

The Falkland Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 19 November 2016



King Penguin rookery



White-tufted Grebe



Rufous-chested Plover



Macaroni Penguins courtship

Report and images by Kevin Elsby



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Day 1

Wednesday 2nd November

Depart Brize Norton on RAF Air Tanker flight, 23:10.

Day 2

Thursday 3rd November

Arrive Ascension Island 08:00 local time. 2 hours in reception area then depart Ascension Island at 10:00 local time.

On our arrival in Ascension, we had to leave the aircraft for the two hours or so change round in preparation for the second leg of the journey to the Falkland Islands. We had to walk to a compound adjacent to the runway, about 300 yards from where the aircraft was parked. This gave us the opportunity to stretch our legs and take in the scenery of this isolated volcanic dot in the Atlantic Ocean.

However, from the unlikely setting of the compound we managed to see three different individual Ascension Island Frigate Birds – a male, a female and a juvenile, as well as two Common Mynas and a single Common Waxbill which was busy building a nest in a Bouganvillea near to the compound. This livened up our wait in the warm sunshine before re-boarding the flight to continue to Mount Pleasant in East Falklands.

When we were approaching the Falklands, we were joined by two RAF Typhoon jets, which escorted us towards our landing point of Mount Pleasant airfield. Arriving at Mount Pleasant to a lovely day, after an 18 hour journey, we were met at the arrivals by a representative from Darwin House, our base for the first night in the Falklands. We climbed into the mini bus for the 23 mile journey to our accommodation. This was initially on tarmac then shortly this changed to rough gravel.

We were soon at Darwin House. The setting for the property is perfect in a lovely bay with excellent views of Mount Osborne, the highest peak in the Falklands at a little over 700 meters.

After organising our room allocation we were free to stretch our legs again in the area adjacent to the property. In next to no time we were enjoying close up views of several typical birds of the islands including Upland Goose, Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatcher, Falklands Steamer Duck, Patagonian Crested Duck, South American Tern and Falklands Thrush, all birds which became very familiar to us throughout our stay. Someone spotted a couple of Southern Giant Petrels flying on outstretched wings, banking regularly, across the bay. Then three Turkey Vultures came into view. When a smart Long-tailed Meadowlark appeared, all were very impressed with the alarmingly bright red throat and breast together with the distinctive head patterning.

While this was going on, several European Hares were giving excellent views, typical of the confiding behaviour of much of the wildlife the Falklands has to offer the naturalist.

After a splendid dinner in excellent accommodation, it was time to sleep off the journey of the last 24 hours in anticipation of more wildlife to be seen tomorrow.

Day 3

Friday 4th November

Most of us awoke a couple of hours before breakfast due to the bright light, and spent a nice pre-breakfast time birdwatching, botanising or just enjoying the scenery and spectacular early morning light. New birds this morning included a couple of Falkland Skuas, before it was time to make the short journey to the nearby airfield at Goose Green, for our first Falklands Islands Government Air Service (FIGAS) flight, to Carcass Island where we would spend the next three nights.

Darwin House was very popular with the group and our hosts had a good knowledge of the history of the conflict with Argentina, and the local landmarks, which they pointed out to us.

The party was divided into two groups for the transfer to Carcass Island, via two aircraft. Three went to Carcass via Saunders Island, whilst the rest went directly. The Britten – Norman Islanders were quite small but all enjoyed the experience. We were met at the airfield on Carcass and were then driven the couple of miles or so to the settlement (consisting of one accommodation unit and several sheds and outhouses). After a refreshing and welcoming cup of tea and some cakes we had a wander around the immediate area before lunch.

During this time we encountered our first Kelp Geese. This species shows dramatic sexual dimorphism, with the males being pure white with a dark bill and yellow legs while the female is mainly dark green on the back with greenish and white stripes underneath. There were at least 20 on the shoreline. By now the weather of the morning had been replaced by an increasingly strong wind, which peaked at gale force. As a result we were able to pick out several Black-browed Albatrosses soaring gracefully on the wind in the gap between Carcass Island and the breeding colony at nearby West Point Island. They were joined by several Southern Giant Petrels.

The sheltered garden of the settlement had some Black-chinned Siskins singing, as well as more Falklands Thrushes. A Sedge Wren showed frustratingly briefly. Then we got our first views of one of the rarest birds of prey in the world – the Striated Caracara. They proved to be bold and curious and three of the party in the late afternoon were ‘surrounded’ by 20 of them whilst they were botanising.

After lunch we drove to the north west of the island, around the bay and got our first views of penguins. We saw many hundreds of Gentoo Penguins, most of which were on eggs. The other species was Magellanic Penguin (named after the Portugese explorer Ferdinand Magellan). However, there were far fewer of these to be seen, as the adults were in their underground burrows, sitting on eggs.

Several Gentoos were coming and going from the rookery – those that were returning to their sitting partner from their fishing trip were a lot cleaner looking than those heading off to sea to feed.

A group of 12 Falkland Skuas stood close to the Penguins, waiting for an opportunity to take an egg from an unsuspecting adult. We also got excellent views of a group of Canary-winged Finches (also known as White-bridled Finch), and a nice group of Black-chinned Siskin, all of which were feeding frantically on seed on the edge of the shoreline. A couple of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants gave the party the run around before we all got decent views of them.

After a couple of hours outside in the gale force wind, we welcomed the opportunity to be driven the couple of miles back to the settlement for a warming drink and cake before resting before dinner.

Day 4

Saturday 5th November

Today we took a boat trip to West Point Island. We walked the short distance from the accommodation to the jetty where we boarded the Condor – a converted fishing trawler which had seen many years' service in the North Sea. Our skipper and his mate were both called Mike, and after donning our life jackets we were informed the trip to the landing at West Point would take just over an hour and to be prepared for choppy sea conditions when we left the protection of the bay. And choppy it was for much of the way but generally enjoyed by all. On arriving at the settlement at West Point we enjoyed a cup of warming tea before we were driven up the hill for a mile or so to the Black-browed Albatross colony on the cliff. There were several thousand birds in the vicinity – most sitting on eggs on their nest constructed of mud and resembling a min volcano. In among the albatrosses were many hundreds of Rockhopper Penguins – our third species of penguin to be seen so far.

It is believed the Penguins gain some protection from predation by Striated Caracaras and Falkland Skuas by nesting among the albatrosses. It was a wonderful experience to be so close to the Penguins and Albatrosses – both species were as little as an arm's length away. It was charming to watch the behaviour of both species from such a close range.

By now the wind had increased in force. It was probably gusting about 50mph. This was perfect for watching the amazing flying skill of the albatrosses and they seemed to soar effortlessly through the air over the colony. Only occasionally, when coming in to land among their fellows, did the strength of the wind cause them to crash land on an unsuspecting albatross or penguin. We spent three hours just absorbing the sights, sounds and, yes, smells of this spectacular scene in front of us. It will surely live long in the memory.

Eventually, we agreed it was time to return back to the settlement and we piled in to the 8-seater Land Rover again for the journey back to the pier and the boat home.

Back at the quay we enjoyed excellent views of a Rock Shag, perched on the slipway. It allowed a close approach for the photographers. Also of interest was a Blackish Oystercatcher, which was sitting on a nest, closely guarded by her mate nearby. We then re-boarded the boat for the journey back to Carcass. Mike, the captain, reassured us that the journey back would not be as 'bumpy' as the trip out, and so it proved, as we were now sailing with the wind. We called into an inlet which was calmer and came across some South American Sea Lions hauled out on rocks just above the water. We counted 13 including one large 'beach master'. We then carried on as far as Grave Cove before turning for home.

We kept our eyes peeled for dolphins – both Commerson's and Peale's occur here. We found two of the former, which accompanied the boat for a while, but none of the latter. In the channel between West Point Island and Carcass Island we encountered a group of 12 Commerson's Dolphins which stayed with us for some time – two even came as far as the berth in the harbour at Carcass. They performed admirably in the bow wave for everyone to enjoy. They are a lovely species of marine mammal with distinctive black and white markings.

After arrival at Carcass we left the Condor and had time before dinner to have another walk along the beach at the settlement.

Day 5

Sunday 6th November

Today we spent the whole day at the northern tip of Carcass. We boarded the two Land Rovers for the journey. En route to our destination we were able to take in the scenery of this lovely island.

A male Variable Hawk (aka Red-backed Hawk) was spotted in the distance and stopped the convoy. Then a Peregrine was seen in the same area. On arrival at the sea, the wind was blowing violently. We took shelter in the thick Tussock grass which was growing here. Along the beach were many Southern Elephant Seals. Most of them were pups of about 6 weeks of age. In among them were the odd male and we could see why they are the largest seals in the world with adult males weighing up to 4 tons. We were entertained by their antics of sleeping, snorting and blowing noises which came from them. It was particularly amusing to watch the irritation displayed by a couple of bull seals when a diminutive Tussac Bird landed on them to pick items off the hide. Instantly the massive animal would rear up, huge mouth agape, and twist in the direction of where the Tussac Bird was, bellowing his disapproval. What was interesting was that the Tussac Bird did not seem bothered about this at all.

The beach here proved a delightful place to eat our packed lunch. One pup seal became inquisitive and came and lay within arm's length of us. Another pup was having a hard time persuading one of its congeners not to get too close to it. All in all a very impressive scene. All the time, overhead flew Southern Giant Petrels and Kelp and Dolphin Gulls. While out to sea all across the horizon the sky seemed full of Albatrosses, banking and gliding in the ferocious wind.

After lunch we had a drive around the island to a couple of pools – one of which was almost dry. There is a drought on the Falklands at present and some of the standing water has disappeared for the first time in living memory. We had hoped for grebes but what little water there was was not enough for grebes. We had consolation with a number of Two-banded Plovers (one with a nest with four eggs was found) and about 100 White-rumped Sandpipers. These latter birds are a true long-distance migrant, breeding in the high Arctic in the northern summer, then wintering in the Falklands in the southern summer.

We then made our way back to the settlement where it was nice to get some shelter from the ever-present wind.

Day 6

Monday 7th November

We awoke again to a very strong wind from the west. However, we were determined to make the best of things. This morning some of us had a last walk around the bay of the settlement before breakfast, trying to get that better view of either of the two wrens present in the area, or trying to get better photographs of the Snowy Sheathbills which had been present the day before. After breakfast we drove to the 'airport' for our 20 minute flight to Port Howard in West Falklands.

We were met by representatives of Port Howard Lodge, and soon we were enjoying more famous Falklands hospitality as we settled in to our next base. We were informed that Port Howard is the second largest settlement

in the Falklands after the capital Stanley, with a population of 34. There are nine children attending the settlement's school.

After dropping off bags in our rooms we made a visit to the nearby sheep shearing sheds. The annual shearing was in full swing and we were amazed at how efficiently and rapidly the shearers deprive their charges of their wool. It was a most interesting experience. From here we drove in two four-wheel drive vehicles in a southerly direction, bird watching and botanising whenever we chose.

Eventually, after a couple of hours, we arrived at a couple of fresh water ponds. These are now quite scarce because of the drought which had prevailed for the last four years. We were lucky therefore to spot our three main target species for today on the lakes. To begin with we saw three Black-necked Swans near the reed bed of one lake. In addition we saw a splendid party of four Silvery Grebes. These birds were quite close to the shore, taking shelter from the incessant blasts of wind across the lake. We found another couple of this most attractive grebe around the shoreline. The third target we found was White-tufted Grebe – a larger species than the Silvery with an all-dark plumage save for tufts of white feathers on its cheeks. As we approached one of the lakes on foot, some of the group were able to see a pair of Flying Steamer Ducks take flight – showing that their name, and identification, was indeed accurate. Another individual chose to swim from the shore to the safety of the centre of the lake. Someone found a couple of Magellanic Snipe standing in a tiny bay not more than a couple of feet from the shore and they allowed a very close approach. They too were trying to keep their heads down in the difficult weather.

The botanists kept the rest of the group on their toes, contributing fully to the day. All the group worked well together to get the most out of our trip, to the mutual enjoyment of everyone.

Eventually, we returned to the well-appointed lodge in Port Howard, in time for dinner.

Day 7

Tuesday 8th November

Thankfully, the wind had slightly decreased today but with it the temperature had fallen. We were now experiencing single digit Celsius temperatures. When added to the wind chill it did feel noticeably chilly.

Today we drove in a northerly direction to White Rocks where there is a flourishing Rockhopper Penguin rookery and breeding colony of Imperial Shags. Although only about 18 miles from the accommodation, the route there was all off road and, with stops to see birds and plants en route, it took 3 hours each way. However, it proved very worthwhile as we were able to sit close to both species in their breeding habitat perched on the edge of a cliff. It was a great experience to be so close to this busy scene as Penguins walked to and from their steep slope giving them access to the sea 60 feet or so below, while the Shags were constantly flying in and out of their colony. Many of both species were busy with courtship, nest building or incubating (in the case of the Rockhoppers). We spent three hours here just enjoying what was going on before us. We were the only people there.

The race was on for the group to see if we could find a Macaroni Penguin. Most years a single bird turns up with the Rockhoppers to breed. No sooner had we got out of the vehicles than one of the group called out to say he had found a Macaroni. We all got to see this bird, which was lying down on the ground. It was noticeably bigger

than the many Rockhoppers present. The tufts of feathers on the head were also more sulphur yellow and intensely coloured than the pale yellow head dress of the Rockhoppers. By watching the bird long enough, we were eventually able to see it was incubating an egg as it stood up.

At one point a couple of the group were watching two Rockhoppers in serious dispute. The argument became so intense that one bird moved away from its nest where an egg was being incubated. In very quick time, a Falklands Skua swooped in to remove the egg, whole, in its beak to land nearby and consume the contents. A pair of Dolphin Gulls waited for any pickings after the Skua had had its fill.

On the way to the coast we called in at a disused farm building where a single Barn Owl was roosting between the rafters. We were also finding new flowers all the time and when we came across Vanilla Daisy. All of the group got down to ground level to see if it smelled like its name – and it did!

Birding interest, on the journey to and from Port Howard, over the moorland, was provided by three Flying Steamer Ducks and several delightful Rufous-chested Plovers (aka Rufous-chested Dotterel). We had excellent close views of these birds with the brighter plumaged females outsmarting their slightly drabber mates.

Returning to the Port Howard, there was just time to check out the bay to see if any Commerson's Dolphins were present but alas we had to content ourselves with about 50 Southern Giant Petrels gathered on the water off the sheep shearing sheds.

Day 8

Wednesday 9th November

The group moved on today from Port Howard to our next destination in the itinerary, Sea Lion Island for a three night stay. We travelled in two aircraft, the first leaving mid-morning but the second not until early afternoon. On arrival we were met by staff of the lodge and after checking in to our rooms we were free to wander around the island at leisure. Those on the early flight were able to explore further afield whereas the two on the afternoon flight wandered to the Gentoo Penguin rookeries immediately adjacent to the accommodation block. We witnessed a couple of unguarded eggs being snapped up by eager Falkland Skuas. The early group had also seen five Orcas cruising just offshore.

Later, the whole group met up at the superb lodge for an orientation drive around the island. We visited both ends of the island, including the Rockhopper Penguin rookery at the west end. When we got there it was getting dark but this was timed to give us a chance of seeing Short-eared Owl and we were lucky, seeing two very dark individuals of this bird which is normally diurnal in the UK.

Birds seen very well included both Rufous-chested and Two-banded Plovers, Black-faced Finch, Silvery Grebe and Crested Duck. On our travels around the island we also saw a large flock of White-rumped Sandpipers, feeding on the shallow turf.

After dinner it was an early bed for everyone as tomorrow, Orcas beckoned.

Day 9

Thursday 10th November

We had a 4:45am departure from the lodge to walk the ½ mile or so to the observation area to witness Orcas coming close in shore in an attempt to catch an unsuspecting Southern Elephant Seal pup. At this time, November, there were many pups along the coast in this part of the island, and they had been abandoned to fend for themselves by their mothers.

Some gather in nursery groups in a small bay on the rocky coastline. At high tide, the water in this bay is deep enough to allow the Orcas to come right to the shore in order to try and capture a pup.

We spent two and a half hours watching as repeatedly a couple of young Orcas made their way to the bay, only to seemingly get snarled in the thick kelp beds and return out to sea 'empty handed'. No pups were caught while we were watching but it was nonetheless an amazing encounter with nature. At times we were less than 20 yards from the Orcas. Just offshore two adults with huge dorsal fins patrolled the slightly deeper water. Altogether 7 individuals comprised this pod.

By 7:15 am, all of the whale watchers were feeling the cold and so we returned to the lodge for a warming cup of tea before breakfast. But not before we discovered a Chilean Swallow, perched on a cliff in the small bay.

At 9 am we departed to the Rockhopper Penguin rookery to the west of the island. We wanted to be there in the morning to get the best from the morning light. As it turned out this proved to be an excellent decision. Driving to the nearby monument to the HMS Sheffield, lost in the Falklands War in 1982, we parked and walked the short distance over the low cliffs to witness three mixed colonies of Rockhopper Penguin and Imperial Shag. The penguins were leaping onto the bottom of the cliff in a fierce-looking surf, then when they had made a landing, had the prospect of a 60 foot vertical climb to get to the top.

By now the weather was perfect - sunny, with the light in the right direction and very little wind. It was almost warm!

Soon after our arrival, one member of the group who had found our Macaroni Penguin on Port Howard repeated his trick here, finding the single bird in among the Rockhoppers. We all got excellent views and watched the hustle and bustle of this busy breeding colony. In addition to the penguins and shags, Dolphin Gulls were ever present, waiting for scraps left by the inevitable Falkland Skuas. Tussacbirds were exploring our feet and resting on our footwear at times – they were very confiding.

After a delightful morning we reluctantly tore ourselves away and headed back to the lodge to eat our lunch.

The afternoon was spent ranging around the area near to the lodge where we found a Two-banded Plover on a nest of three eggs. We also found two Chiloe Wigeon on one of the ponds, as well as a pair of Magelanic Snipe busily feeding by probing into the soft soil here.

Several of us sat on the beach overlooking the Southern Elephant Seals, several bulls of which were still engaged in altercations with each other. A party of scientists were attaching radio tags to females in the midst of all this turmoil and commotion. At one point, one of the party was attacked by a Striated Caracara. The bird flew into

his face. Although it is well known that these birds are curious and daring, this behaviour was totally unexpected. Luckily, apart from a cut lip, the member was otherwise unharmed. We will give these birds even more respect in the future.

After dinner, it was an early night again to reflect on what had been an excellent day.

Day 10

Friday 11th November

We awoke this morning to worse weather. It was blowing a gale from the south west. Those who went pre breakfast to see Orca again were only rewarded by two distant fins.

After breakfast we decided we would drive to Beaver Pond. We had tried to do this yesterday, having been taken there on our orientation drive. The trouble was, our orientation drive was at dusk and visibility was fading. As a result we were unable to locate the right track to the pond yesterday. The map in the leaflet from the lodge did not have any tracks marked on it, and this, combined with the fact that one track in the field looks just like any other, and that there were no obvious distinguishing landmarks in the landscape, made it a nightmare to find the right route. And so it was we were determined today to get there! We did. Eventually. On the way we found a route to the coast where we spent some time looking out to what was a stormy sea in the hope of seeing a stray 'exotic' species. Sadly we were disappointed in this respect but we did see lots of the expected Black-browed Albatross cruising past the headland with nonchalant ease.

We also found a flock of Dolphin Gulls hugging the shoreline against the wind. We also found a party of 8 Silvery Grebes on one of the ponds as well as a number of Two-banded and Rufous-chested Plovers, many of which had young. Another noteworthy record was the sighting of two Chilean Swallows which were flying low due to the strong wind.

On arriving at Beaver Pond the wind proved almost too strong to stand up in. Needless to say we were unsuccessful in seeing a Cobb's Wren here today (we did see them here a couple of days earlier). A few Kelp Geese were on the strandline, keeping the numerous Upland Geese company. We decided to return to the lodge for a warming drink and to eat our packed lunch.

Once refreshed we headed out again. This time to the Rockhopper Penguin and Imperial Shag breeding cliffs we visited the day before. The main reason was again to see if we could add some new seabirds to the trip list but it also gave us another excuse to immerse ourselves in the spectacle of this seabird breeding area. The Shags were having difficulty orientating themselves for a landing in the tightly packed colony, due to the strength of the wind. No such problem for the Rockhoppers though, but they instead had to battle with trying to get from the turbulent surf to the terra firma of the bottom of the cliff and then haul themselves the 60 odd feet up to the rookery above. It was an impressive thing to watch.

A couple of Striated Caracaras were huddled together, trying to keep warm as it had now gone quite cold. Meanwhile the indefatigable Tussock Birds continued to probe for morsels around our feet.

When we had got too cold we headed back inland. En route we stopped to photograph a Magellanic Snipe adult with a very young chick. Then we watched a party of 50 White-rumped Sandpipers feeding frantically on a patch

of short turf. When a hail shower materialised, they all clustered closely around the base of a tussock grass, once again giving an indication of how vital this plant is in the ecology of life on these islands. We came across four Falklands Pipits, which were confiding, allowing for photography, as did a pair of Yellow-billed Teal.

We decided to spend the rest of the afternoon on the beach near the lodge. Here we were able to get more sights (and, yes, smells) of the Elephant Seals. There was still some intermittent bickering among the males, but most of the serious aggression had finished some weeks ago. A mixture of Magellanic and Gentoo Penguins were coming and going from the rookeries. It was easy to see which had come from the sea – they were the ones with the gleaming clean plumage.

At one end of the beach, some Striated Caracaras had stolen a Gentoo Penguin egg and were trying to break into it. Periodically one bird would try rolling it with its claws, only for another bird to usurp it and try the same. It took them a good 30 minutes before breaking it open. What was surprising was that at times they all moved away from the egg but not once did any of the nearby Skuas swoop in to take it. Nonetheless it proved very entertaining to watch.

The Gentoos were settled on their nests and at times there were squabbles between sitting birds as one bird tried to steal a pebble from its neighbour's nest. In addition there would occasionally be a chorus of braying calls from the rookery with the birds pointing their heads skywards and calling loudly – one of the familiar sounds of a penguin rookery.

As we headed back to the lodge for dinner, we were able to reflect on another wonderful day's wildlife watching on these unique islands.

Day 11

Saturday 12th November

Today we made the journey from Sea Lion Island to Pebble Island which lies in the north west of the archipelago. It was a rainy, dull morning with a stiff breeze for our journey.

After 40 minutes we touched down at the airstrip on Pebble and were greeted by our hosts for our four-night stay. After a warming cup of tea and the obligatory biscuit we stretched our legs before settling down to lunch. Only 4 people are resident on Pebble Island, which is one of the larger islands of the group.

After lunch we were driven to a large pond nearby which we explored at a gentle pace. It became noticeably milder than yesterday, but the wind was ever present.

Soon we were watching a pair of shy but immediately identifiable Black-necked Swans. Initially at the side of the lake they sadly soon became alert to our presence and moved to the centre of the lake. In front of us, in the shallower part of the lake, weed was growing, and in this, many pairs of Silvery Grebes, and two pairs of White-tufted Grebes were busy making nests. We studied these for some time before continuing our walk along the side of the lake.

Next came a large party of at least 50 Yellow-billed Teal. Interestingly they all got out of the lake as one, though not apparently because of our presence. Then, after a short time on the bank, they got back into the water as

before. In amongst the ducks, three Yellow-billed Pintail and a pair of Chiloe Wigeon were also spotted, giving us our best views yet of both species. One of our group then spotted a single White-rumped Sandpiper on the short grass alongside the lake. It was very confiding and this enabled us to get some good photos.

Further on, we could see several gulls roosting on a spit and making our way nearer we could see about 50 Kelp Gulls and 30 Brown-hooded Gulls, a species which had been hard to pin down up to now. We got excellent views of both species and also had frame-filling views of more Silvery and White-tufted Grebes.

Returning to where we entered the lake we walked round the other side in order to try and get better views of the Black-necked Swans. Exploring the area of the lodge we found some Black-chinned Siskins and a Long-tailed Meadowlark, and over 100 South American Terns flew over. Several Imperial Shags and a few Rock Shags were present on the nearby pier.

It had been another successful day and the prospects for the next few days look good with a large island to explore in detail.

Day 12

Sunday 13th November

Today we woke to a wonderful day. The sun was shining, it was quite mild and, mercifully, there was only a gentle breeze blowing. Pretty well perfect conditions for our all day trip by 4-wheel drive to the west of the island. This was to prove one of the most enjoyable days of the holiday.

Our first few stops were to examine and learn about several pieces of aircraft wreckage littering this part of the island, relics of the war with Argentina in 1982. It being Remembrance Sunday, it was somehow more poignant to witness the site and sights of this conflict. As we made our way out into the hinterland from here, we started to encounter birds. First of interest were a pair of typically confiding Magellanic Snipe. Next came several pairs of Rufous-breasted Plovers and Two-banded plovers, several with small chicks. A few Falklands Pipits were seen on the Diddle-dee bushes, as well as a party of 7 Long-tailed Meadowlark. A Peregrine shot past one vehicle, lost quickly to sight as it reached a nearby cliff. Soon we were in Magellanic Penguin territory. At this time of the year most of the adults were incubating their eggs underground in their burrows but we did encounter a few adults at the surface.

Carrying on along the spectacular north coast of Pebble, we next came to a cove where we stopped to look at a small rock stack. Here we found a pair of Southern Caracaras, which were very vocal in display. Three South American Sea Lions were resting high up the cliff in the distance.

A short break for a traditional 'smoko' (coffee and biscuit), was followed by more driving west. Next we came across a delightful wide beach with white sand. There were two highlights here. Firstly, on a nearby plateau on the cliff, was a breeding colony of Southern Giant Petrels. We estimated 200 nests were present. In view of the fact that they are easily disturbed, we only observed and photographed them from our vehicles. The other highlight was a nearby gathering of Gentoos Penguins, in amongst which was a single King Penguin. This was enjoyed by all. Noticeably larger than the Gentoos with a very colourful head and neck, it loafed with the Gentoos for a while before making its way to the sea. However when it got there, it had second thoughts, turned and headed back to the Gentoos on the landward side of the beach.

We saw several Dolphin Gulls on the tideline, together with a Falkland Steamer Duck, a few Brown-hooded Gulls and a large Jellyfish on the sand.

It was hard to tear ourselves from this lovely place but it was the prospect of two more penguin species further west which allowed us to do so. We soon arrived at a large Rockhopper Penguin rookery on the edge of a cliff. Soon enough we spotted three Macaroni Penguins among them. Today had thus been our special penguin day with five species seen. We spent the next couple of hours watching the comings and goings of the rookery and most of us wandered to the slope where the birds were entering or leaving the sea at the bottom of the cliff. It was a delightful sight. When we had had our fill we started to make our way back to the settlement in time for dinner. On the way we spotted two Variable Hawks which showed very well for us.

It had been a long day in the field (nine hours in fact) but all had had a thoroughly enjoyable time with lots to look back on.

Day 13

Monday 14th November

Well, today also dawned bright and sunny with hardly a cloud in the sky. However there was more breeze than yesterday. Last night we were joined in the lodge by three ladies from New Zealand who were travelling independently.

While we had been in the west of the island enjoying five species of penguin, they had been watching a Leopard Seal on the beach near the settlement. As a result we all met at 6:30 am for a walk to the beach in the hope of seeing it for ourselves. We were to be disappointed. The tide was well in and not much beach was exposed. However the walk ensured we had a good appetite for our breakfast when we returned to the lodge.

After breakfast we set off in two four wheel drive vehicles, this time for an exploration of the east of this large island. We enjoyed some stunning scenery during the day. First stop was the long beach where the Leopard Seal had been. This beach, at 4 miles long, is the longest in the Falkland Islands. Indeed, at times it serves as the landing strip for the FIGAS aircraft. Many pairs of Falkland Steamer Duck were present together with parties of Magellanic Oystercatcher and Dolphin Gulls. Still no Leopard Seal, but we did see a pup Southern Elephant Seal.

Turning inland off the beach we came across more Long-tailed Meadowlarks together with several Falklands Pipits and some more Rufous-breasted Plovers. Several Magellanic Penguins were outside their burrows today and we were able to get perfect views of them. A solitary Black-necked Swan was on a pathetic patch of water in a pond which was almost dry – a reflection of the four year long drought in the Falklands – together with 4 Silver Teal.

One of the target species for today was South American Sea Lion. We eventually arrived at a cliff where about 60 feet below a group of about 50 animals were hauled out on a shelf above the sea. The group consisted mostly of females and pups but there was one much larger adult male with his harem – the beach master. They were very vocal at times, giving raucous calls, which could easily be heard over the sound of the sea. While we were watching the Sea Lions, someone spotted a small bird resting on the cliff just below where we were standing. Sandy brown in colour with pale fringes to the primaries, it caused a running commentary about its identification. Eventually we decided it was a recently fledged Dark-faced Ground Tyrant. Then a Peregrine was

seen flying over the cliff edge. Some endemic Falklands Thrift was discovered growing on the cliff top here, appearing less attractive than its congener found in the UK. In the same area were several more Dark-faced Ground Tyrants, including one bird gathering material for a nest.

We next visited a colony of Imperial Shags on a cliff. We got excellent views once again of these attractive sea birds and were able to enjoy the antics of them bringing in nesting material to their mates. We could happily have stayed there all day watching their fascinating behaviour. However, after a picnic lunch it was time to press on.

Carrying on eastwards we next came to a rookery of Rockhopper Penguins. As we approached in the vehicles, two Southern Crested Caracaras were spotted and several of the group got out of the vehicles to approach for photography. We then spent more time watching and photographing these diminutive penguins, which were a favourite of all the group. Many penguins were vocal in their greeting of their mates as they returned from fishing trips. However there were much bickering and aggression shown by other birds in the rookery. The scenery here continued its spectacular theme. On a nearby cliff someone spotted an immature Variable Hawk. However, this one proved not to be as photogenic as the two from the previous day as it flew off at our approach.

Calling at one more nearby Rockhopper Penguin we found two Macaroni Penguins – clearly a pair, they had at least one egg. It proved easier to get photographs of these birds since there were fewer Rockhoppers in this rookery.

We then went further east to a Gentoo Penguin rookery. Here, amazingly, we saw another King Penguin, making 5 species of penguin in a day for the second consecutive day. On this occasion, all 5 species were found within a distance of about half a mile.

By now, the weather had turned and rain threatened in the distance. Accordingly we made our way slowly back to the settlement, pausing again on the long beach to observe a large group of White-rumped Sandpipers as well as two Sanderlings on the shoreline. Many gulls had gathered to feed on the beach with the incoming tide – mainly Kelp Gulls and Brown-hooded Gulls (many of which had a pink suffusion to the breast for the breeding season) as well as a few Dolphin Gulls. A pair of Blackish Oystercatchers was also present together with several South American Terns.

All in all, another tiring but extremely enjoyable day, capped off with a glorious sunset between the showers.

Day 14

Tuesday 15th November

This morning we woke to heavy rain showers and a drop in the temperature. Undaunted we began by driving to the HMS Coventry memorial on a nearby hill. By the time we arrived there was a gale blowing and the rain was horizontal. After a brief stop we came back down the hill and drove back past the settlement to the big pond we had visited on our arrival day on Pebble.

On this occasion although we saw many Silvery and White-tufted Grebes, the birds seemed to be fewer in number. However we did find many Yellow-billed Teal as well as a pair of Yellow-billed Pintail with a single

chick in the middle of the lake. Two Black-necked Swans appeared, sadly continuing to be out of decent photographic range. We found a pair of South American Terns roosting near a mixed flock of gulls and then a Flying Steamer Duck flew past.

When we had seen all there was to see, we drove to the long beach. Looking to the distance we couldn't see evidence of a Leopard Seal. Fewer birds were present here than yesterday and we stopped to get some shots of a single Gentoo Penguin and a few Dolphin Gulls.

It was soon time to return to the lodge for lunch, just in time to miss a heavy squall with sleet and hail which carpeted the ground white briefly. Indeed in the distance the hills had a fresh coating of snow, reflecting the change in temperature.

For the afternoon, in a gap between the showers, we walked to the nearby pier and harbour where we concentrated on getting photographs of Black-crowned Night Heron, Brown-hooded Gulls and Rock Shags. There were several Snowy Sheathbills on the shoreline as well.

Day 15

Wednesday 16th November

Today we left Pebble Island on an early flight to Stanley. The weather was squally and there was still snow on the hill tops. In the flight we flew at no more than 700 feet and through a couple of sleet showers – most interesting.

On arrival in Stanley we were greeted by our local ground agent and transferred to the Malvina hotel, which is in an ideal location on the waterfront in the capital. After checking in the group explored the many interesting aspects of this town, including a very good maritime museum.

After lunch the group met up again and went out on a three-hour boat trip to view the array of seabirds off Kidney Island to the east. We were lucky that the two man crew were also 'chumming' off the back of the boat to attract birds. In next to no time we had many Black-browed Albatrosses off the stern, accompanied by several Southern Giant Petrels. Then we started seeing some Sooty Shearwaters and eventually a single White-chinned Petrel was identified among them. It was tricky in the choppy swell, but eventually all members of the group got on to the bird. When the chum had run out we carried on to Kidney Island. When we got close to the island it was clear that several thousand Sooty Shearwaters were resting on the sea just offshore. They were awaiting nightfall, when it is safer for them to return to their nest burrows. Skuas, Southern Giant Petrels and caracaras are serious threats to these birds.

We got closer and had an amazing spectacle as these enigmatic seabirds were all around the boat at short range. Several times the flocks took to the air, only to land again a short distance away. We managed to find two much paler Great Shearwaters in among them, and they stood out very easily against the dark chocolate brown of the Sooties.

It was a very enjoyable experience and many photos were taken by the group. We then turned for home and Stanley. On the way we stopped at a couple of cliffs with birds on them. On one of these, Rockhopper Penguins had a rookery at the top. However the cliff appeared vertical, of about 100 feet, and it was amazing to see these

birds fighting their way out of the sea and then climb what must surely have been a formidable obstacle, to reach their nest.

We arrived back at Stanley in time for dinner in our hotel and all were agreed that this had been yet another highlight of the trip.

Day 16

Thursday 17th November

Today was our last full day on the Falklands and we visited the famous King Penguin rookery at Volunteer Point. However, the weather Gods were not kind to us as we awoke to driving rain and a cold wind. Undeterred we left Stanley in the two four-wheel drive vehicles for the 2 ¼ hour drive to the rookery. Much of this drive was off road and could be classed as genuine 'off road'.

Arriving at the rookery we first decamped to the small portacabin to get into our wet weather gear. There were many King Penguins seen (estimated at 2,000 birds) including three hundred or so immature birds with their shaggy plumage. There was a rookery of Gentoo Penguins here as well as one of Magellanic Penguins, and birds of both these species were also seen.

We heard that the King Penguin chicks were declining in numbers due to the fact that the Southern Giant Petrels have learned how to single out chicks and move them away from the rest of their fellows whereupon they are attacked and killed. This situation is of great concern to the warden and other conservationists at this site.

We made our way to the rookery site, passing many adults en route, many of which were in an advanced state of moult. Many of the adults were already into courtship behaviour, and vocalisations filled the air. Some of the group chose to wander to the beach where several parties of King Penguins were standing by the shoreline or entering the sea on fishing expeditions. There was much to enjoy at this site.

By late afternoon we had all seen what we wanted to see and we made our slow but thoroughly enjoyable ride back to Stanley.

Day 17

Friday 18th November

After a very early breakfast we made our way to the Mount Pleasant Airport in readiness for our return flight to Brize Norton, calling in at Ascension Island on the way. After an uneventful flight we arrived safely at Brize Norton the following morning after what had been a very successful and most enjoyable trip.

Day 18

Saturday 19th November

Arrival back in the UK

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Species Lists

Birds (✓= abundant)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	November															
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>											1	1			2000	
2	Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	3	200	
3	Rockhopper Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		200		
4	Macaroni Penguin	<i>Eudyptes chrysolophus</i>						1		1			3	2				
5	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>		10	10	2	6		20	50	100	6	10	50			30	
6	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>					4					8			6			
7	Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>					7		5	11	8	30			30		1	
8	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>		30	✓	✓	6	25	6	20	50	15	2	3		50	1	
9	Southern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	2	20	20	50	10	100	100	200	200	20	300	100	20	20	50	6
10	Northern Giant Petrel	<i>Macronectes halli</i>								1								
11	White-chinned Petrel	<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>														1		
12	Cape Petrel	<i>Daption capense</i>							1									
13	Great Shearwater	<i>Ardenna gravis</i>															2	
14	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>			1												2000	
15	Common Diving Petrel	<i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i>			1													
16	Rock Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax magellanicus</i>	1	3	30	5	1	3	5	3	20	6	10	10	20	6	2	
17	Imperial Shag	<i>Leucocarbo atriceps</i>			15		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	20	2	✓		300		
18	Ascension Island Frigatebird	<i>Fregata aquila</i>	3															
19	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	2	3	3	1		6	3			2	3	2	4	5	1	
20	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	3	10	6	10	2	50	25	20	2	14	12	12	10	3	20	4
21	Black-necked Swan	<i>Cygnus melancoryphus</i>	13				5					2			2			
22	Upland Goose	<i>Chloephaga picta</i>	50	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	150	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	10	10
23	Kelp Goose	<i>Chloephaga hybrida</i>		40	✓	✓	20	2	6	2	6	4	4	4	4	3		
24	Ruddy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>	10	4	1	10	2	2	20	2	2	4	4	2			2	2
25	Flying Steamer Duck	<i>Tachyeres patachonicus</i>					3	3	1	1	1	1			3			
26	Falkland Steamer Duck	<i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>	5	20	10	10	2		3	2	6	4	15	200	10	2	6	
27	Crested Duck	<i>Lophonetta specularioides</i>	1	4	5	50	2	10	6	10	6	6	4	100	30		10	
28	Chiloe Wigeon	<i>Anas sibilatrix</i>		2						2		2					3	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	November															
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
29	Yellow-billed Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>	2	7		30	25	6	6	1	4	100		20	40		2	2
30	Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>					2					3			3			
31	Silver Teal	<i>Anas versicolor</i>	2				3					1		4				
32	Red-backed Hawk	<i>Geranoaetus polyosoma</i>			1	1		1	1	1	1		2	1	1	1		
33	Striated Caracara	<i>Phalacrocorax australis</i>		40	50	50	6	1	30	30	50		2					
34	Southern Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>		2		1	2		1	2	1		2	2				
35	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2			1							1	1				
36	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>	3	30	50	150	10	10	40	30	6	27	100	100	200	2	20	
37	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>	4	4	2	2	1					2		2				2
38	Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>	2	1		20	2		15	2	50		20	50	2			6
39	Rufous-chested Plover	<i>Charadrius modestus</i>						15	25	4	4		20	6				
40	Magellanic Snipe	<i>Gallinago paraguaiae</i>		3		1	2		20	3	20	1	2					
41	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>												2				
42	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>				100			50		50	1		200				100
43	Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis albus</i>			2	6			20	35	20	7	11	20	20	5		
44	Falkland Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	2	1	2	2	4	1	1	3	6	100	3	30	12	10		3
45	Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus maculipennis</i>	30						3		1	40	4	30	30			5
46	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	4	30	100	✓	30	6	50	30	30	50	100	200	200	4		20
47	Dolphin Gull	<i>Leucophaeus scoresbii</i>		2	30	20	2	10	30	15	50	4	12	30	30	2		4
48	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>	2	1	2	2	4	1	1	3	6	100	3	30	12	10		3
49	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>						1										
50	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>							2									
51	Blackish Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>		50	30	✓	6		50	50	50	1						
52	Dark-faced Ground Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola maclovianus</i>		6	2	3	1	4	10	2	5	2	3	10	1			1
53	Chilean Swallow	<i>Tachycineta meyeni</i>								1	2							
54	Falklands Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>		6	2	3	6	2	4		4	1	6	6	3			2
55	Grass Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>		2	4	2	2		4		1				4			
56	Cobb's Wren	<i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>			2	7	3		6	1								
57	Falkland Thrush	<i>Turdus falklandii</i>	6	50	40	✓	8	10	10	10	10	2	2	10	5	1	4	3
58	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	2															
59	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	6	6												10		6
60	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	1															

	Common Name	Scientific Name	November															
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
61	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Spinus barbatus</i>	1	40	12	20	2	10	2		3	6	4	3	2	2		3
62	Canary-winged Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>		30	2	10	1	1	10	10	30	2	20	4	1		1	
63	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella loyca</i>	3	10	6	20	6	3	2			1	20	20	6	1	6	4

Mammals

1	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	10	8															1
2	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	6																
3	Commerson's Dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>			12		4												
4	Southern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>				110		100	200	250	200		1						
5	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>							6	7	2								
6	South American Sea Lion	<i>Otaria flavescens</i>		1	13														

Plants

Plant names and status follow the Vascular Plants Checklists produced in 2012 by Falklands Conservation

Most plants were identified from Liddle, A. 2007. Plants of the Falkland Islands. London: Falklands Conservation

Scientific Name	Common Name	Status	Notes
Prickly-burr	<i>Acaenia magellanica</i>	Native	
Thrift (Falkland Thrift)	<i>Ameria maritima</i> (<i>A. macloviana</i>)	Native	Checklist and Moore 1983 put <i>A. macloviana</i> within <i>A. maritima</i>
Marram	<i>Ammophila arenaria</i>	Introduced	
Wild Celery	<i>Apium australe</i>	Native	
Christmas-bush	<i>Baccharis magellanica</i>	Native	
Tall-fern	<i>Blechnum magellanicum</i>	Native	
Small-fern	<i>Blechnum penna-marina</i>	Native	
Balsam-bog	<i>Bolax gummifera</i>	Native	
Yellow Lady's Slipper	<i>Calceolaria biflora</i>	Native	Planted in Conservation Garden, Stanley
Lady's Slipper	<i>Calceolaria fothergillii</i>	Native Endemic	Planted in Conservation Garden, Stanley
Field Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium arvense</i>	Native	
Fachine	<i>Chiliodactylon diffusum</i>	Native	
Whitegrass	<i>Cortaderia pilosa</i>	Native	
Native Stonecrop	<i>Crassula moschata</i>	Native	
Monterey Cypress	<i>Cupressus macrocarpa</i>	Introduced	

Scientific Name	Common Name	Status	Notes
Diddle-dee	<i>Empetrum rubrum</i>	Native	
Mountainberry	<i>Gaultheria pumila</i>	Native	
Pigvine	<i>Gunnera magellanica</i>	Native	
Cinnamon-grass	<i>Hierochloe redolens</i>	Native	
Bluebell / Hybrid bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i> / <i>H. x massartiana</i>	Introduced	Checklist only has hybrid but plants seen had <i>H. non-scripta</i> characters of flower spike nodding and flowers on one side of stem only (Stace 2010)
Buttonweed	<i>Leptinella scariosa</i>	Native	
Vanilla Daisy	<i>Leucheria suaveolens</i>	Native Endemic	
Native Wood-rush	<i>Luzula alopecurus</i>	Native	
Tall Rush	<i>Marsippospermum grandiflorum</i>	Native	
Water-milfoil	<i>Myriophyllum quitense</i>	Native	
Teaberry	<i>Myrteola nummularia</i>	Native	
Coastal Nassauvia	<i>Nassauvia gaudichaudii</i>	Native Endemic	
Pale Maiden	<i>Olsynium filifolium</i>	Native	
Scurvygrass	<i>Oxalis enneaphylla</i>	Native	
Falkland Lavender	<i>Perezia recurvata</i>	Native	
Thrift Plantain	<i>Plantago barbata</i>	Native	ID from Moore 1968
Bluegrass	<i>Poa alopecurus</i>	Native	ID from Moore 1968
Tussac-grass	<i>Poa flabellata</i>	Native	
Arrow-leaved Marigold	<i>Psychrophila (Caltha) sagittata</i>	Native	Checklist uses <i>Psychrophila</i> not <i>Caltha</i>
Short Rush / Brown Rush	<i>Rostkovia magellanica</i>	Native	Two common names in Checklist
Falkland Strawberry	<i>Rubus geoides</i>	Native	
Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	Introduced	
California Club-rush	<i>Schoenoplectus californicus</i>	Native	ID from Moore 1968
Sea Cabbage	<i>Senecio candidans</i>	Native	
Woolly Falkland Daisy (Falkland Woolly Ragwort)	<i>Senecio littoralis</i>	Native Endemic	Checklist common name different to Liddle 2007
Groundsel	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Introduced	
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>	Introduced	ID from Moore 1983
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Introduced	
Native Boxwood	<i>Veronica (Hebe) elliptica</i>	Native	Checklist uses <i>Veronica</i> not <i>Hebe</i>
Fuegian Violet	<i>Viola magellanica</i>	Native	ID by Warden of Sea Lion Island

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Imperial Shag



Long-tailed Meadowlark



Southern Elephant Seal



Two-banded Plover



Lenticular clouds and Southern Giant Petrels, Port Howard



Silvery Grebe