

# Albatross and petrel breeding sites in the Falkland Islands

## Suggested guidelines for landowners



**JUNE 2006**

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## ***Background information***

The Falkland Islands, sandwiched between the cold nutrient rich waters of Antarctica and the warm currents from Brazil, represent a fantastic breeding location for abundant marine species in the South Atlantic. Animals that depend on land to breed but on the sea for food enjoy an island close to their feeding grounds, with little or no disturbance from the outside world.

Around the Falklands there are a great number of marine animals, some remain close to shore all year round and others migrate vast distances each year to breed on our coastal beaches, rocky outcrops, cliffs and islets. The most plentiful of these animals are the seabirds.

Seabird populations around the world are declining at a rate far greater than other bird species, and in the southern oceans the problem is concentrated on albatross and petrel species. The decline has been studied at a large range of seabird nesting sites around the world and although some island sites have stable, even increasing numbers, the larger picture indicates an unsustainable decline across the oceans.

The biggest cause of the decline in seabird numbers, especially albatross and petrels species comes from the interaction between the birds and the fishing industry. There is a worldwide effort, led by BirdLife International to reduce this negative interaction and therefore improve the status of the world's seabird populations.

Because of the decline, any extra pressure on the seabird populations may be enough to decrease breeding success and push the albatross closer to extinction. With this in mind Falklands Conservation are working with BirdLife International as partners in the Falklands to give the birds as good a chance of recovery as possible.

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### **BirdLife International**

BirdLife International is a global partnership of conservation organisations who work together to help improve the status of the world's bird populations, the habitat they rely on to breed and feed, and to maintain global species diversity.

BirdLife's aims are to:

- Prevent the extinction of any bird species
- Maintain and where possible improve the conservation status of all bird species

- Conserve and where appropriate improve and enlarge sites and habitats important for birds
- Help, through birds, to conserve biodiversity and to improve the quality of people's lives
- integrate bird conservation into sustaining people's livelihoods

Through the cooperation of partner conservation groups around the world, a picture of the health of the bird populations can be gained. As the partner for the Falkland Islands, Falklands Conservation provides data and advice on the situation of birds in the South Atlantic.

There is recognition that the terrible state of the world's seabird populations is currently worsening and unless we act to improve the situation we face the very real threat of losing whole species due mainly to human activity.

### **ACAP**

The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatross and Petrels (ACAP) is an international agreement, which seeks to improve the status of endangered seabirds by coordinating international effort to reduce and control threats to albatross and petrel populations.

Countries that have signed ACAP include the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, France, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Brazil and Ecuador. These represent the main countries where ACAP species breed and also countries whose fishing fleets are present in areas where the birds feed.

The UK with support from the Overseas Territories, including the Falkland Islands, ratified ACAP in 2004.

The Falklands is one of the UK's most important territories as the majority of the world population of two species listed under ACAP breed here.

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### **Which Falkland Island species are included in ACAP?**

#### ***Black-browed albatross***

The black-browed albatross breeds on 11 islands in the Falklands and at one location on West Falkland. The world's largest colony is at Steeple Jason Island with 171,286 pairs and the second largest at Beauchêne Island with 105,458 pairs.

The most recent census in 2005 estimated a total of 399,416 breeding pairs. This indicates a decline of 38,000 pairs of black-browed albatross over the past 10 years. The rate of decline is therefore

slightly less than 1% per year or around 7,600 birds. This is about 21 birds per day or approximately one bird every hour.

With over 65% of the world's population breeding in the Falklands, the black-browed albatross clearly relies heavily on the islands as a stronghold for the species.

The nesting habitat is typically coastal cliffs and sloping ground overlooking the sea. Nests are built from mud and grass and stand approximately 60cm tall with a slight indentation at the top. The black-brows nest in large, sometimes dense colonies and often with rockhopper penguins.

### ***Southern giant petrels***

Southern giant petrels breed in the Falklands in many small coastal colonies, made up of some 33 sites including 22 islands. Sandy Cay in the south of Falkland Sound holds the majority of the Falkland's 19,816 breeding pairs and is the largest colony in the world with 10,936 pairs.



Although there is no historical data on the status of this species in the Falkland Islands, there is considerable local knowledge and anecdotal suggestion that the population has increased since the 1980s.

Because of the distribution of this species around the Falklands, it is the most likely of the ACAP species to come into contact with humans. It is also, unfortunately the most easily disturbed of the seabirds. This species will flush on sight of humans, even at distance. Some colonies may also flush if vessels pass close to shore and will certainly be negatively affected by low-flying aircraft. If birds are flushed from the nest this allows eggs and hatchlings to be predated or chilled and can severely affect breeding success.

### *White-chinned petrels*



There are only three known breeding sites of white-chinned petrels in the islands, New Island in the west and Kidney Island in the east. The third site, Bottom Island, has only a single confirmed breeding pair.

This species is a burrowing petrel, returning to the nest at nightfall and is easily overlooked and therefore it is possible that other sites around the Falklands remain to be discovered.

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### **Important times of year for albatross and petrels**

During their life cycle, albatross and petrels spend the vast majority of their time at-sea, feeding, resting and travelling on the ocean waves. They only visit land to raise their young and only then after at least seven years at-sea.

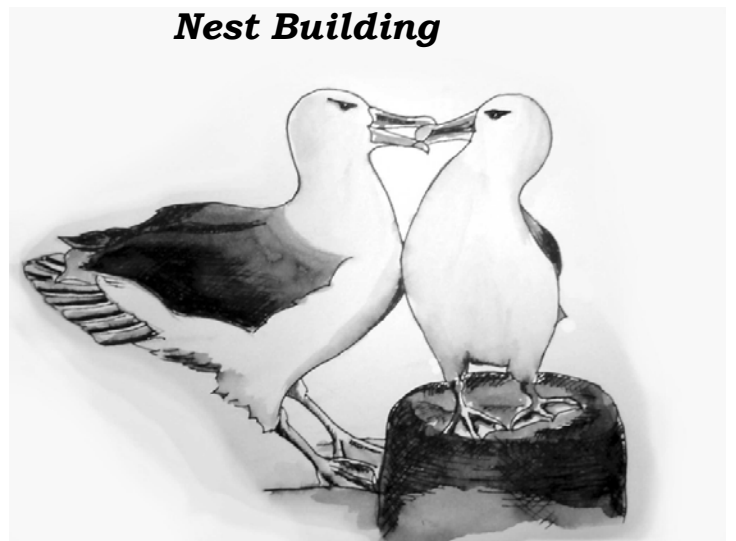
The time on land is split into several periods, some of which are less easily disturbed than others. It is important that during the more sensitive periods the birds are not subjected to stress caused through excessive visitor or other pressure.

The following periods describe the part of the life-cycle spent on land and highlights the sensitive times for the birds.

#### **Breeding cycle**

Birds return to the nest sites in early to late-September each year. The black-browed albatross nest is built or reconstructed of a mixture of soil, grass and roots on tussac island slopes. White-chinned petrels are excavating old nest burrows and giant petrels make themselves comfortable in small indentations on pebble and sandy beaches.

#### **Nest Building**





### ***Egg period***

After a laying period that extends over approximately 20 days for the black-brows, most birds produce an egg by late October. At this stage, adults will share the incubation of the egg. Normally each adult will make trips of around two weeks whilst the other stays on the nest. During this period the albatross are unlikely to abandon nests.

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### ***Small chick period***

The eggs start to hatch in early December and the young chicks are especially weak and vulnerable to predation. The adults at this time start much shorter foraging trips, bringing meals of approximately 500g regularly to the small chick. Turn around is now just a few days and each time the birds swap on the nest the chick is in danger. For this reason early to late December



is one of the most sensitive times of year for the young birds. It is important to restrict disturbance as much as possible at this stage. If through disturbance the chick should fall from the nest, it is too small to climb back in and will be abandoned by its parents, resulting in starvation or predation. Skuas and Johnny Rooks will take a chick in seconds.

### ***Large chick period***

By late January the chicks are much larger and stronger. The adult birds begin simultaneous foraging trips, leaving the large chicks alone on the nest where they can now fend for themselves. The chicks are capable by this stage of resisting any attacks by predators and are much less likely to suffer from disturbance. However, at any stage, if the chick is disturbed and removed from the nest it will not be fed by the parents.



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### ***Fledging***

At the end of April the birds start to fledge, now at a weight of about 5kg in albatross and 4.5kg in giant petrels. The smaller white-chinned petrels weigh significantly less at approximately 1.2kg.

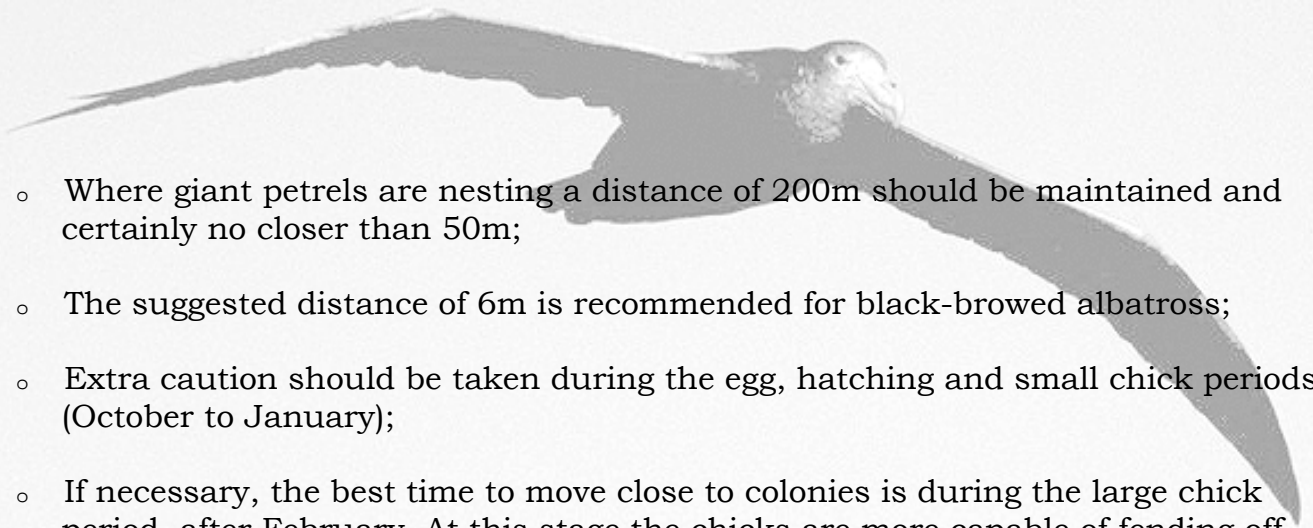


During the period just prior to fledging, the birds are at a delicate stage. With many of their flight feathers fully developed, the birds are able to take off, especially when there are strong winds. The young birds will still have downy feathers on parts of the body, generally on the back and chest giving them an untidy appearance. These downy feathers and a lack of adequate waterproofing means the birds will become waterlogged and die if they are flushed from the nest sites too soon.

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### ***Recommendations for landowners with breeding colonies of ACAP species***

- Southern giant petrels in the Falkland Islands are much more sensitive to disturbance than in other breeding localities. For this reason we suggest that extra care is taken with this species.



- Where giant petrels are nesting a distance of 200m should be maintained and certainly no closer than 50m;
- The suggested distance of 6m is recommended for black-browed albatross;
- Extra caution should be taken during the egg, hatching and small chick periods (October to January);
- If necessary, the best time to move close to colonies is during the large chick period, after February. At this stage the chicks are more capable of fending off predators;
- The pre-fledging period is also sensitive. Colonies should be completely avoided wherever possible during April;
- During sensitive periods or with larger visitor numbers, a larger distance is always preferable;
- Burrowing petrel nests are susceptible to trampling. Care should be taken to avoid burrows at all times of the year;
- Do not block seabird sea-access paths or take-off areas;
- Avoid making any sudden or loud noises in the vicinity of seabird colonies. This includes car doors, motorbike engine noise, shouting, whistling, etc;
- Camera flashes should be turned off – they are seldom of use outside anyway;
- Helicopter flights should be restricted to agreed flight paths, ensuring respectable distances from all seabird colonies;
- Dogs should be kept away from seabird colonies;
- Avoid close approach to nest sites during December, especially the first two weeks;
- Avoid giant petrel colonies wherever possible.

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**Thank you for taking the time to read this.**