

Sizing up North East Island Rats

By Euan Dunn, RSPB sabbatical visitor to Falklands Conservation

As its name suggests, North East Island sits off the north-east corner of Lively Island, the biggest rat-free island in the Falklands. However, North East Island does have rats, which not only makes it much the poorer for small birds but also poses a threat to nearby Lively, well within the expected swimming distance of the Brown Rat. In September we will be employing Derek Brown from New Zealand again, a world expert in the eradication of rats from seabird islands, to act as Pied Piper for North East Island. Previously, this was successfully attempted from Outer and Double Island, as well as seven others a couple of years ago.

Derek has already investigated North East to assess what needs to be done but we also wanted to know what's there now, in terms of bird and plant life, to act as a baseline for gauging the changes that are bound to follow once rats are gone, and also to assess what impacts actually carrying out the eradication may have. So in late February, Robin Woods, Sally Poncet and I landed with the help of *Island Maid* and skipper Kjetil Slettnes on North East. We camped for the weekend in the excellent shelter of the old corral and palenque on the north-west corner of the island. While Sally surveyed shorebirds round the coast, Robin and I recorded birds and plants along a series of transects across the Island.

We were soon able to confirm that the island is indeed rat-infested. The first afternoon, a red-backed hawk took off, leaving parts of its meal behind – a rat skull and intestines. We turned up other rat skulls, one a confirmed Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* and saw a number of live rats. The potential for the island's birdlife to bounce back once it is rat-free was also clear to see. Apart from drawing a blank on thrushes, we found all the typical small bird species but in very sparse numbers. A handful of tussacbirds, ground tyrants, pipits, siskins, finches, meadowlarks, snipe, plovers and dotterels were clinging to survival, some perhaps temporary overspill from Lively. Encouragingly, we also found about half a dozen male grass wrens, some singing lustily, on the northern half of North East and a couple more on the southern half which is joined by a sand-spit. Sally also spotted two juvenile grass wrens and, on our second night, a juvenile Cobb's wren – the only one encountered all weekend - turned up chattering at the corral. It was still there when we left, even managing a snatch of song in the blazing sunshine of the Falklands 'indian summer'.

The upland, ruddy-headed and kelp geese all seemed to have bred reasonably well and the tidal flats were dotted with hundreds of migratory sandpipers. However, the substantial population of steamer ducks and oystercatchers (both species) had fared less well and in each case we struggled to find more than a couple of juveniles. Other species such as skuas however, may miss the rats and it was gratifying to have a short-eared owl pitching onto the fence post by our tents on the first evening. Botanically, North East is an island recovering from heavy grazing pressure from sheep and cattle. The island's most stunning and dominant feature, unique in the Falklands, is a massive carpet of oxeye daisies *Leucanthemum vulgare* which shimmered in the late summer sunshine.

Continued



The Island Maid owned by Falklands Fresh



Sally and Euan looking at the huge population of *Ranunculus acaulis* found on the Island, also shown below



Pictured here a close-up of Mudwort found in abundance on North East



North East has a fantastic variety of flora

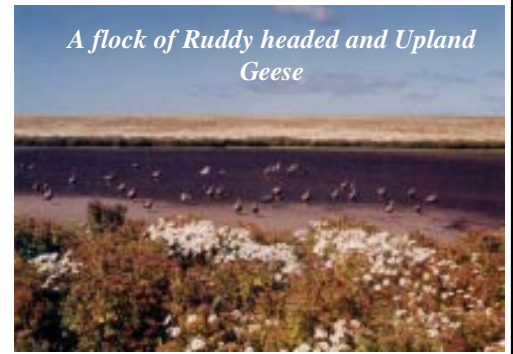


View along SW side of Island

Sally's photographs show that in 1994, the year the sheep were removed, the daisies occupied only some of the central areas of the northern half of North East. By her next visit in 1996 they had already spread to colonise much of the bare sand. During our February survey, Robin compiled an impressive plant list for the whole island amounting to about 60 species. This has still to be fully analysed but no plants had been recorded for the floral atlas in this 10km square (VC03), so every observation was new and interesting. Highlights included mudwort *Limosella australis*, previously known from only three other sites on East Falkland, and Skottsberg's buttercup *Ranunculus acaulis* known from only ten sites on East Falkland, most of them on the north coast.

Sally found the biggest patch of Skottsberg's that Robin had ever seen, covering nearly 400 square metres. From just this brief encounter, it is clear that North East Island has much to offer, including one of only three sandy beach colonies of sea lions in the Falklands. With its rich and varied flora, it promises to be even more spectacular as a rat-free island. Work is due to start on North East in September and any local volunteers to assist with the project would be very welcome. Call the FC office in Stanley for further details.

Euan joined the North East Island survey during his sabbatical leave from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (where he heads up the marine team) to assist Falklands Conservation. Thanks to landowners S. and J. Poncet and Ian Bury for allowing us to visit North East Island, to Falklands Fresh for putting the 'Island Maid' at our disposal and, last but not least, Alec Jaffray on Lively for maintaining spot-on radio contact.



A flock of Ruddy headed and Upland Geese



This picture shows the high and density of the vegetation on North East



Habitat of Mudwort

All photos were taken by Robin Woods

A HORDE OF HUDSONIAN GODWITS

On the 2nd of March, Alan Henry, with Mike and Sue Morrison, was lucky enough to stumble upon 21 Hudsonian Godwits (*Limosa haemastica*).

Although not a particular rarity to see one in the Falklands, it is very rare indeed to have a sighting of a large group such as this.

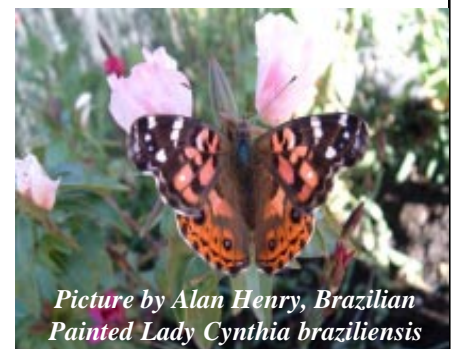
The birds, which breed in northern Canada and migrate to the south of Argentina for the austral summer, were seen at Kelp Point on Fitzroy Farm. The habitat they were sighted in is ideal for the birds, as the Hudsonian Godwit likes muddy estuaries, shores of inland lakes, rivers or seas.



Photos by Alan Henry

BRAZILIAN PAINTED LADY

This beautiful butterfly was spotted at Swan Pond, Cape Dolphin by a very sharp eyed Trish Henry who saw the butterfly whilst driving through the camp. The Brazilian Painted Lady has not been seen in the Falklands for two summers, and it is thought that this insect may have bred here this year. The last time they were seen many other sightings followed, so keep your eyes open!



*Picture by Alan Henry, Brazilian Painted Lady *Cynthia braziliensis**

Three legged cat first to discover rare visitor to Islands

Once again, Alan Henry, keen local birder and former FC Trustee, identified a dead Dark-billed Cuckoo recently and brought it in to the Falklands Conservation office. The bird had been discovered after coming to an untimely death in the clutches of a cat. To add insult to injury, the cat also had only three legs, making it even more remarkable that it managed to catch this rare visitor.

This is only the second record of this species in the Islands, the last being in 1937 in the grounds of Government House.

More commonly seen on the South American mainland, the bird feeds primarily on invertebrates. It is possible that this visitor arrived on one of the visiting cruise ships, so it is also a possibility that with increased passages to the islands the chances



Photo: Falklands Conservation

of seeing one of these birds may increase.

Whilst it may be possible for them to survive on the Falklands, their natural habitat consists of the woods and savannahs of central and southern America, so their distribution would be limited to sheltered areas around settlements and areas of tree planting.

The bird normally has very

distinctive tail feathers, extending to approximately the same length again as the entire body and strikingly marked in black and white stripes. It would appear that this particular feature was lost in the bird's final disagreement with the cat. Hopefully the next visitor will be more lucky and provide local birders with a live sighting of this rare bird.

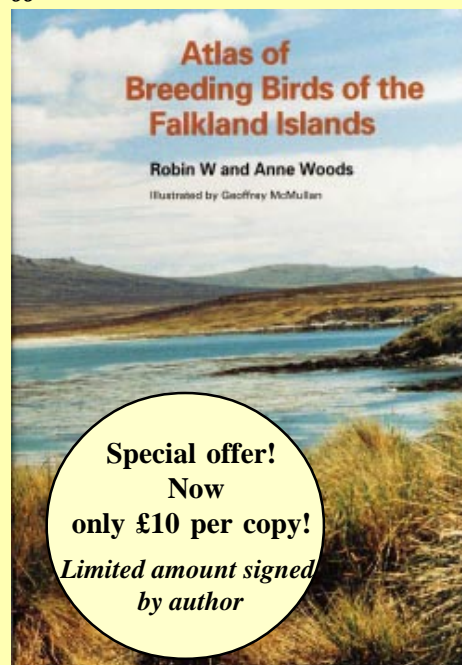
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