



The old whaling station on New Island is the only land-based whaling station in the Falklands.



Above: Eroded seabird burrow. Below: Mouse pictured in white-chinned petrel burrow, New Island Below right: Ship rat pictured in white-chinned petrel colony, New Island



Above: Beautiful New Island cliffs. Below: With continued restoration effort, New Island can keep being one of the most important sanctuaries for both people and nature in the Falklands. Photos FC unless otherwise indicated.



Last year, FC restored five eroded, white-chinned petrel burrows. They constructed the artificial nests using ducting donated by Trant Engineering. Below: Feral cat pictured in white-chinned petrel colony, New Island

New Island like new

WITH sprawling colonies of black-browed albatross, fur seals, sealions and penguins, and the world's largest breeding population of thin-billed prions, there is no doubt that New Island is an extraordinary place for wildlife.

This is in no small part thanks to the pioneering conservation action that has taken place there over the last half century. It's also an extraordinary place for people. Visitors enjoy the contrast between the dramatic cliff scenery and the gentle sandy beaches, and the Island's rich heritage with the remains of the only land-based whaling station, and historic stone buildings.

However, this is only part of the picture. As part of the Darwin Plus funded New Island Restoration Project, Falklands Conservation have learned some unsettling truths. Despite these past conservation efforts, many of the Island's ecosystems and species are still in decline.

Work undertaken by the RSPB used satellite data to confirm that

soil loss on New Island is an alarming problem. 23% of the island has been eroded to bare rock or clay, half of this in the past 18 years. Nine football pitches of soil are now lost each year. If this were to continue, the island would be soil-free in 250 years. The Island's soils, and therefore habitats supporting its unique biodiversity, are quite literally blowing into the wind.

Another startling discovery was the decline in white-chinned petrels. Historically, there have been between 30-50 breeding pairs of white-chinned petrels on New Island, but when a team conducted a survey of their population in February 2023, they found that none of the white-chinned petrels successfully raised a chick, and many of their burrows had eroded away leaving less than ten potential breeding burrows.

This species, which is in global decline and is found only at three other sites in the Falklands, is on the verge of local extinction. Unfortunately,

this is a similar fate to many other species which are notably absent from New Island, such as storm petrels, diving petrels, Cobb's wren, and camel crickets.

These examples are symptoms of an ecosystem under pressure, but what is driving it? The truth is that all the contributing factors, of which there are likely to be many, are not fully understood. However, the presence of invasive mammals is playing a role. Globally, invasive species are implicated in 86% of all recorded extinctions on islands, and on New Island there are four species of invasive mammals which are regarded to be among the world's most damaging: rats, mice, rabbits, and feral cats. Motion activated cameras installed at the white-chinned petrel colony showed feral cats regularly listening at the entrance of white-chinned petrel burrows and rats, mice and rabbits using the same area, sometimes the same burrows as the white-chinned petrels. Rats, mice, and cats threat-

en wildlife through predation, but mice and rabbits also play a large part in changing ecosystems. Mice eat insects and lots of seeds which can inhibit the recovery of native plant species. Rabbits are selective grazers, nibbling the shoots and seedlings of their favourite foods while largely ignoring some others. Combined, the effects of predation, changing ecosystems and suppressing recovery of flora and fauna, is undoubtedly a key part of why some of New Island's habitats and species are in decline.

The good news is that now more is known about some of the problems, Falklands Conservation is working towards fixing some of them.

Falklands Conservation installed some artificial nest burrows for the white-chinned petrels, and early indications are that the birds are keen to use them! It is also planned to tackle the causes of decline, and Falklands Conservation, along with FIG and RSPB are working towards

removing all the invasive mammals from New Island, halting the predation pressures and enabling the recovery of species and habitats. This would also enable continued restoration efforts to plant tussac and other native plants which will stabilise soils, capture carbon and provide a habitat for an increasing abundance and diversity of native species. One day, it is hoped that increasing numbers of white-chinned petrels will be seen safely breeding on New Island, and that extirpated species such as Cobb's wren, camel crickets and other small seabirds will recolonise the Island.

Falklands Conservation also aim to restore the historic stone building so that it will last for future generations to enjoy. In short, Falklands Conservation aims to build on the incredible conservation efforts that have been done in the past and enable New Island to become an even more extraordinary place for wildlife and people, in short, to be more like new. **FC**