

Falkland Islands

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Issue 40 • May 2024

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Watch Group
Family Camp





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Partnering with the local and international community to conserve the Falkland Islands' natural environment

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Publication Manager: Darnell Christie
Editor: Robert Still
Magazine Design: Studio 52, Julie Halliday
Printing: RSPB Reprographics



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Cover photo: Sooty shearwater flies in murmuration on Kidney Island. David Higgins

editorial

The last few months have been challenging for the natural environment of the Falkland Islands. With lightning strikes leading to wildfires on the wildlife rich islands of Bird Island and Sea Lion Island, our nature has sadly suffered. With our unique situation of having remote islands covered in highly flammable peat, coupled with a drying climate, the threat of wildfires is ever-present. At Falklands Conservation, we need to be aware of this threat, and prepared to do all we can to minimise both the risks of fires and the effects when they occur. This includes the islands under our own stewardship and elsewhere. On Pages 6 and 7, Grant Munro talks about the challenges posed by wildfires and what we can do to minimise risks in the future.

On pages 4 and 5, Ben Taylor explains how the Peatland Greenhouse Gas Project will help us to better understand the factors affecting greenhouse gas emissions/sequestration in peatland habitats. These data will be useful in enabling us to assess the feasibility of carbon offsetting schemes in the future. On page 13, David Higgins describes the workshops run on both East and West Falkland, used to introduce the Habitat Assessment Field Key to the agricultural sector (discussed in the previous edition of this magazine). These workshops aimed at supporting landowners to achieve specific standards covering animal welfare, pasture management and biodiversity criteria under the Responsible Wool Standard scheme.

We are lucky to have access to such a wide range of wildlife in the Falkland Islands. We have our annual Rare and Vagrant Bird Report on pages 10 and 11, with this year's report having a bumper set of rare birds turn up that provided local ornithologists with much excitement. On page 12, Darnell Christie talks about his experience while carrying out burrowing seabird surveys with volunteers on Kidney Island, and the importance of the work. Caroline Weir provides us with an insight into the increased incidents of cetacean strandings in the Falkland Islands and what we can learn from them on pages 8 and 9.

It is always motivating to see the next generation so keen and engaged in learning about conservation. In January, we were visited by the Dutch tall ship Oosterschelde, which is travelling around the world recreating Darwin's voyage. Whilst in Stanley, the Watch Group were invited onboard to partake in a live discussion with children from around the world about conservation and wildlife in their countries. Glenn Welch talks about our annual Watch Group Family Camp at Little Creek Farm on page 14. The group also had the opportunity to meet with current UK Foreign Secretary, Lord David Cameron and encouraged him to eat some local produce (see page 15).

Finally, we would like to say goodbye and a big thank you for all the work and support of several people. Our Board Chairperson of ten years, Roger Spink, who has provided excellent leadership and encouragement, and to colleagues David Higgins and Janna Biesiot. We would also like to welcome our new Chairperson Tom Blake, and new colleague Rabia Rao. The commitment and energy of our trustees and colleagues, as well as all our supporters and partners, is hugely important to us.

Esther Bertram
Chief Executive Officer

The Darwin200 Expedition in the Falkland Islands

By David Higgins Peatlands Biodiversity Project Manager

Charles Darwin visited the Falkland Islands twice, first in 1833 and later in 1834. He explored the Falklands on horseback, fascinated by the geology and fossils he found, but importantly it was here where he developed his early thoughts on the nature of species. The Falkland Islands were a Galapagos prototype; the place where he began to form his Theory on Evolution later expanded in the Galapagos Islands. So the Falklands have a unique and often forgotten place in the history of evolutionary theory.

The Darwin200 voyage, conceived and planned by Stewart McPherson and team, is following Charles Darwin's Beagle voyage on a two-year expedition on-board the incredible Dutch tall ship Oosterschelde. The aim is to develop the next generation of cutting-edge conservationists, chosen from countries around the world, who join different legs of the journey for a life changing experience of learning and development. Darwin himself realised that, 'nothing can be more improving to a young naturalist, than a journey in distant countries.' Each of the young Darwin Leaders carry out a project while on the voyage and this advancement of their skills gives them potential to become global promoters for positive change.

It was with great pleasure that Falklands Conservation were able to assist the Darwin200 voyage on its stop in the

Falklands. I guided them as they explored the importance and conservation of tussac grass habitats at Gypsy Cove, and Amanda Kuepfer (Seabirds Ecologist) demonstrated penguin monitoring at Yorke Bay, as part of the Falkland Islands Seabird Monitoring Programme. Amanda taught them how we count seabirds, the importance of monitoring to understand population dynamics along with the potential drivers of changing numbers. She explained the threats to wild populations and the need to help conserve them.

I also discussed my work on the Darwin Plus Peat-Wetlands Project, alongside the importance of terrestrial-marine linkage in tussac grass habitats. I explained how the annual influx of breeding seabirds provides a habitat-scale symbiosis; tussac grass offering the nesting habitat, with the seabirds delivering nutrient inputs that allow the tussac to thrive.

Each of the young conservationists aboard the voyage produce video log outputs and we wait to see the films produced in the Falkland Islands which will be posted on the Darwin200 website: <https://darwin200.com/blog/>

As in nature it is the same with people; positive relationships help us to succeed and develop our knowledge, argument and conflict hold us back or reverse advances. The world's greatest-ever scientist put it best, 'in the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed'; (Charles Darwin). Falklands Conservation wishes the Darwin200 project every luck over the next 18 months of their voyage. We hope they prevail. 🐧

Members of the Watch Group before the tour of the Oosterschelde.



The Darwin200 voyage is aboard the Oosterschelde – a three-masted topsail schooner.



The Watch Group were invited to attend a tour of the Darwin 200 voyage ship, the Oosterschelde.



Understanding breeding success and population dynamics of seabirds helps us understand threats and gives us information to conserve their populations in the Falklands.



GHG project progress and next steps

By *Dr Ben Taylor* Peatland GHG Project Manager

2023 saw the start of an ambitious 3-year project, titled "Improving Falkland Peatland GHG data: understanding carbon sequestration and offsetting feasibility", with Falklands Conservation leading a specialist team of Partner organisations SAERI, UK CEH and BAS in its delivery. The project intends to improve our understanding of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the peatland habitats of the Falkland Islands and assess the carbon offsetting opportunities that their conservation and restoration could offer.

Anecdotally, there is a trend of drying climate. Drying land across the Falklands contributes to the reduction in vegetation, lowering its capacity to support the primary rural activity of sheep farming, which itself can impact vegetation cover through grazing pressure – driving feedback loops which negatively affect the ecosystem. Furthermore, a drying climate could impact the vast peatland carbon stores of the Islands. This is because changing conditions facilitate increased organic matter breakdown which is known to influence the rate of GHG emissions, like carbon dioxide. The knowledge generated by this project could help address these challenges through the possible implementation of a carbon offsetting scheme, the value of which

is generated through environmental improvements which reduce carbon emissions from peatlands. Such a scheme could also provide an alternative rural livelihood for landowners.

The project so far

The project is made up of three components, which will broadly run alongside each other, these being:

Improving our understanding of current greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from habitats (focusing on tussac grass and white grass).

This will be achieved through the deployment of GHG flux towers and chambers to create a network across the Falkland Islands. This will provide data on the sequestration or release rates of key GHGs (Carbon Dioxide (CO₂), Methane (CH₄) and Nitrous Oxide (N₂O)).

Investigating the current and historical accumulation and erosion of peat.

This will be achieved through the study of peat cores, which will also illustrate carbon storage capacity of the environment now and into the future.

Assessing the carbon offsetting opportunity in the Falkland Islands.

The project will achieve this by garnering environmental data around the benefits, considerations, and risks of a carbon offsetting scheme, while also incorporating the thoughts of the community.

Much of 2023 focused on getting all the necessary equipment to the Falklands. This comprised of nearly 300 individual items, many of which made their way to the Islands on the monthly delivery ship. By December 2023, everything had arrived, and we readied ourselves to begin gathering data.

Whilst awaiting equipment delivery,

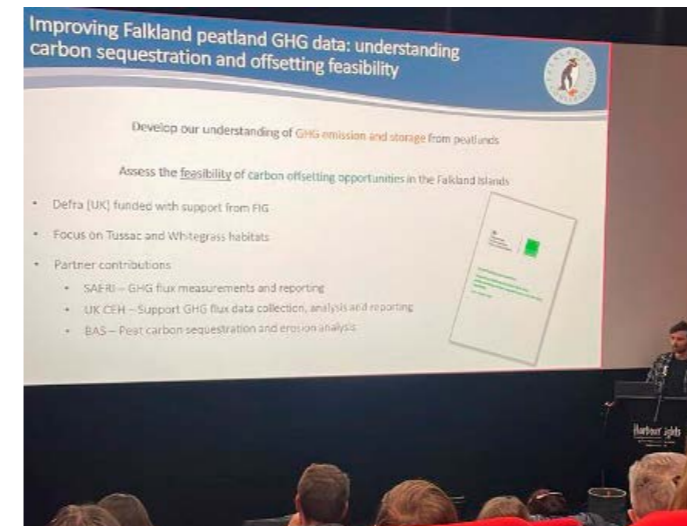
the project was introduced to the community at 'Farmers Week', an annual event which brings together landowners, farmers, government, organisations, and members of the public to discuss all things agriculture. Falklands Conservation spoke about the challenges and opportunities it is working to address and deliver, including this project. It was encouraging to have plenty of questions from the audience on the project – an important first step to begin engagement with the community.

During February 2024, project partners from the UK visited the Falklands to progress the project through the installation of the GHG flux towers (led by UK CEH) and sampling of peat cores (led by BAS).

Measuring GHG flux

The project will use four flux towers and a network of 20 flux chamber sites to measure GHG emissions from across the Islands. Flux towers are tripod structures bristling with sensors and analysers which are established in the environment and capture high-resolution data constantly (20 times a second!). The data captured comprises of everything from soil moisture, solar radiation, wind speed and importantly, concentrations of GHGs – sampling an area approximately 100m wide. The chamber network is a series of discreet points at which measurements will be taken monthly, again, capturing information on moisture, light and GHG flux.

Specialists from UK CEH installed two flux towers on East Falkland to allow comparison of terrestrial white grass type habitats, and another two on smaller islands to assess the effect of tussac



Project Lead, Ben Taylor, introducing the project to the community at Farmers Week 2023.



Falklands Conservation and SAERI demonstrating the use of a portable gas analyser (flux chamber) for the local media. The equipment will be used by the project.



LEFT Ground anchor screws being installed to secure flux tower tripod against the typical high winds of the Falkland Islands; CENTRE Flux tower tripod with some units attached whilst survey work is carried out; RIGHT UKCEH team nearing completion of flux tower installation. Each tower took around three days to install.

restoration. By the end of February, GHG emissions data were being collected from all the sites.

Coring peat

Peat cores are being used to provide insight into historical peat accumulation rates and current carbon storage capacity under different habitat conditions. The core sampling and associated peat depth surveying was carried out by a team from BAS in February 2024. The team took cores at each flux tower site to provide data on the specific situation around

each tower. The collected peat cores will be transferred to the UK for full analysis, including bulk density, carbon content, radiocarbon dating and change ecology data.

Project next steps

The project will continue to collect GHG data over the next two years, with monthly sampling across the chamber network and regular data retrieval from towers also taking place. These data will be analysed to provide emission factors for the different habitat types.

Additionally, in the next few months, work will commence to assess the feasibility of carbon offsetting in the Falklands, considering everything from project opportunities to financial risks and legal concerns. Funding for the project is primarily provided by Defra (UK), with further contributions from the Falkland Islands Government in the form of additional equipment. RSK have also contributed by providing funding for a Project Leader to manage and deliver the project.

Coastal tussac habitat of the Falkland Islands.



Peat core sample inside coring apparatus taken at Horseshoe Bay by BAS team, showing peat (brown, left) to clay (grey, right) interface.



Island Restoration – Challenges and Opportunities

By Grant Munro Terrestrial Lead

Although the Falkland Islands may appear largely untouched, the majority of the Islands' habitats have still been influenced and modified by human activities. The initial sealers of the early 19th century set fire to tussac to drive out seals, the early unfenced grazing of wild cattle, and subsequently sheep, largely removed tussac from the mainland of East and West Falkland. Ongoing selective grazing has modified the species composition of native habitats.

Just a fraction of one percent (0.15%) of the Falklands' land area, extending to 1,755 ha, can still be called pristine. These small offshore islands have never been grazed and remain free of introduced rats or mice and hold a disproportionate amount of our wildlife. They are an incredibly valuable national resource with irreplaceable conservation value.

In recent years, human-induced climate change has raised further challenges to land management and conservation and will keep doing so if the landscape continues to dry out as forecast. A drying landscape increases the risk of erosion as peatlands dry-out (and become hydrophobic), pasture production declines and surface soils become more hostile to seed germination. Furthermore, the combination of predicted increased storm events, drier vegetation and peat soils significantly increases the fire risk both from natural lightning strikes and accidental human causes.

This year has seen wildfires on Bird Island, Grand Jason, Sea Lion Island, Saunders Island and Johnson's Harbour, all,

most likely caused by lightening. Whilst all fires are potentially devastating and can lead to significant habitat, soil and carbon loss, the fire on Bird Island in January 2024 was particularly devastating with upwards of 210,000 - 315,000 thin-billed prion nests impacted, in what was the world's second-most important site for the species.

To improve the overall net habitat values of the Falklands and roll restoration forward, we must not only restore bare ground and improve already degraded habitats, but also ensure that our land management and fire response does not cause further bare areas and erosion to appear. It may not always be possible in the case of fire, but it should be our intention whenever possible by committing to forward planning and response.

Both sides of the equation are imperative. To do one (restoration) when neglecting the other (management and response) is the equivalent of one step forward and two steps backwards. Over the course of the last 20 years, some 350,000 tussac tillers covering 70 ha have been planted by a range of dedicated landowners, volunteers, and organisations. However, over the course of just a few days this summer, a combined area of almost 45 ha of land was lost on Bird Island and Sea Lion Island, equivalent to more than 10-years of planting efforts undone. This extended to both tussac and dwarf shrub heath and whilst some of this may regrow, much could still be lost.

Without any additional new degradation, it is estimated that there is already around 5000 ha of bare tussac peat exposures around the Islands, not counting clay patch or mobile sand. If re-planting was to continue at the same rate as has been achieved over the last 20 years, then it would take us another 15 centuries (1,500 years) just to restore



Prions and petrels were the most impacted on Bird Island as the fire swept through the tussac habitat where they nest in burrows. Charred corpses of adults and chicks were both encountered. It is estimated that upwards of 210,000–315,000 nests may have been impacted. IGOR BELLY

the bare ground we already have. We cannot afford for more bare ground to be forming. It is essential to value the habitats we already have when they are still in a condition that can respond to management. Some of this will come with a cost, but prevention is invariably better than cure. It is easier, and likely more cost effective, to catch and protect what we still have than to try and restore what we have already lost.

Of course, the issue must be tackled from both sides, exposed tussac peat will erode if direct intervention and planting is not undertaken. On the flip side, restoration and planting rates have increased in the last few years. But there remains much work to be done to fully mainstream this activity and to create a conservation economy where planting and restoration is as valued a seasonal job as shearing or fencing.

Falklands Conservation has projects working on both sides of the land-management equation – valuing, and protecting what we have but also working



Coastal erosion of former tussac peat and subsequently the underlying clay layers. Maintenance of vegetation cover is essential to prevent this erosion from gaining hold.

to restore degraded habitats and to better manage for fire preparedness.

Restoration

Volunteer tussac planting has been conducted on Motley Island through EU BEST and continues on Middle Island with the support of Georgia Seafoods. Over 16 ha has been planted over the last 4 years.

This latter Georgia Seafoods initiative is particularly encouraging, as it demonstrates a partnership with a local business interested in offsetting some of their carbon impacts, albeit in an unofficial manner at present.

In the longer term, such offsetting may provide a sustainable economic model for supporting and mainstreaming such restoration work. This meshes into other ongoing project work (described in the current issue – see pages 4-5) to better understand the interchange of greenhouse gases in Falklands peatlands, and to determine whether carbon sequestration and storage is still ongoing in healthy and/or restored native habitats.

Contract tussac planting is due to commence on Pebble Islet this current winter season, funded by the UK Darwin Initiative. The aim is to help develop a conservation economy, where such restoration becomes an ongoing and reliable seasonal employment. It is hoped that this will extend the available labour pool and allow planting to be expanded to larger, more significant areas, resulting in a step-change in our restoration capacity. The target is to replant 24 ha on Pebble Islet.

Land management

Responsible Wool Standard (RWS).

A Darwin Local grant has allowed the development of a Native Habitat Scoring Matrix, to provide farmers with a simple tool for valuing their farms' native habitats. This will help farmers to comply with the requirements of the RWS scheme. Additionally, since approximately



Erosion can also occur on upland sites with the drying out and cracking through the depth of the peat profile.

92% of the Falklands' land area is farmed, small gains and improvements in valuing and managing native pastures can have a significant impact when scaled up across the landscape. A series of workshops have been delivered by Falklands Conservation to demonstrate the use of the matrix (see page 13).

Set-Aside

A collaboration with the John Ellerman Fund has allowed us to investigate the potential for use of set-aside in the Falkland Islands, both as an environmental measure and as a potential source of secondary farm income, as sheep stock numbers continue to fall due to drying lands. This could take many forms but in its most basic form, could be a payment made to farmers and land managers to incentivise certain management practices or modify stocking rates.

Fire preparedness

A Darwin Local grant has facilitated the purchase of a stock of basic fire-fighting hand-tools and equipment that can be rapidly deployed from a central source when required. This will be combined with wildfire operator training provided by UK Defra, to widen the pool of available personnel with basic training. The knowledge learned will add to and improve the pre-prepared fire plan data sheets that Falklands Conservation holds for each of its 23 islands. Deployment and response may not always be possible, but having all the information collated, may save valuable time in response planning and mobilization, whilst some mitigation may be able to be put in place in advance.

Falklands Conservation continues to try and work with all parties across land management, to promote and facilitate sustainable use of our resources within a working landscape, and to achieve a balance between this and island reserves.



When the coastal tussac fringe is thinned out below a certain density (by grazing or fire) wind corridors can form between the remaining bogs, removing the leaf litter and preventing any accumulation. As the site dries new plants do not self-set and the old bogs gradually die out leaving a lunar-like landscape that is subject to wind erosion. The eroding peat is either deposited inland, burying and destabilizing further vegetation, or blown out to sea where it can inhibit marine growth.



Volunteer tussac planters on Motley Island.



Surveying of the critically endangered Falkland Islands endemic plant, Falklands nassauvia which is restricted to just 5 known sites on the highest peaks of West Falkland. GRANT MUNRO

Bird Island before and after. GRANT MUNRO (LEFT); MEGAN TIERNEY (RIGHT)



John Ellerman Foundation



High and dry – our work with stranded whales

By Dr Caroline Weir Cetacean Ecologist



Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) have been documented coming ashore around the world since historical records began. The term 'stranding' is used to describe both cetaceans that die at sea and subsequently wash ashore, and events involving live animals that beach themselves.

Stranded cetaceans once provided a bonanza of food for villages (and still do in some parts of the world) or were placed on carts and towed around towns for public display. Nowadays, cetacean strandings still regularly attract crowds of onlookers, especially the spectacle of large whales or schools of smaller animals that 'mass strand' together. Even for those of us fortunate enough to work regularly with cetaceans, a stranding provides a fascinating opportunity to view the full size and pigmentation pattern of animals rather than the brief and partial glimpses that are usually available at sea.

Unlike seals and otters, cetaceans are fully aquatic mammals that give birth, nurse their young, and feed entirely in water. Indeed, their aquatic environment is what has enabled the great whales to reach their enormous body sizes, freed from the limitations of gravity that apply on land. A cetacean that finds itself

stranded alive ashore is therefore in real difficulty, and without assistance such animals often perish due to dehydration, overheating, stress, injury including internal injuries caused by their own weight, or from being unable to breathe as the tide returns.

In the Falklands stranding database, the earliest records date back to the 1800s. However, almost a quarter of the records are from the last 10 years, corresponding with the onset of targeted cetacean research in the Islands and associated increased reporting and recording. An impressive 27 species have stranded in the Falklands, including little-known beaked whales, and rarely encountered species such as spectacled porpoise, southern right whale dolphins and pygmy right whales. The statistics in the Falklands are probably unique globally; a quarter of strandings comprise baleen whales and 17% are beaked whales, while those groups form the minority in most regions. Although 47% of strandings are of dolphins, 65% of those are long-finned pilot whales and most are mass strandings of up to 500 animals. These statistics are doubtlessly biased by under-reporting of smaller animals that strand in single events. For example, the two common coastal dolphin species, Peale's and Commerson's dolphins, together comprise only 8% of the total stranding database records. At least two factors explain this. Firstly, the

Falklands coastline is long, remote and convoluted, and many strandings are therefore observed by pilots flying for the Falkland Islands Government Air Service – large whales and mass strandings (and associated aggregations of scavenging giant petrels) are most obvious from the air. Secondly, the vast number of scavenging birds in the Falklands mean that small single animals can be completely consumed within around 48 hours, leaving only their bones.

57% of the stranded baleen whales that have been identified to species level in the Falklands were sei whales. This makes the Islands one of two hotspots globally for sei whale strandings (the other being the Chilean fjords). Falklands Conservation has carried out field research on sei whales since 2017, and over that timeframe we have seen a steady increase in the number of stranded sei whales reported annually from single events in 2017 and 2018 to a record number of nine strandings of this species in 2023. While it is always a sad event to see a dead whale, we make the most of these incidents by taking a suite of body measurements and collecting samples (blubber, skin, baleen plates and bone) for our ongoing research into the genetics, life history and diet of the species. We also try and locate the stomach and intestines to collect prey, faecal material, and parasites, and we sample other organs (to test for disease) if an animal is sufficiently fresh.

Pilot whale: Freshly dead juvenile long-finned pilot whale at Bertha's beach. CAROLINE WEIR/FC



Young sei whale that live stranded and subsequently died. CAROLINE WEIR/FC

In January, we attended a live stranding of two sei whales that had been driven into a bay by killer whales and stranded themselves to avoid being preyed. Those whales took 24 hours to die following stranding and the event was traumatic for both the whales and the human onlookers. While we were sadly unable to end their suffering, we did keep one animal as comfortable as possible by deterring giant petrels and keeping its skin wet until it passed.

Establishing the cause of death is a critical component of attending a cetacean stranding, since this can directly identify human threats to species and feed into conservation and management plans. For example, if fresh propeller marks or rope marks are evident on dead animals, then it would suggest that the death might be attributed to vessel strike and fishing gear entanglement respectively. While it is often difficult to conclusively establish cause of death (since animals may be quite decomposed), several recent strandings of sei whales in the Falklands have been confirmed as the result of predation attempts by killer whales and are considered natural mortalities.

It is relatively rare for baleen whales to

strand alive, and the options for refloating them are limited by their sheer size. Studies have shown that euthanasia is difficult to achieve for large whales in a humane way and without endangering humans. Chemical injections can be used for euthanasia, but carcasses must then be disposed of very carefully. In the Falkland Islands, where strandings are often in remote locations and large numbers of scavenging birds are present, chemical euthanasia isn't feasible. The use of ballistics to despatch live animals is also challenging in large whales, requiring a high calibre of weaponry and often multiple carefully placed shots. As a result, the advice from many management bodies worldwide (including the UK) is not to intervene with live large whale strandings, but to let them die naturally.

It is likely that whale strandings around the Falklands will become more common as populations recover across the Southern Hemisphere, and Falklands Conservation is committed to both scientific sampling of dead animals to provide management-related insights on their threats and life history, and to developing practical decision-making guidance for handling live animals to optimise animal welfare considerations. 🐋



Collecting digested prey from the intestine of a dead whale. SUSAN RUTHERFORD/FC



Dead juvenile sei whale in Berkeley Sound. CAROLINE WEIR/FC



Attending strandings sometimes produces surprises, like this rare specimen of a spectacled porpoise which we subsequently sent to London's Natural History Museum. ANDY STANWORTH/FC

Thanks to Darwin Plus for funding our whale research, including stranding sampling, since 2019. Many thanks to the numerous landowners, Falkland Islands Government Air Service (FIGAS) pilots and visitors who have reported cetacean strandings over the years.

Rare and Vagrant Bird Report

1st July 2022–30th June 2023

Each year many unusual avian visitors are blown off course and arrive in the Falkland Islands, sightings are collected by Mike Morrison.

Adelie penguin

Pygoscelis adeliae

On the 29th September Richard Sheldrake saw and photographed a single bird at Chubut Creek, Port Louis.

Chinstrap penguin

Pygoscelis antarcticus

A single bird was seen by Dave Carter on the rocks at the end of Cape Pembroke on the 28th July, another single bird possibly the same one was again seen by Dave at Cape Pembroke on the 24th September.

Black-bellied storm-petrel

Fregetta tropica

A single bird feeding with 20+ Wilson's Storm-petrels off Cape Pembroke and drifting slowly north on the 14th November sighted by Ryan Irvine. Another single bird was seen by Micky Reeves off Sea Lion Island on the 31st March.

Light-mantled albatross

Phoebastria palpebrata

A single bird off Cape Pembroke on the 6th September seen and reported by Ryan Irvine. Another single bird was seen off Cape Pembroke by Ryan Irvine on the 28th October.

Mottled petrel

Pterodroma inexpectata

A single bird was seen by Ryan Irvine off Cape Pembroke on the 17th August; Ryan consulted with other birders with the description and sketch in the identification of this bird. This is the second record of this species in Falkland waters.

Kerguelen petrel

Aphrodroma brevirostris

Four birds were seen off Cape Pembroke on the 6th September by Ryan Irvine. Another single bird was seen by Micky Reeves off Sea Lion Island on the 27th May.

Manx shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

Two birds were seen by Ryan Irvine off Cape Pembroke on the 20th November. A single bird was seen by Micky Reeves off Cow Bay, Sea Lion Island on the 4th December.

Cocoi heron *Ardea cocoi*

A single bird was reported by Nick Pitaluga at Salvador settlement around the area of the jetty and barges which was there for approximately five weeks through November and early December.

Snowy egret *Egretta thula*

A single bird at the ditch below the reservoir at Goose Green settlement, spotted by Ryan Irvine on the 26th October, and Micky Reeves on the 31st October, seen in the same area up until the 5th November, Ryan Irvine.

South Georgia shag

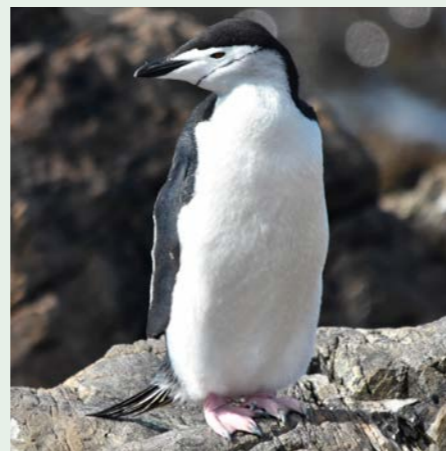
Phalacrocorax georgianus

On the 23rd February Micky Reeves photographed a single bird at Sea Lion Island with other Shags *Phalacrocorax atriceps* showing white back patch when in flight.

Southern lapwing

Vanellus chilensis

A single bird was seen on Steeple Jason Island in late December by Danni Thompson.



Chinstrap penguin. MIKE MORRISON

Least seedsnipe

Thinocorus rumicivorus

A single bird at Port Edgar which was reported by Dale Evans on the 6th May.

Lesser yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*

A single bird was reported by Ryan Irvine at Yorke Bay pond on the 18th October and two birds at Long pond, Cape Pembroke on the 20th October also reported by Ryan Irvine, these birds stayed in the area of Long pond and Big pond, Cape Pembroke until at least the 5th November. Nick Rendell reported a single bird at garden pond Bleaker Island settlement on the 6th November, still present at the same location on the 12th November seen by Andy Pollard. Three birds at the pond in Phillips Point (same pond as the Wilson's Phalaropes) reported by Andy Pollard on the 5th December, four birds were seen by Ryan Irvine the next day, at least three of these birds remained in the area of the pond and south beach until early March. A single bird was seen by Andy Pollard at the penguin colonies at Volunteer Point on the 13th February.

Greater yellowlegs

Tringa melanoleuca

A single bird was seen by Micky Reeves at the Canache, east end of Stanley Harbour on the 2nd November. A single

bird was seen by Nick Bonner at the road crossing of the Pedro river on the 28th December. A single bird was seen at Gull Island pond by James Port on the 26th January (ebird post with photo).

Wilson's phalarope

Steganopus tricolor

Five birds were reported by Nick Rendell at Bleaker Island on the 17th October. Georgina Strange reported a single bird at New Island on the 21st November. Another single bird was seen at the Big pond, Whale Point by Ryan Irvine on the 22nd October, and also seen the next day by Ryan Hawksworth. Six birds on a pond in Phillips Point, Stanley Common, seen by Sue and Stephen Luxton on the 8th November still in the same location up until the 13th November, on the 5th December Andy Pollard found four birds on the same pond in Phillips Point it is unknown if these were part of the first flock, these four birds remained on the pond until at least the 14th February, Micky Reeves.

Aplomado falcon *Falco femoralis*

A small falcon was seen by Dave Carter flying over Diamond Jubilee Road, Stanley on the 24th August and at the east end of Stanley airport runway by Sue and Mike Morrison, more sightings were made at Sapper hill and the racecourse by Ryan Irvine and Dave Carter on the 1st September. Another sighting on the 9th September by Ryan Hawksworth over Davis Street flying towards Memorial wood, the last sighting was by Sue Morrison at the south side of Cape Pembroke. It was concluded to be this species.

Cattle tyrant *Machetornis rixosa*

A report of a single bird at West Point Island (ebird post) on the



Wilson's phalaropes at Phillips Point. MIKE MORRISON

11th November another report of this bird on ebird appeared on the 19th November accompanied by a photograph by Amin Khalifa taken near the garden on West Point Island.

Eastern kingbird

Tyrannus tyrannus

A strange bird was reported by Tim Stenning at the old whaling station on New Island on the 13th February this was later identified by Will Wagstaff as this species plus a second bird that was at New Island on the 2nd March.

Fork-tailed flycatcher

Tyrannus savana

A bird fitting the description of this species was reported at Horseshoe Bay settlement by Maggie Goss on the 9th November. Micky Reeves reported a single bird at Sea Lion Island on the 13th November. A single bird at the beach east end of Surf Bay found by Colin Clingham on the 20th November, this bird remained in this location at least until the 1st December. A single bird reported at Goose Green settlement by Glynis Newman on the 14th March.

Rufous-collared sparrow

Zonotrichia capensis

A single bird seen at the lodge, Weddell Island settlement on the 17th 18th and 19th September, by Mike Morrison.

Grassland yellow finch

Sicalis luteola

A single bird at New Island identified by Will Wagstaff and reported by Tim Stenning on the 2nd March.

Sand martin (Bank swallow)

Riparia riparia

A single bird at Hookers Point on the 3rd November seen by Ryan Irvine (see above). Another single bird at Carcass Island on the 11th November reported by Alvaro Jaramillo, (ebird post). A single bird at Kidney Cove, Murrell Farm in a flight of swallows seen by Ryan Hawksworth on the 19th November. A single bird at Rookery Bay seen by Ryan Irvine on the 25th November.

White-banded mockingbird

Mimus triurus

A single bird was photographed on Steeple Jason Island by Ellen Adelman on the 12th November, (ebird report).

Thank you to those who sent in their observations, and the full report is available on request to

info@conservation.org.fk.



Snowy egret at Goose Green. MIKE MORRISON



Lesser yellowlegs at Phillips Point. MIKE MORRISON



Fork-tailed flycatcher. GLENN WELCH

Burrowing Seabird Surveys on Kidney Island

By *Darnell Christie* Volunteer

As the wind rushed through my hair on that early mid-February morning, my mind began to drift, envisioning the abundant natural paradise to which I was slowly approaching. With each undulating ocean wave, my thoughts conjured up an image of the tranquillity that I would soon experience that day.

Dreamy, though this oasis may have been, my expectant imagination was quickly punctuated by the frequent splashes of harbour water, lurching themselves from underneath the small launch.

We arrived on Kidney Island a little after 8am on that day. This was the second time that I had landed on the island, which happens to be one of the Falklands most important sites for wildlife. Harboured tens of thousands of breeding seabird pairs, abundant with marine life and even being one of four sites where the elusive, white-chinned petrel is known to breed; it's easy to see why the Island has been designated as a national nature reserve and prioritised by the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) for conservation.

To help maintain conservation efforts on Stanley's tussac islands (of which Kidney Island is a part), Falklands Conservation (FC) has been undertaking burrowing seabird surveys over the past months on behalf of FIG's Environment Department. The surveys, that so far have been completed on Kidney and Top Island, will provide updated information on sooty shearwater and white-chinned petrel populations, which will help to

inform a review of FIG's Stanley Tussac Islands Management Plan 2018-23. Further surveys on Cochon and Bottom Island are planned for the following breeding season.

On 16th February, I joined Amanda Kuepfer (Falklands Conservation's Seabird Ecologist) and several volunteers, to help complete the burrowing seabird surveys. Once Amanda had given our briefing on the beach, we soon split into groups to complete the day's work. There were around 50 plots that had been systematically chosen as survey spots across the island. The island was divided into sections, with each group of volunteers taking charge of a section.

While surveying, my group took readings of the number of burrows around each plot; average tussac height; land elevation; soil moisture and percentage of bare land area in the plot. Although obtaining most of the data was straightforward; searching for burrows required a bit more effort. To determine the number of burrows in the area, we often had to crawl on our hands and knees and search under tussac grass. This got trickier as we neared the island's cliffs, and the elevation of the land became steeper – not the easiest of work!

Once all the plots had been surveyed, we returned to the beach to debrief and await our launch back to Stanley. Despite my tiredness after the day, it felt good to actively get involved with conservation efforts, and even better knowing that all the data gathered, would be used to inform future management planning for this beautiful tussac island. This work goes a long way to ensure the protection of our seabird populations. 🐦



Sooty shearwater burrow on Kidney Island. FITV



Volunteers survey seabird burrows. FITV



Volunteer measures tussac grass height at a survey site on the island. FITV

Sooty shearwater in flight. GLENN WELCH



Volunteers land on beach ahead of fieldwork on Kidney Island. FITV

Falklands Conservation deliver Responsible Wool Standard Workshops

By *David Higgins* Peatlands Biodiversity Project Manager

Over 40 farms in the Falkland Islands, which is over half the farms in the islands and covers 1.13 million hectares, have joined the Responsible Wool Standard (RWS) scheme.

The scheme ensures that farms meet specific standards covering animal welfare, pasture management and biodiversity criteria. This means that farms must evidence that biodiversity is both considered and monitored, so that native habitats are well managed. The new Falklands Conservation Habitat Assessment is an ideal tool to help farmers adhere to the Land Management requirements of the RWS, which looks at: soil, biodiversity and water in peatland habitats. The assessment provides an improved quantitative understanding of land and enables long term monitoring in an objective and reportable format, which can then be provided to third parties, such as RWS auditors.

In January 2024, Falklands Conservation (FC) and the Department of Agriculture (DOA) ran training workshops

on both East and West Falkland to assist farmers in the development of skills, encompassing both plant and habitat monitoring – which, considering our ever-changing climate, are important indicators of land health. We achieved this by using the Habitat Assessment, as well as a dedicated Falkland Islands Pasture Condition Score Sheet (PCSS), developed by the DOA. The collaborative workshops were attended by 32 participants, funded by the Darwin Plus Local Biodiversity Project, and managed by FC Terrestrial Lead, Grant Munro.

The workshops were open to RWS farmers, non-RWS farmers and anyone else with an interest in habitat and pasture monitoring. The sessions began with a short indoor meeting to explain the assessment methods and to answer questions before heading into the field for practical demonstrations. We showed how the Habitat Assessment uses plant, bird, soil cover and vegetation measures to assign a score to areas of peatland, classifying them from 'Very Good' to 'Very Poor'. The best habitats are usually found on near-pristine and remote islands, whereas the most impacted locations are areas of bare peat or clay. Most of the

The Habitat Assessment key and Scoring Sheet can be downloaded from the Falklands Conservation website, under the 'Falkland Islands Habitat Assessment' section: <https://falklandsconservation.com/downloads/>

grasslands on East and West Falkland fall into the 'Moderate' category, with some reaching the 'Good' category.

The PCSS was developed as a quick and easy method to assess pastures within Camp at set locations, thus capturing changes over time. Ideally, the PCSS is used four times annually; spring, summer, going into and coming out of winter, to capture seasonality changes. The assessment itself takes approximately 10 minutes, but captures vital information about pasture production, grazing utilisation, and the species present. The Habitat Assessment takes a little longer – but once the survey location is set up, the method takes approximately 20 minutes. This is a relatively short period for a robust method, which provides meaningful information for classifying habitats as part of a long-term monitoring method to report back to the RWS auditors.

We hope to run similar sessions during Farmers Week in July. While this is outside the ideal survey season, (November to February) the process can still be taught. There will also be future bespoke and 'refresher' workshops to ensure that anyone who is interested in the methods, can access training. 🐦



Participants learning to use quadrats for plant surveys.



Habitat monitoring workshop at Hill Cove where participants learned to score habitats and pastures.

Practical demonstrations of the monitoring methods at Hill Cove



Watch Group Family Camp makes annual return

By Glenn Welch Watch Group Coordinator

On the weekend of 10th-11th February, the Watch Group and their families headed to Little Creek Farm for their annual camp. Kindly hosted by Emily and Mark Gilbert, the children and their families enjoyed a range of activities related to conservation and nature. Fortunately, the weather was kind to us allowing us to have a packed schedule of outdoor activities.

This year, for the first time, a competitive element was introduced with families being split into teams and competing for the chocolatey prizes on offer at the end of the weekend! After pitching the tents we headed to Smylie's Black Rincon for the first activity. This involved carrying out a habitat assessment as developed under the Falklands Conservation (FC) Peat Wetlands Project which has been introduced to landowners for potential use as part of the Responsible Wool Standard. The children used this to assess part of the habitat of Little Creek. The children and their families then tried their hands at rockpooling, discovering a number of weird and wonderful creatures. Points were given for each different species found, with bonus points given for correct identification. It was incredible seeing just how much life there was living in these pools.

The groups then headed off on a wildlife walk to see which team could spot the most species. A large number of bird species was seen, with birds ranging from siskins to red backed hawks - but the highlight of this wildlife watching

walk was a group of sei whales blowing just off the shore. After watching these for a while, it was time to head back to camp.

On return to camp, three of the Watch Group members (Xenia, Rose and Katie) ran a treasure hunt for the other members. This was a resounding success and it was great to see some of the children starting to take on leadership roles within the group. The day was rounded off with a delicious barbecue after which the children enjoyed toasted marshmallows.

On the Sunday, the group headed off to a different beach where they were greeted by a colony of gentoo penguins. The teams then set off to clean the beach, with points being awarded for the team that collected the most rubbish. Despite the beach appearing clean at first glance, the groups were still able to fill several sacks full of rubbish leaving the environment in a better state than when they arrived.

This was followed by a nature art competition with each team creating a work of art using just the natural materials found on the beach. The three groups showed great creativity by creating a rockhopper penguin, a field of sheep and an underwater scene.

After lunch by the beach, there was time for a quick scavenger hunt before heading back to take down the tents, tot up the points and reward the winning team with chocolate! Everyone then headed home exhausted but happy!

Many thanks to the hosts, sponsors, volunteers, parents, and Watch Group members who together, enabled this event to happen.

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Collecting rubbish from the beach; Toasting marshmallows on the barbecue; Looking for creatures in the rockpools; The winning team with their chocolatey prizes; Some of the children with their nature art Rockhopper Penguin; The Watch Group and their families who attended the camp.



With the generous support of Springcreek Conservation, we are able to maintain a programme of activities throughout the year for the Watch Group. Meetings take place twice a month with an indoor meeting and an outdoor more practical meeting. Visiting speakers and experts often attend to share their knowledge with the children

noticeboard

Global BirdFair
12th-14th
July 2024



We are pleased to confirm that we'll be attending Global BirdFair again this year and hope to see some of our UK-based members to support us there! This year, the event will be held at a new address: Lyndon Top, Oakham, Rutland, LE15 8RN. If you are planning to attend, or would like to help out on the stand as a volunteer for an hour or two, please email ukadmin@conservation.org.fk



Lord Cameron visits Gypsy Cove with the Watch Group. PENGUIN NEWS

Foreign Secretary meets with Watch Group

Four children from the Watch Group recently met Foreign Secretary, Lord David Cameron during his recent visit to the Falkland Islands. They spoke to him about the wildlife of the Falkland Islands, pointing out some of the birds that could be seen at Gypsy Cove, and about the work of the Watch Group. They also managed to persuade him to have a taste of tussac grass!

We've been featured in the Times!

In March, Falklands Conservation was featured in The Times and The Sunday Times newspaper as one of the 10 charities to support in 2024. While we are very grateful for this level of acknowledgement, we cannot forget to recognise and thank our countless supporters who, without their efforts, we would not be able to undertake the important conservation work that we do. This is a recognition of all your dedication and contributions to our vision and we thank you sincerely for partnering with us. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/static/calm-richard-house-givewheel-happa-falklands-conservation-charities/>

RIGHT Janna Biesiot completes fieldwork with albatross chicks; FAR RIGHT Dave Higgins completes fieldwork.

Changing Faces at FC

In this edition, we feature a few heartfelt farewells from the team at Falklands Conservation. Firstly, we say goodbye to our esteemed Board Chairman, Roger Spink, after ten years in the role and 17 years as a trustee. Roger's dedication and leadership have been invaluable, shaping our mission and strengthening our commitment to the Islands' conservation for many years. As he steps down, we remain sincerely thankful for all his efforts and contribution to our work.

We would also like to extend our warmest welcome to Tom Blake, who will now be taking over from Roger. As a long-standing trustee of Falklands Conservation, we are confident that Tom's experience and leadership will propel the charity forward in safeguarding the remarkable biodiversity of the Falklands. Thank you both for your continued support over the years.

We also express warm thanks to our Peatlands Biodiversity Project Manager, Dave Higgins who after three and a half years, is leaving the organisation to pursue more environment-related work in the UK. His dedication to our Peat Wetlands Project has truly enriched our conservation efforts and contributed to important work around the Responsible Wool Standard in the Islands. Thank you.

Last December, Falklands Conservation also bade farewell to Financial Assistant Janna Biesiot. Janna formed a crucial part of the team, providing important logistical and financial support. We express a deep level of gratitude for her valuable contributions over the time she spent with us. While saddening to see Janna go, we also welcome Rabia Rao who started as our new Financial Assistant in February. Rabia carries a host of experience, and we are very excited to work with her.



Rabia Rao joins the team as new Financial Assistant.



The FC Team say goodbye to Board Chairman, Roger Spink (far left)





**Partnering with
the local and
international
community to
conserve the
Falkland Islands
natural
environment.**