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Falklands Conservation



Newsletter

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Census work underway

On the 3rd November, following some frustrating weather delays the first team set off on Mike Clarke's *Condor* to Beauchêne Island to forge the initial steps of the long-awaited 2005 albatross and penguin census. Tim Reid, Oli Yates and Nic Huin endured a relatively comfortable crossing leaving the harsher return ride for Mike, Ron Dixon and Derek Clarke – to whom we are most grateful for the considerable effort. The small team remained for 8 days to make the first counts of the 5-yearly census of the IUCN listed *endangered* black-browed albatross and the *threatened* rockhopper, *near threatened* gentoo penguins and the king penguins.

Tim and Nic then continued on the boat team with Sarah Crofts and Cleo Small from the RSPB to complete the boat-based surveys to Bird Island and subsequently around the west islands to the Jason group in the north west in late November. Ron Dixon left and was replaced by Bill Pole-Evans along the way. It was crucial to the success of the census that survey teams could travel around the islands with many changes at short notice and FIGAS were fantastic at all times to make sure this was possible.

Survey teams on the east and west formed the mainly land-based counts and included Gus Clausen, Ruben Fijn visiting from

Holland, Helen Otley, Dee Masters from Edinburgh Zoo and Peter Nightingale as a guide for West Falkland. Alan Henry and Mike Morrison headed out to Saunders Island and on to Pebble Island to count the various colonies of albatross and penguins there, whilst several land-owners helped by providing their own counts. Along the way many people offered warm welcomes, food, shelter and washrooms for the various teams. This made the whole experience a much more pleasant one so great thanks to all who helped.

Laser range finders used by surveyors and handheld global positioning systems provided a swift and accurate methods of obtaining the area estimates for large colony boundaries. With the area known, transect lines through the colonies provide enough information on density for an estimate to be calculated for number of breeding birds, the non-breeders and empty nests in the entire colony. The remaining smaller colonies were counted by hand with tally counters. The hand counts were done multiple times either three times by one person or once by three people, and if the counts varied significantly (over 5%) they were repeated. Initial thoughts and results seemed to vary depending on location and all the data will have to be pulled together once all teams have arrived safely back in Stanley.

Previous surveys indicated that there has been a dramatic decline in the numbers of black-browed albatross breeding in the islands, especially in the five years before the last count in summer 2000/01. Seabird populations are declining on a scale much higher than any other species around the world due to a range of factors, mainly fishing related mortality. The Falkland Islands is one of the few places in the world where serious efforts are being undertaken by the Fisheries Department and Falklands Conservation to ensure that the threats to seabirds in Falkland waters is minimised.



Article and photo's by Oli Yates.

Ascension Island Visit

Part of my Environmental Education project with Falklands Conservation involves working with Conservation on Ascension Island and Two Boats School to produce locally focussed environmental education material. On October 4th I headed north to begin my first Ascension Island visit.

The main focus of my visit was to familiarise myself with the island and the people I would be working with and to research all environmental aspects of the island so that I could start putting the educational resources together for the school.

Conservation on Ascension is still in its infancy, having only been established in 2001. The first big project for Conservation at that point was the eradication of feral cats, which were restricting the populations of sea birds to a number of small rock stacks and Boatswainbird Island. There were few breeding birds on the mainland other than the two large colonies of Sooty Terns that continued to breed successfully due to their sheer numbers and co-ordinated breeding cycle.

The RSPB provided the funding for this project and, four years later it appears to have been successful although the monitoring process will continue until March to ensure complete eradication. Sea birds such as Masked Boobies, Brown Boobies, Tropicbirds and Noddies have returned to a number of locations on the mainland and have raised chicks successfully over the last couple of years. It's brilliant to see chicks fledging successfully in areas where there haven't been any breeding sea birds for around 150 years. The other big success story for Conservation is Green Mountain National Park, which was established earlier this year with funding from OTEP (Overseas Territories Environment Programme). Paths have been cleared and a boardwalk has been built to the Dew Pond at the summit of Green Mountain. This certainly makes the whole of Green Mountain far more accessible for visitors to the island.

There is also an ongoing project to propagate endemic ferns and re-introduce these into the wild. At one point there were fewer than 50 *Pteris adscensionis* ferns left in the world, but this decline has been halted by the programme of propagation.

With all these projects going on it gave me a number of opportunities to get out around the island to photograph the wildlife and plants as well as the landscape of the island itself to use in the production of educational resources. I went out on the weekly bird-monitoring walk, which involved getting a GPS location of any nest found on the mainland so that the nest could be monitored from egg laying through to chick fledging, all being well. I went with the cat monitoring team to see the process of ensuring the island is free of cats which involves setting up and monitoring bait stations, some of which are on a 24 hour video system particularly in areas where they think there could be a potential cat problem.

As well as being involved with the work of Conservation, I obviously spent time in school meeting the staff and beginning to put together some ideas to support the curriculum being taught. As with the schools here they follow the UK National Curriculum so I was already familiar with the units of work that lend themselves readily to the local environment. As a result of these meetings I've been able to plan lessons and activities for the children to complete both in school and out in the local area including a Nature Trail next to the school and one on Green Mountain. I also spent time gathering resources for the school to use in class such as collecting rock samples from various parts of the island to use in the Year 3 unit about Rocks and Soils, a bit of a heavy task in the heat but well worthwhile!

I also organised a trip for the Ascension Explorers group, (rather like our Watch Group here), to visit the Sooty Terns that were in the middle of their breeding season. It was quite a sight to see and hear nearly 80,000 pairs of Sooty Terns and their



chicks on the Wideawake Fairs, which are on the barren volcanic plains near the airport. I had 29 children take part and the visit to the bird colony was followed by a slide presentation on Falklands wildlife, which seemed to go down well.

Finally I put together a new display in the airport to promote the work of Conservation on the island. This included information about the projects that Conservation are currently involved in and a display about the sea birds of the island. If you're passing through on your way to the UK and happen to get delayed in the cage for any length of time there's something to read for a while at least! I also put the same display in the Conservation office itself for visitors to the centre.

So all in all it was a very successful and enjoyable work trip and I have returned here with plenty to work on for school in terms of putting together teaching resources ready for my next visit to Ascension Island in April 2006.

If you want to find out more about the work of Conservation on Ascension Island you can log onto their website: www.ascensionconservation.org.ac



Sea Lion Island regulars enjoy good sun and plentiful food

As the sun crept up over the east end of Sea Lion Island the group of regular visitors were already actively hurrying up and down the coast, enjoying the calm weather and thinking about a good feed.

'Hay' the dominant female in the group, was leading the family along what she knows is a beach full of elephant seal pups waiting to make their first trips out to sea. Hay is not walking though, but swimming several metres off the beach in deeper water, as 'Hay' is a killer whale.



The young elephant seal pups are not too confident in the water and make an easier catch for the small group of killer whales that regularly patrol the shores of Sea Lion Island and the surrounding area. A new project first attempted last year through Falklands Conservation's Small Grant Scheme has this year shown that the whales are the same group as last year, and comparing with pictures in the lodge, the same individuals as were patrolling the shores in 1996.



Through the use of a high-resolution digital camera and a large zoom lens, it has been possible to obtain photos of the individuals in the group or 'pod' and show the same natural markings between years. Natural scars and cuts on the animals are relatively permanent and provide a good guide, like a fingerprint of each individual. From these markings each whale can be identified and followed year by year.

The pod consists of six animals, three adults and three young including one possible new calf this year. The names were given after the surrounding islands, Rum, Whisky and Brandy; plus Hay fondly named after Falklands Conservation's most knowledgeable member Carol Miller, and Ele from, slightly ironically the elephant seals.

The animals display interesting hunting skills that give an insight into their intelligence and knowledge of the Falklands habitat and geography. With some killer whales reaching 90 years old, it is possible this small family group knows Sea Lion Island much better than most Islanders! The family bonds are strong and roles

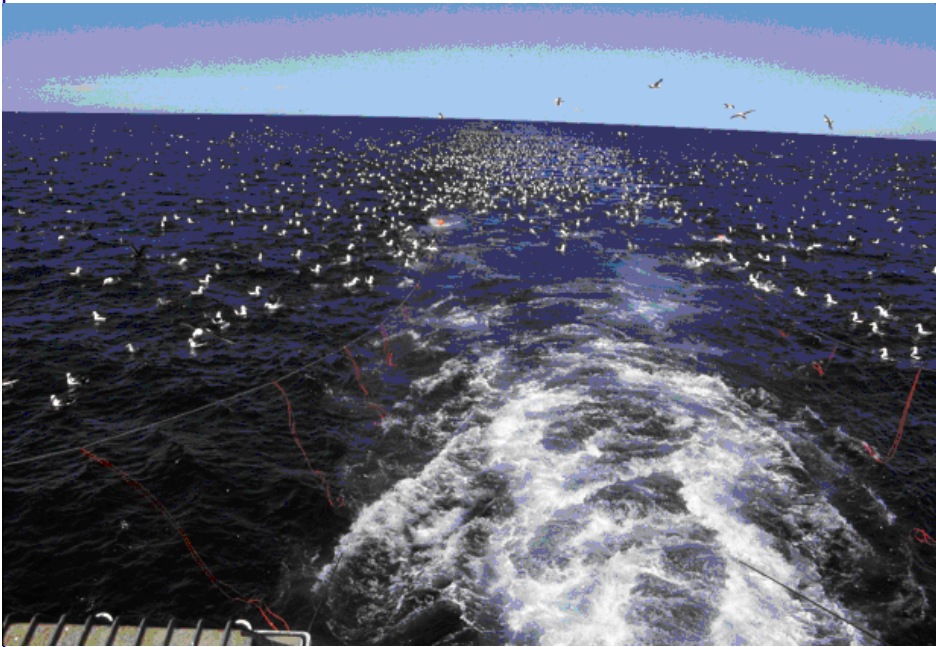
are distinct. Some individuals show specialised hunting skills whilst others appear to care for the younger members of the group.

It is hoped that the pod will be studied into the future and a better picture of their life and habits gained. Another good reason to fill in the 'Cetacean Watch' calendar and help form an idea as to where Hay, Whisky (pictured on the calendar), Rum and the others get to around the Falklands.



Oli Yates & Paola Palavecino

New stern trawler mitigation a great success



Great thought by Fishery Department scientists and Conservation staff went into producing a mitigation measure that would solve this problem, with some inventions significantly more useful than others.

Tim Reid of Falklands Conservation came up with an idea to try tori-lines, altogether similar to the bird scaring lines used on longline vessels. After several trials these mitigation measures were found to be rather good at deterring the birds from the danger area immediately around the warp cables at the rear of the vessel.

Discussions with Falkland Islands Government and specifically the Fisheries Department led to the introduction of the new mitigation on stern trawlers in the Falkland Islands finfish fishery. Since then, effort has been made to monitor the usefulness of the tori-lines at sea under varying weather conditions.

The results of the report indicate that the tori-lines are extremely effective and reduce the mortality of the seabirds around finfish vessels by a massive 90% with the new estimate of mortality at just 169 birds killed. There were some problems involving the deployment and retrieval of the

lines at sea and some concern about their effectiveness in rough sea conditions, but overall the mitigation has proved a huge success.

The future plan for the mitigation is as a short to medium term measure whilst other management options for reducing the offal discard are discussed by industry and Government. The perfect situation would be for no offal discard at all.

The project is match-funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Overseas Territories Environment Programme and Falkland Islands Government. The Laskaridis family provided extra funds for observer coverage throughout the project.

By Oli Yates

Second edition of the Visitor's Guide to the Falklands

Falklands Conservation will shortly have available for sale the Second Edition of the Visitor's Guide to the Falklands.

The 5th of December will see the Falklands launch of the book, written by Debbie Summers on behalf of Falklands Conservation.

The guide has nine new sites and the original sites have been up-dated. It is a nice addition to any book collection and makes a beautiful gift, with fantastic photographs of the Islands. It is the perfect present for friends who live away, people visiting or as an information guide to residents.

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

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