

As the Falkland Islands prepares to mark 40 years since its liberation, experience the wonderful wildlife highlights of this Atlantic archipelago

DOWN SOUTH

Photos by MARK SISSON

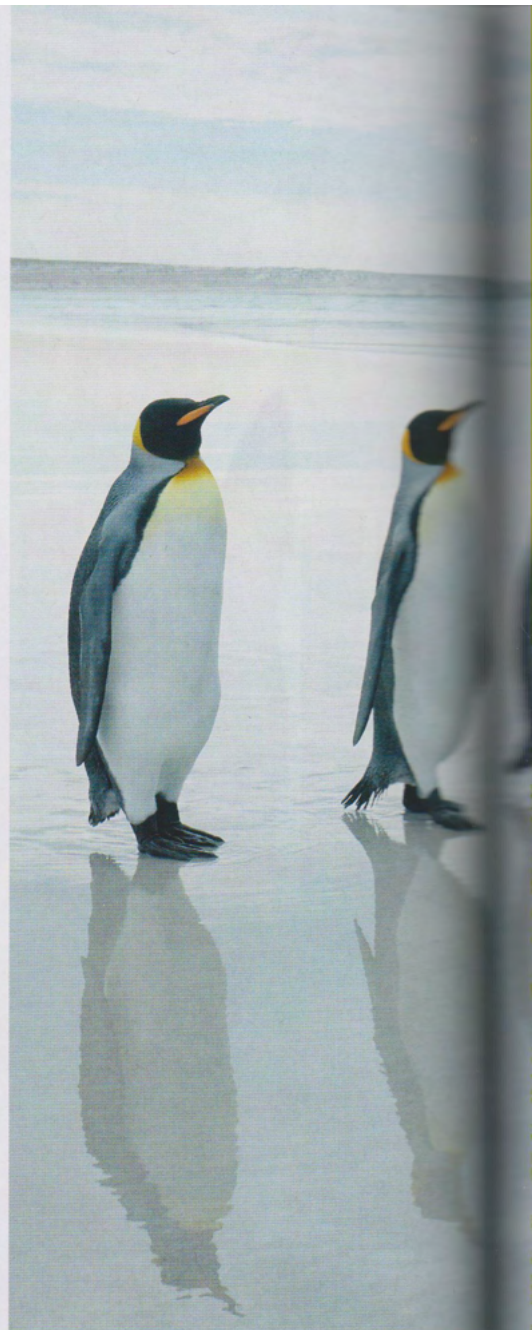


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Waiting patiently

The noisy black-browed albatross colony on Steeple Jason Island is on flat ground along the shoreline but the species is also known to nest on steep slopes. This colony consists of more than 200,000 breeding pairs and is the largest of any albatross species in the world. Fluffy, single chicks are often left alone for days while their parents forage out at sea. This youngster will fledge at four months and breed at about seven years old.





Taking its pick

In November, imperial cormorants (*above*) return to shore to breed. This one on Bleaker Island is pulling up clumps of *Empetrum rubrum*, known as diddle-dee or red crowberry, for its nest. The stunning blue ring around the bird's eye is most prominent during the breeding season.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A wildlife photographer based in Shropshire, Mark Sisson has spent nearly a decade capturing images of Falkland Island wildlife. His latest book *Wild Islands: The Nature of the Falklands*, is a collaborative project with Falklands Conservation.



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Beach buddies

Volunteer Point beach, East Falkland, is home to the biggest king penguin colony in the archipelago. The birds will cluster in small groups on the sand before and after their feeding trips.

Artist's impression

Mark captured this abstract image of a black-browed albatross while it rested on its nest. "I defy any makeup artist to match the delicate shades of colour that can be seen around its eyes," he exclaims. The long-lived, pelagic bird has a strong bond to its colony of birth.

Jumping for joy

Diminutive and striking, the Commerson's dolphin (*left*) can regularly be seen foraging by the shore. "The cetacean plays just for the fun of it and is attracted to any small boat that creates bow waves for it to ride," says Mark.





Tucked up

The last rays of the day illuminate a colony of black-browed albatrosses on the cliffs of New Island early in the breeding season. The species is monogamous and each pair takes turns to incubate their sole egg for about 70 days.

Scavenging seabird

A southern giant petrel glides effortlessly over rough sea during an extremely windy day in the summer at Volunteer Point. This master of the air survives on carrion, cephalopods, krill, discarded fish and refuse from ships, and often feeds near trawlers and longliners.

Eye for detail

Mark has spent a lot of time capturing the intricate shapes, patterns and textures of various species of bird in the Falkland Islands using a long lens. "None was more vibrant than the sweeping 'necklace' of a king penguin," he says.

Run for it

Southern rockhopper penguins face stressful challenges when they return from feeding trips to their breeding colonies because they are located at the top of steep cliffs. This pair coming ashore on New Island are moving with haste to avoid being dragged back into the sea by the next wave sweeping in behind them.



Peaceful slumber

"When it comes to cuteness, southern elephant seal pups seem to have it in abundance," says Mark. This two to three-month-old youngster, sleeping on a beach on Sea Lion Island is fully weaned. Although content for now, when hunger strikes, it will head out to sea to feed on fish and squid.





Grab and go

The striated caracara has a mischievous reputation for removing wipers from cars and targeting photographers' unattended equipment. Here, this iconic bird of prey of the Falklands, known locally as 'Johnny Rook', is eating a gentoo penguin egg taken from a nearby colony.

Under foot

"When walking in the Falklands, I always take time to look down as it can reveal things I could otherwise miss," explains Mark. King penguin footprints and delicate plants such as sea cabbage decorate the beach – the latter was historically eaten by sailors to ward off scurvy.





Gaggle of geese

Kelp geese, as their name suggests, are shore-based and can be found foraging for seaweed exposed on the beach or rocks during low tides. Here, the birds are feeding where a freshwater stream falls to the sea at Coffin Harbour, New Island, with the scuttled *Protector III* behind them.

Flexing muscles

Elephant seal bulls finish competing for the right to breed by early November on Sea Lion Island. Younger males, like this pair, which have kept their distance from the beach during this time, now engage in frequent tests of their own strength to start developing status hierarchies for the years ahead.

Early birds

Adult gentoo penguins make their way down Volunteer Beach and out to sea as the sun rises at 4am to maximise the time they spend feeding. The birds can travel up to 24km a day in search of food and will return to their nests in the evening to feed their chicks and swap with their partners, who will go in search of prey the following day. 