rollandia rolland	About 15 pairs on Pebble Island; two on Bleaker and one on the Volunteer Point trip.
30	Silvery Grebe	Podiceps occipitalis	About 10 pairs on Pebble Island; one on Long Pond, Sea Lion Island.
	HERONS, BITTERNS		Family Ardeidae
31	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	Common throughout the islands.
	CORMORANTS		Phalacrocoracidae
32	Rock Shag	Leucocarbo magellanicus	Seen daily with a few colonies here and there.
33	Imperial Shag	Leucocarbo atriceps	Common out at sea with large colonies on Carcass Pebble, Sea Lion and Bleaker Islands.
	NEW WORLD VULTURES		Family Cathartidae
34	Turkey Vulture	Cathartes aura	Common on all the islands.
35	Striated Caracara	Phalcoboenus australis	Common on Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
36	Southern Crested Caracara		Caracara plancus A few on Carcass, Pebble and Sea Lion islands.
	FALCONS, CARACARAS		Family Falconidae
37	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	An immature on Carcass; a pair seen at Tamar Point, Pebble Island, one out at sea on the Stanley pelagic trip.
	RAPTORS		Family Pandionidae / Accipitridae
38	Variable Hawk	Buteo polyosoma	A poor year for this species with just five sightings.
	SHEATHBILLS		Family Chionidae
39	Snowy Sheathbill	Chionis albus	Common around the various seabird colonies, with a maximum of more than 30 on Bleaker.
	OYSTERCATCHERS		Family Haematopidae
40	Magellanic Oystercatcher	Haematopus leucopus	Common throughout.

41	Blackish Oystercatcher	Haematopus ater	Common throughout.
	PLOVERS		Family Charadriidae
42	Two-banded Plover	Charadrius falklandicus	Common throughout.
43	Rufous-chested Plover	Charadrius modestus	Common throughout.
	SANDPIPERS, SNIPES		Family Scolopacidae
44	South American Snipe	Gallinago paraguaiae	Common throughout.
45	White-rumped Sandpiper	Calidris fuscicollis	Common on beaches, a few inland
46	Baird's Sandpiper	Calidris bairdii	Six on Big Pond, Pebble Island.
	GULLS & TERNS		Family Laridae
47	Dolphin Gull	Leucophaeus scoresbii	Common around seabird colonies.
48	Kelp Gull	Larus dominicanus	Common throughout.
49	Brown-hooded Gull	Larus maculipennis	
50	South American Tern	Sterna hirundinacea	Common throughout.
	SKUAS		Family Stercorariidae
51	Subantarctic (Brown) Skua		Stercorarius antarcticus Common throughout.
52	Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger)		Stercorarius parasiticus One 'fly-past' at the Imperial Shag cliffs on Bleaker Island.
	OWLS		Family Strigidae
53	Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus	One on Sea Lion Island.
	TYRANT FLYCATCHERS		Family Tyrannidae
54	Dark-faced Ground Tyrant		Muscisaxicola maclovianus Common throughout.
	OVENBIRDS		Family Furnariidae
55	Blackish Cinclodes	Cinclodes antarcticus	Common on rat-free islands - Carcass, Sea Lion and a few on Bleaker.
	WRENS		Family Troglodytidae
56	Sedge Wren	Cistothorus platensis	Difficult this year with a single on Sea Lion and two on Bleaker.
57	Cobb's Wren	Troglodytes cobbi	Common on rat and cat-free islands: Carcass and Sea Lion..
	THRUSHES		Family Turdidae
58	Austral Thrush	Turdus falcklandii	Common throughout.
	SPARROWS		Family Passeridae
59	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	A few in Darwin and Port Stanley.
	WAGTAILS & PIPITS		Family Motacillidae
60	Correndera Pipit	Anthus correndera	Common throughout.
	FINCHES		Family Fringillidae
61	Black-chinned Siskin	Carduelis barbata	Common throughout.
	NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS		Family Icteridae
62	Long-tailed Meadowlark	Sturnella loyca	Common throughout but absent from Sea Lion Island.
	BUNTINGS & ALLIES		Family Emberizidae
63	White-bridled Finch	Melanodera melanodera	Common throughout.

MAMMALS

	CATS		Family Felidae
1	Wild Cat	Felis silvestris	Two on Pebble Island
	EARED SEALS		Family Otariidae
2	South American Sea-Lion	Otaria flavescens	One male on Shedder Pond Beach, Carcass; a colony of about 50 on Sea Lion Island; one hunting penguins in the surf at Volunteer Beach.
	EARLESS SEALS		Family Phocidae
3	Southern Elephant Seal	Mirounga leonina	Common on Carcass, about 40 on Sea Lion
	RORQUALS		Family Balaenopteridae
4	Antarctic Minke Whale	Balaenoptera bonaerensis	A few off Bleaker and in Berkley Sound where one close to the boat was heard blowing loudly.
5	Sei Whale	Balaenoptera borealis	Five from the plane off Saunders Island; eight from the air off Bleaker Island; scores of 'blows' seen from Bleaker and in Berkley Sound.
6	Fin Whale	Balaenoptera physalus	A few seen blowing from Bleaker and in Berkley Sound.

OCEANIC DOLPHINS

- | | | |
|---|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| 7 | Killer Whale (Orca) | Orcinus orca |
| 8 | Peale's Dolphin | Lagenorhynchus australis |
| 9 | Commerson's Dolphin | Cephalorhynchus commersonii |

Family Delphinidae

A school of five seen close in to shore hunting seals or penguins from Sea Lion Island
 Two on the West Point trip; three schools around Bleaker Island; a school of eight around the boat off Kidney Island.
 Schools seen on four occasions around the islands, one of about six surfing the waves on Elephant Beach had been seen from the air as we came in to land on Pebble Island.

FISH

MULLET

- | | | |
|---|------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Falklands Mullet | Eleginops maclovinus |
|---|------------------|----------------------|

Family Eleginopidae

Three whoppers pulled out of the harbour at Goose Green.

OTHER TAXA

LADYBIRDS

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Eleven-spotted Ladybird | Coccinella 11 punctata |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------|

Family Coccinellidae

First recorded in the islands in 1982, we saw several on the trip.

MANED JELLYFISH

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|
| 2 | Lion's Mane Jellyfish | Cyanea capillata |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|

Family Cyanea

COMPASS JELLYFISH

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|
| 3 | Compass Jellyfish | Chrysaora hysoscella |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|

Family Pelagiidae

) These three species were commonly seen washed up on
) beaches this year. Some were being devoured by
) albatrosses
) at sea between Carcass and West Point Islands. I do not
) remember ever seeing jellyfish in the islands before.

MOON JELLYFISH

- | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| 4 | Moon Jellyfish | Aurelia aurita |
|---|----------------|----------------|

Family Ulmaridae

)

HEAVENLY BODIES

Orion: Rigel, Betelgeuse Orion the Hunter is one of the best known constellations in the sky. It contains the red super-giant star Betelgeuse and blue-white giant Rigel. The Great Nebula is the centre 'star' in Orion's sword. Betelgeuse (Alpha Orionis) is the second brightest star in the constellation, located 429 light years away from the Sun. A red giant marking the north-east shoulder of Orion, it is one of the largest diameter stars known, 667 times the diameter of the Sun. Rigel (Beta Orionis) is the brightest star in Orion, located 777 light years away from the Sun. It is an interesting double star. Rigel is located in the south-west corner, the right knee of Orion.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Gemini: Pollux and Castor | Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands. |
| Virgo | Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands. |
| Leo | Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands. |
| Regulus (in Leo) | Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands. |
| Crux, the Southern Cross | Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands. |
| The Jewelbox | Seen close to Crux from Sea Lion and on other islands. |

Large Magellanic Cloud with Tarantula nebula Discovered by the explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1519, it was used for navigation in the Southern Hemisphere. One of the closest galaxies to our own Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud is only 180,000 light years away, and closer than its companion galaxy, the Small Magellanic Cloud. The Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC) has an irregular shape and no central core, probably because of the gravitational attraction of the Milky Way, which is 10 times its size. The LMC encompasses several degrees in the sky and can be seen with the unaided eye by observers in the southern hemisphere. It appears as a huge and diffuse cloud in the sky and contains a treasure trove of celestial objects. Among its many interesting objects are nebulae, globular and open clusters, planetary nebulae, dust clouds and a giant region of hydrogen gas. In 1987, supernova 1987 A exploded in the LMC in 1987 (actually, 180,000 light years before 1987!), the nearest supernova in 400 years. The most prominent object in the LMC is the Tarantula Nebula, a large diffuse nebula. It is an absolute delight to sweep through this region with a field telescope.

Small Magellenic Cloud	Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands.
Sirius, the Dog Star	Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands.
Arcturus	Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands.
The Moon	Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands.
The Milky Way	Seen well from Sea Lion and on other islands.

ASCENSION ISLAND

BIRDS

FRIGATEBIRDS

1	Ascension Island Frigatebird	Fregata aquila
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Fregatidae

One flew over our heads as we walked to the cage.

STARLINGS

2	Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis
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Sternidae

About three in total.

Tim Earl

Principal leader

Guernsey

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