

Month/Year. 07/02
29th July 2002



FALKLANDS CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER

P O Box 26
Jetty Visitor Centre
Ross Road
Stanley

Tel : 22247
Fax : 22288
E-Mail : conservation@horizon.co.fk
Website : www.falklandsconservation.com

The life of a Gentoo Penguin in the Falkland Islands

Most locals and visitors to the Falklands alike have a favourite penguin and my experiences at Volunteer Beach showed that the King penguin is the most popular. But when I tell people that the Gentoo penguin is my personal favourite most people are surprised. You get the idea that in most people's minds the Gentoo has no unusual features that sets it apart, like the austere stare of a King or the curious sight of the hopping rockies. However, recent research conducted at Volunteer Beach by Helen Otley during the 2001/02 breeding season suggests that the Falkland Islands Gentoo penguin does behave in some quite surprising ways compared to Gentoo penguins living in other parts of its range.

The Gentoo penguin breeds across a wide geographic location from 46°S on almost temperate islands in the Indian, Pacific and South Atlantic Oceans to 65°S on the Antarctic Peninsula. In colonies on islands in the Indian Ocean, breeding starts in winter and only one pair in three manages to raise a chick because birds spend up to three days collecting enough krill and fish. In contrast, breeding begins on the Antarctic Peninsula in spring and because there is an ample supply of krill just offshore, sufficient food can be found in as little as six hours and every pair manages to fledge at least one chick.

To investigate the breeding behaviour of the Gentoo penguin in Falklands, where the birds enjoy a relatively warm and dry summer and feed in the productive Patagonian Shelf, fourteen pairs were marked temporarily with a piece of flexible waterproof tape wrapped around a flipper. The each nest of each pair was checked daily at dawn and dusk from incubation until chicks fledged in February.



Surprisingly, the Gentoo penguins at Volunteer Beach used a mix of breeding strategy employed by birds in both the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic Ocean. In common with colonies in South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula, Gentoo penguins at Volunteer Beach began breeding in spring months and almost every pair produced one chick. However, birds at Volunteer Beach undertook much longer foraging trips, on average 2.5 days at sea, which is a similar duration to birds on islands in the Indian Ocean like Crozet Island and Kerguelen Island

That Gentoo penguins in the Falkland Islands wait until October to commence breeding is probably due to the spring plankton blooms and increases in krill that allow birds to reach the necessary high body weights required for the energetic demands of breeding. Longer foraging trips during incubation and chick rearing is suggested to be related to the complexity of the Patagonian Shelf so that the day-to-day and yearly location of krill, fish and squid is unpredictable and penguins have to spend more time searching.

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Long-term research is required in the Falkland Islands to determine whether these behavioural differences do exist year to year. Although the research required little specialised equipment, the project required a high level of dedication to comply with requirements of collecting data at dawn and dusk every day for four months. Luckily Falklands Conservation had two enthusiastic and committed volunteers in Helen Otley and Darren Christie who both caught the Falklands bug and extended their stays in the islands to complete the research. The results of the Gentoo penguin research is actually only one of many bonuses of Falklands Conservation's support of a full-time Warden at Volunteer Beach over the summer months. A comprehensive report of the Gentoo penguin study is available from the Falklands Conservation office.

Buff-necked Ibis

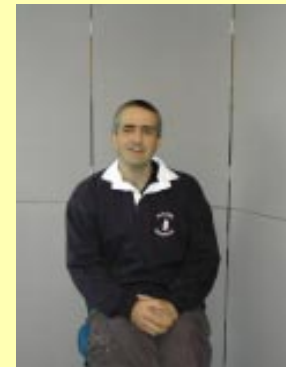
Mr Paul Robertson of Port Stephens phoned Conservation to say that he had spotted a Buff knecked Ibis. This is a South American bird native to most of the South American region. It is a large bird close in size to a goose with orange-chestnest plumage over head upper breast and neck with black plumage across wings it also has grey brown shoulders and back. This spieces has visited the Islands on numerouse occasions but is not a common sight.

Information from Robin Woods Guide to Birds of the Falkland Islands and Picture from Birds of Southern South America and Antarctica by Martin R. De LaPena and Maurice Rumboll



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