

Falklands Conservation Newsletter

P.O. Box 26, Jetty Centre
Stanley, Falkland Islands
FIQQ 1ZZ
Phone: 00500 22247 Fax: 00500 22288
email: grant.munro@conservation.org.fk
www.falklandsconservation.com



Albatross monitoring and tracking on Steeple Jason

The end of March heralds the close of the busy fieldwork period of the Seabird Monitoring Programme, with ringing of Black-browed Albatross chicks at the long term study colony on Steeple Jason Island.

We were certainly blessed with a fabulous day for crossing to the island, barely a cloud in the sky and low winds made for a very smooth ride, and the attendant Peale's dolphins, and some foraging Sei Whales kept us entertained.



Peale's dolphins surfing in the bow-wave of the Condor.
Photo I.Forster

The Albatross study colony on the island is a small group of 300 nests within the vast population of breeding albatrosses that the island holds. The last census estimated approximately 175,000 breeding pairs so as you can appreciate the unbelievable spectacle that presents when you first arrive on the island. Our small 'selection' of nests is intensively monitored with all adults having a known identity and nest location, and, at this time of year, each of the surviving chicks from these nests receives its own identity ring for future

study when they return. Most albatrosses return to the same site that they were raised in, when they mature as adults. Of course this won't happen for another five to ten years, such is the time taken to reach breeding age, but when they do return we can then link them to their parents, providing population productivity rates. This information is vital to assess their conservation status in light of the known issues of seabird deaths when interacting with fisheries worldwide.

Now Albatross ringing may sound like a glamorous pursuit, but in reality it is a rather smelly, and somewhat painful job. The newly feathered chicks that are almost ready to take their first flight don't generally appreciate one applying a nice piece of inscribed metal jewellery to a leg, retaliating with some sharp pecks and a sometimes liberal dose of squid and fish flavoured oil. Whilst this would probably be recommended in the latest new age catalogue for skin protection I can tell you that it has a rather penetrating and lingering odour that wears, rather than washes off! Nevertheless with myself and Nic filled with scientific righteousness we slapped on a good 400 rings in a busy 5 hour session on our first day. Making the most of the good weather is definitely a priority in the Falklands.

Further colony counts conducted on

our second day showed that the season has been a very productive one for the Albatross, with a high success rate of around 65% since laying. In poor years productivity can drop to around 30% so the news is good on the breeding front for 2007.



Adult in colony.
Photo I.Forster

The last task of the trip was to attach three satellite transmitters to juveniles, so they can carry them off into the sunset when they leave their nest for the first time. This will provide us with detailed information on their movements as they migrate northward to spend the first part of their lives. Critically juvenile albatrosses appear to be much more susceptible to mortalities from interactions with fishing vessels than mature birds, and with this detailed tracking information we should be able to highlight fishing areas that are of particular conservation importance for Falkland Islands' birds.

Thus ends another summer at the albatross field site. It's always a shame to wave goodbye to such a fabulous place, but long term work will continue there come November 2007. I. Forster

Sea Lion Island Warden reports on the Islands Wildlife Activities over the summer

The season started off with the impressive entrance of the elephant seals, taking over the beaches particularly around the north east point. This year 465 pups were born, as recorded by the researchers from ESRG (the Elephant Seal Research Group) that have been studying the animals here for over 10 years now. What is amazing to realise is that some of the pups they first saw when they started their work are now the huge breeding adults, and have even reached beachmaster status. At the moment, the younger non-breeding seals are spread out on the beaches while they moult, and the breeding adults are slowly filtering back to do the same. Since November/December they have been out at sea filling their stomachs after the long fast they go through during the breeding period.



Photo Morag Smart

This year has seen a rise in the number of gentoos on the north-east beach, with 2331 pairs counted. The largest colony has also moved a little since last year – they are now clearly within sight of the lodge, meaning that visitors only have to look out of the windows to see their first glimpses of the gentoos! Earlier in the season, a small band of explorers came inside the lodge fence boundary to investigate the lodge. They stayed outside for a couple of days, wandered around a bit and had a quick

peek in the sitting room door, then decided it was too busy so headed back to their own homes. Who knows, maybe next year they will decide to move in!

The rockhoppers unfortunately are not doing so well, with numbers still decreasing as they have over the past few years. This could still be due in part to knock-on effects from the toxic algal bloom that happened in 2001, with the chicks of that season not surviving to replace the breeding adults. The strong winds, torrential rain and storms have not been kind to the chicks either. In particular, at New Year 22 headless chicks were spotted around the colonies and after initial thoughts of a headless horseman patrolling the area, it was clear the chicks had died from exposure and the predators had moved in afterwards. Our remaining chicks are just going through their final moult at the moment, and the king cormorant chicks that nest with them are just getting their first flight feathers in. This means a lot of mischief up at the point, with young cormorants trying out their feathers (usually a little precariously), and often coming over to investigate any visitors.

An unusual visitor to Rockhopper Point this year was a solitary macaroni penguin who turned up in mid-December to sit among the rockhoppers for the day. Macaroni penguins do occasionally breed on Sea Lion Island, so it will be interesting to monitor the area and see if any more return in the future.

On another positive side, there has been lots of food available for the caracaras and skuas meaning their chicks are doing well and the lodge is

having to get on the defensive again in preparation for the onslaught of newly-fledged Johnny Rooks in the area. We have 11 pairs of Johnny Rooks on the island, most of them nesting on the cliffs in tussac areas. Two nests are a little more strangely located – one in an old jackass burrow and the other just in a hollow in the grass. Interestingly they often line their nests with bits of rope, coloured plastic or cloth. One pair of Johnny Rooks nesting near one of our more remote beaches are particularly aggressive – they have managed to knock a number of unwary visitors on the head, usually when they least expect it. I wonder if they have a quota for the season? And are there more points for hitting the warden...

We were lucky to have some of the newest members of the Watch Group with us for a couple of days, helping us replant some tussac grass along the north side of the island. We are working towards connecting some of the larger stands of tussac together to create a larger area of habitat that will directly benefit the wildlife here. Well done and a big thank you to them, Jo and Trish for all their hard work! A big thank you to volunteer Neil Dawson as well, for all the hours he put into the orca surveys he carried out and for his help in other projects on the island.

Once again, the season has gone by in the blink of an eye, and soon people and penguins will be heading their separate ways. This is a small but very special island, and it is hard to forget the unique moments and amazing wildlife encounters that are all part of the Sea Lion experience. It has been a real privilege to be here. Morag Smart.



Photo Morag Smart

Bleaker Island 10th - 11th February

On the 10th February the WATCH Group flew out to Bleaker Island to do a beach clean. The group were asked to pick up all the wood from a jetty that blown down in strong winds. After donning their bright yellow rubber gloves, they set to work. It took a lot of hard work for the wood to be collected and piled into two big heaps. After the beach had been cleaned the group went for a walk to Sandy Bay beach to pick up any rubbish and litter that they saw and did a little bit of beach combing on the way. On arriving back at the house the Group drew some cartoon strips while tucking into a tin of home baked cookies that Teen Short had made. Everyone enjoyed a fantastic supper of sausages and mash potato cooked again by Teen Short before going outside to play some games. After being exhausted playing poison ball and some wheel barrow races everyone needed their hot chocolate and popcorn on returning to the house before bed. The next morning everyone tidied and packed, ready to leave. Half of the group left in the morning to return to Stanley, the other half didn't return until later in the afternoon and were able to enjoy a walk to the Shag colony to take some photos. The WATCH Group had a fantastic time and would like to thank Phyll and Mike Rendell for having them stay at Bleaker Island, Elaine, Rob and Teen for making them welcome and making sure they were well fed, Julie and Mandy for looking after them, FIGAS for making sure they all arrived and Standard Chartered Bank for their continued sponsorship and support.



The Group learn that beach cleaning involves team work.



A rare photo of the grown-ups doing some work.



On your marks, get set.....

Do plovers and dotterels stay at home or go travelling over winter?

British PhD student James St Clair has completed his first of three summers studying two-banded plovers and rufous-chested dotterels on Sea Lion Island. Now back in his University of Bath office, he is wondering whether the banded birds will stay on Sea Lion Island or migrate northwards to East Falklands or elsewhere. "Similarly sized white-rumped sandpipers arrive in the Falklands in September from the Arctic, so plovers and dotterels should be able to travel large distances and move from island to island," explains James.

"Over the summer, the banded birds on Sea Lion Island stayed fairly close to where they were nesting, but over winter, no one knows if they stay or move to different feeding grounds," says James. "If you see a banded plover or dotterel away from Sea Lion Island, I'd love to hear about it."

James asks that you record the date, location, species and combination of the colour rings. The study birds have four bands, with the bottom right band being metal. Record first the colour of the bottom left band, then the top left band and lastly, the top right band. "Colour rings can be difficult to read," says James. "But if you see a colour-ringed bird but can not read the colours or sequence of rings, please make a note of this and submit the record anyway."

Records should be sent to James by email (jjhsc20@bath.ac.uk) or to Falklands Conservation who will pass them on.



Photo: Rufous-chested dotterel – T. Szekely

Seabird identification meeting in Chile

Having moved from the Falklands to Chile and waved a goodbye to the staff at Falklands Conservation (and since had half of them come and stay!) I investigated what efforts the folk across the water are making to help the albatross. I was greeted first by Guillermo Luna, a member of the academic staff at the local university in the forth region. He explained quickly that there is a need for action in the area as little is known about the impact of the swordfish fisheries on the high seas.

Collecting data in this fishery is a clear aim of the Chilean National Plan of Action – Seabirds and there is a team of dedicated seabird observers preparing to form the frontline in seabird conservation here. An approach we in the Falklands have dealt with for some time I thought, but there is a difference in Chile, which I found an excellent idea.

The seabird observer team were brought together in a meeting and

workshop at the Universidad Catolica del Norte with Chilean bird experts on hand to point out the whimbrels from the choughs, so to speak. The team was made up of several chaps in their twenties with that definite twitcher appearance to them, although thankfully no-one sported waders. The other members were students from the university, a couple of interested locals (myself and Paola included!) and the local fishing captains. The presence of the captains seemed an excellent addition and importantly included them in the effort from the outset.

To my delight, I saw the meeting unfold, expertly led by Dr. Carlos Moreno, who joined us in the Falklands for the albatross workshop in March. The meeting discussed not only the effect of fisheries on seabirds, the global nature of the problem populations face but also basic taxonomy and species identification. I was pleasantly surprised to see the workshop part of the meeting examine pictures and photos and noticed the interest of the captains. By the end of the meeting, the fishermen were discussing the difference between *south*

ern and *northern* royal albatross and actually picking them out in photos!!

I realised that timings of vessel movements in the Falklands makes such group meetings of captains difficult, but certainly not impossible. By the end of the meeting the captains had agreed to send in sightings of birds with tags, with numbers when possible. I think some were glad to have an extra challenge and all appeared happy to be involved in the planning of seabird observations.

Best wishes to all in the Falklands, those who have stayed, those who are going to soon and those who came to the region but we never met!! We hope you are all well and enjoyed the summer. Oli & Paola



Group photo of the attendees of the Seabird Meeting.

Members Presentation

Shallow Marine Survey Group will be giving a presentation on
Shallow Marine Flora and Fauna of the Falkland Islands
at the
Chamber of Commerce
at
6pm on the 11th April 2007

Falklands Conservation

Chief Executive Officer: Grant Munro

UK Executive Officer: Ann Brown

Science Officer: Nic Huin

Administrative Officer: Anna Shepherd

FI Secretary: Hay Miller

Albatross and Petel Programme: Isaac Forster and Sarah Crofts

Trustees: Jan Cheek (FI Chairperson), Keith Biles (FI Treasurer)

Henry Robinson (UK Chairperson), Bill Featherstone (UK Treasurer)

A full list of Trustees is available on request from our offices.

The Newsletter is edited by Anna Shepherd

Falklands Conservation Company Number 3661322 Charity Number 1073859

The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Falklands Conservation.



The Newsletter is partially sponsored by

CABLE & WIRELESS