

Falklands Conservation Newsletter

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Oiled Penguins at Bluff Cove

On Friday (4th April) reports of oiled gentoo penguins from Bluff Cove Lagoon swiftly activated a small team from Falklands Conservation, and a number of volunteers to rescue the oiled birds. The reports from Kevin Kilmartin at Bluff Cove, (fortuitously on a tourist day, meaning that people at the site were noticing the birds), indicated that about 8 birds were badly oiled and a good number more with smaller oil spots.

Staff from FC headed to the colony, home to just under 1,000 breeding pairs of gentoo penguins and a handful of King penguins. Five of the worst oiled birds were rounded up, caught and transported back in to Stanley. Each bird received thorough cleaning using warm soapy water by a number of volunteers, removing the oil from their feathers.

Quick action is essential for a good long-term prognosis for the birds, who ingest the oil as they preen their feathers, which can result in lesions in the penguins' stomach and can change the birds' immune systems, making them more vulnerable to disease. The greatest risk of oiling to seabirds however results when oil destroys the natural water repellent properties of the birds' plumage which is essential for them to survive the cold South Atlantic waters. Loss of their waterproofing allows water to penetrate into their feath-

ers causing water logging, loss of insulation and drowning.

The source of the oil is unknown, a fly-over of the suspected area at sea, by FIGAS on Saturday revealed no clues as to the location of the oil slick. At this time of year many vessels are operating in the coastal waters around north-east coast of East Falkland. An additional oiled gentoo penguin was also reported at Kidney Cove on the same day, and one reported on Surf Bay on the following Monday. Whilst it is difficult to speculate where the oil came from, it is certainly a result of illegal dumping of oil at sea. Clean up operations of oiled birds although usually successful, are expensive and time consuming, and can never be as effective as prevention in the first place.

The rescued gentoo penguins were kept in captivity, until they were fit again to be released back at Bluff Cove Lagoon. A period of rehabilitation ensures that their plumage has regained its natural protective waterproofing, essential for a successful release back into the wild. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, the penguins did not survive. The veterinary department was involved through out but it is not possible to say whether the penguins succumbed to the stress of the situation or had been poisoned through oil ingestion. This is the first incidence of oiled birds so far this season, and provoked

a willing response and help from local volunteers.

FC and Bluff Cove would like to thank all those involved, in particular the fisheries department, Steve Pointing, FIGAS, Colin, Natalie and Kane Smith, and a number of people including fisheries staff & observers who contributed to cleaning and rehabilitating the birds, let's hope this is the first and last oil incident of the year! If anyone sees or suspects oiled birds, or other wildlife please report sightings to FC as soon as possible. We are now relocated in Jubilee Villas our phone and contact details are still the same:

Phone 22247 or email
grant.munro@conservation.org.fk.



One of the penguins being captured at Bluff Cove and then being cleaned at the Fisheries Department.

New record for nationally threatened and rare species

During our December fieldwork we (myself and volunteer Chris Bell) were lucky enough to visit Keppel Island for several days. Another surveying day was coming to an end, dusk was rapidly approaching and in Chris' words we were 'on the homeward stretch and putting on a pace to get back to the settlement for food.' It was one of those unexpected finds and Chris said 'it just caught my eye as I stepped over it and checked me in mid-stride.' What Chris had spotted was the small but charismatic and unusual-looking fern, Dusen's moonwort (*Botrychium dusenii*).



Dusen's moonwort (*Botrychium dusenii*) is also found on Isla Grande, Staten Island, Islas Wollaston, Chile and western Argentina. This is a special find for the Falkland Islands as the fern is nationally protected and rare

and, prior to this field trip, had only been recorded at three locations along the eastern seaboard of East Falkland. At the site on Keppel at least a dozen plants were found, spread across two populations a short distance from each other. Individuals were roughly 6-8 cm tall and in damp, semi-improved grassland (dominated in this area by the introduced smooth-stalked meadow grass, *Poa pratensis*). The site wasn't far from the northern coast of the island and very close to sea level.

Moonworts are small ferns in the genus *Botrychium* and are characterized by the production of a single leaf that is divided into a vegetative segment that is pinnately divided into leaflets and a fertile segment that overtops it. The fertile segment is also pinnately divided but bears yellowish-brown spore-capsules (called sporangia) on its branches instead of leaflets. All moonworts have short, fleshy, underground stems called rhizomes.

The biology of moonworts is really fas

cinating with most of their life stages occurring belowground. After germination, moonwort spores won't develop any further than a few cells unless colonized by a mycorrhizal fungus and the maintenance of this symbiosis is also essential for all future successful growth. Plants generally produce just one leaf every year but it is also common for moonworts to remain dormant belowground and not produce any above ground leaf at all. It is during this underground phase of a moonwort's life that it also depends on mycorrhizal fungi for sugars as well as for water and minerals, as it is not able to photosynthesize at this time.

Plants die down in autumn and emerge again in the spring so the best time to look out for them is over the summer. Being rare and so difficult to find makes searching for this species a real treasure hunt with the places to look being lowland areas near sea level, in greens and neutral grassland as well as on sand dunes. As we find more populations of Dusen's moonwort we can look towards carrying out research into its life history and ecology, which in turn will allow us to determine management practices to help conserve these intriguing plants.

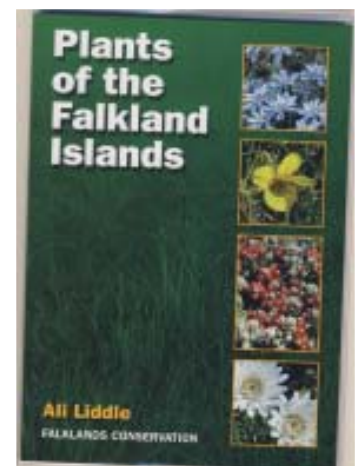
Rebecca Upson, Plant Conservation Officer

A Successful Evening For Ali



Falklands Conservation's newest publication, *Plants of the Falkland Islands*, was successfully launched on Thursday 6th March 2008. Ali Liddle, the author, signed copies of her book while guests were able to sample some of the recipes illustrated in the book.

The book is available for purchase from Falklands Conservation's office at Jubilee Villa and other retail outlets in Stanley for just £10.



Horse paddock of high conservation value

In October 2007 the first Important Plant Areas Programme Workshop was held in Stanley. Several people at the workshop mentioned the Horse Paddock at Chartres as a site that had the potential to be botanically rich owing to the lower grazing intensity over a period of over 100 years. An initial day visit last December, primarily to follow up the particular sightings of those present at the workshop, showed that the paddock might indeed hold many more hidden treasures.

The 930-hectare site did not disappoint and with 104 (61% of the native flora) native vascular species recorded over the nine-day survey period (along with 16 non-native vascular species), there was far too much of interest to cover everything in this article. Of particular relevance to plant conservation are the several populations of Falkland rockcress (*Phlebelobium maclovianum*) found along the cliffs on the edge of the Chartres River and the extensive areas covered by mature fachine scrub, a nationally threatened habitat.

This could a valuable National Nature Reserve, with its species rich examples of dwarf shrub heath, bog, acid grassland and fachine scrub. The frequent occurrence of bluegrass (*Poa alopecurus*) within areas of acid grassland was notable and the occurrence of two data deficient species, the Fuegian foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*) (known at only one other site at present) and the blood beak sedge (*Carex aematorrhyncha*), within some areas of fachine scrub was also noteworthy. The blood beak sedge was particularly common across the site (in some areas forming the dominant cover), and these two species were also found within the Little Chartres wildlife corridor. This suggests that these species are sensitive to grazing intensity or perhaps they are simply under-recorded because of the difficulty of identifying them when flowers are absent.

Fachine scrub is known to grow in association with the silvery buttercup (*Hamadryas argentea*) at Doyle Farm and also at the nearby wildlife corridor at Little Chartres. This association was also found in the Chartres Horse Paddock at several locations. At one site near 'Loafer's Corner' the snake plant was also found growing within fachine scrub, bringing the total number of known lowland locations for this association up to four (along with Little Chartres wildlife corridor, Narrows Island and Big Arch Island). Leaf samples for DNA analysis were collected from the Snake plant (*Nassauvia serpens*) population at Little Chartres in order to begin to investigate whether these populations are genetically distinct from plants growing in upland stone run sites.

Another data deficient species (only known at present from 3 other sites), the Fuegian sedge was found within an area of short rush (*Rostkovia magellanica*)-dominated bog as well as with a variety of other sedges alongside streams in the northern section of the paddock. Seven species of sedge were found across the site. Many species of sedge have special root adaptations to low soil nutrient status and this is part of the reason why they are of conservation concern as they are often sensitive to agricultural practices such as the addition of fertilizers and the drainage of wetland areas. As an extra source of food and shelter for local wildlife, sedges also play an important role within the ecosystem. With a lack of knowledge, globally, about the basic biology of many sedge species, the Chartres Horse Paddock could prove useful as a research site as well as being important for species conservation.



Recording *Carex magellanica* along stream



Fachine scrub



Grass wren in fachine scrub



Fuegian foxtail growing within fachine scrub

Wildlife Sightings

Black-browed albatross

Falklands Conservation have received a number of calls recently regarding black-browed albatross chicks.

A combination of the birds having just left the nest for the first time and not yet had time to find their wings so to speak and the strong winds that the Falkland Islands have been experiencing recently have resulted in some of these birds crash landing. So far Falklands Conservation have been contacted to deal with and provide advice for albatross being found on top of Mount Kent, at M.P.A, Government House, Victory Green and various gardens around Stanley.

If you do come across an albatross then do contact us here at the office. We will be able to advise you on the best method to help the bird.



Whales and Dolphins

Falklands Conservation have also been involved in the rescue of a Dusky dolphin which had become stranded in the Canache in Stanley harbour. Once Falklands Conservation had been informed of the animals difficulty, a small team supported by volunteers managed to rescue the dolphin and release it into deeper water at Surf Bay. Recently some pilot whales, stranded at Fox Bay were refloated by the residents, although Falklands Conservation were not involved in this incident.



The Falkland Islands is a fantastic place to see whales and dolphins all year round but during the months of February - June it is possible to see some of the largest whales in the world. The Sei whale, which is the third largest, is commonly seen around the Falkland Islands at this time of the year. Fin whale is also sighted around the islands and they are the second largest whale after the Blue whale. During November to February Killer whales are seen frequently at Sea Lion Island preying on the pups as they learn to swim. Peale's dolphin and the distinctive markings of the Commerson's dolphins can be seen all year round.

Falklands Conservation have been collecting data on cetaceans around the Falkland Islands since 2004. The database now has over 900 records and is still growing. If you have any sightings that you would like to report then just contact us at our office in Stanley.

Falklands Conservation

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The Newsletter is edited by Anna Shepherd

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