

The Falkland Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 19 November 2011



Rockhopper Penguins (Peter Nichols)



Silvery Grebes (Cath Hamblin)



Dolphins in the surf (Cath Hamblin)



Pale-faced Shearwater & Dolphin Gull (Peter Nichols)

Report compiled by Paul Dukes
Images courtesy of Catherine Hamblin and Peter Nichols



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Day 1

Thursday 3rd November

As we neared the Falkland Islands the pilot of the Triton Airlines Boeing 767 on charter to the RAF announced that the local weather was sunny and the ground temperature 19°C, something of a surprise for those on board expecting a colder reception! Earlier in the flight from Brize Norton we had made the customary two hour stop-over on Ascension Island for re-fuelling but as usual, the birdlife was sparse and limited to a couple of Common Mynas plus an unidentified 'shape' lurking in the neatly cultivated shrubbery opposite our compound! Two Ascension Island Frigatebirds did make an appearance just before we were called back to the aircraft but as distant specks circling in the clouds they barely merit mention!

Emerging into the warmth of the spring afternoon at Mount Pleasant Airport we were met by Arlette Bloomfield from our ground agents in Stanley and were soon installed in a spacious mini-bus for the one hour drive to the capital. Arlette imparted the latest news as we sped along the main road which in stretches has a tarmac surface but is interspersed by sections of gravel. Dire warnings about speeding urge drivers to resist the urge to put their foot down and one or two minefields beside the road are a further incentive. Arlette informed us that the 'heatwave' had lasted for a week or so and we dared to hope it might go on for a little longer! The drive from MPA introduced the group to the characteristic white-grass and Diddle-dee moorland of the Falklands whilst to our left the fractured rocks of the Wickham Heights included hills made famous during the Falklands conflict such as Mount Tumbledown and Mount Harriet. After over 18 hours of flying we could be forgiven for perhaps dozing a little during the journey but anyone staying awake would have observed a few of the commoner Falkland birds such as Upland Geese, Turkey Vultures, Falkland Thrush and Long-tailed Meadowlark.

Eventually the brightly painted roofs of Stanley came into view and soon after passing the iconic sign proclaiming 'Stanley - twinned with Whitby' we were tucking into the first of many fine meals at the very comfortable Malvina House Hotel looking out from the restaurant at a sun-bathed Stanley seafront. After the meal we wasted no time in going for a stroll through the 'city' a trek that requires no great stamina as the main road extends for not much more than a quarter of a mile and even today, the expansion in population of recent years is still contained in an area no bigger than a large English village.

Following our own agendas the afternoon exploration took in such attractions as Christ Church Cathedral, the SS Great Britain mizzen mast on the Green and a few visits into souvenir shops! As always on the Falklands, birds were never far away. Flightless Steamer Ducks, or Loggers as they known locally, loafed around on the shoreline, Upland Geese grazed the Green and both Dolphin and Kelp Gulls squabbled over scraps from lunch-time picnics.

Other observations along the seafront included Rock Shags lined up along the jetty, Crested Ducks, South American Terns, Southern Giant Petrels, Blackish & Magellanic Oystercatchers. Beautiful little Black-chinned Siskins were busy feeding young in the pines sheltering some of the larger gardens whilst Falkland Thrushes hopped around on the lawns recalling female Blackbirds from home. Further resonances were provided by daffodils in the gardens and the chirping of House Sparrows which thrive here. One further addition to the list was a juvenile Night Heron seen by Peter and Catherine near the War Memorial. Strangely no-one was inclined to keep late hours and after our second tasty meal in the restaurant we handed in our packed lunch order forms and retired to bed for some welcome sleep.

Day 2

Friday 4th November

Sunshine streaming through my window at 5am encouraged me to start the first full day on the islands with a walk along the seafront towards the War Memorial. A rather poorly looking male Kelp Goose was the only new species but I saw many of the birds from the previous day including several handsome Long-tailed Meadowlarks and a flock of Black-chinned Siskins around the Governor's House.

After a hearty breakfast we set off on a day excursion to Volunteer Point in two vehicles driven by local tour guide 'Nobby' Clarke and his friend Ken, known as 'Carrot'. Volunteer Point is a privately owned reserve on the northern side of Berkeley Sound about 50 kilometres from Stanley. The principal attraction is a colony of about one thousand adult King Penguins but it also supports a large number of Gentoo Penguins, Magellanic Penguins and a good selection of other birds. Access was formerly quite difficult and usually made by boat but in recent years a programme of road building has created a network of links between Stanley and various settlements throughout East Falkland making the overland journey to Volunteer Point a more practical proposition.

To begin with we travelled on a gravel and tarmac road which bisects the hills of the Wickham Heights to head north to the former capital Port Louis. Nobby proved to be an erudite guide and during the journey entertained us with many tales of Falkland life, some relating to the conflict when he was among the people held captive on Pebble Island for a month and released one day before the date set for their execution! The wreckage of an Argentinian Chinook helicopter in the hills was a reminder of the war and evidence of how large a part the Harrier jets played as the helicopter, and several other aircraft 'parked' in this lonely valley were destroyed by a patrolling Harrier before they could be used to attack the British troops.

En route we also paused briefly to take photographs of a 'Stone-Run', a geological phenomenon of these hills which caused boulders and stones of varying sizes to spill down hillsides creating rivers of rock that extend like mini-glaciers for considerable distances. Another stop was made to look at a flock of Brown-hooded Gulls displaying noisily on the shores of an inlet beside the road. Although not uncommon, these dainty gulls do not start nesting until November and this demonstrative flock was doubtless on its way to a nearby colony. A pool nearby also contained a pair of Chiloe Wigeon, new for the tour list.

From the scatter of farm buildings which mark Johnson's Harbour the last stretch of over ten miles involves driving off-road on narrow trails which test the abilities of both drivers and vehicles. There is a friendly rivalry between Nobby and Carrot about the attributes of their respective 4x4's and there was a good deal of radio banter during the drive as we slithered and bounced our way through a challenging moorland terrain.

Both drivers were however veterans of the run to Volunteer Point and in due course we finally arrived at the farm buildings which now house the Reserve Warden. A vagrant Patagonian Mockingbird had been seen in the gardens earlier in the day but that could wait until later and we continued along the flat coastal plain towards the King Penguin colony, stopping a few hundred metres from the birds at the portacabin which now serves as a visitor centre.

The scene was reminiscent of some medieval battleground as hundreds of King Penguins stood around on the close-cropped turf, the central core a solid mass of bodies but looser assemblies around the periphery comprising mixtures of immatures and smaller groups of adults. Many were simply occupying a piece of ground with an air of bewilderment as if unsure why they were standing there but others were more animated and adults noisily displaying to each other provided evidence that November is the beginning of another egg-laying season in the complex reproductive cycle of the penguins. A cacophony of whistling and grating calls filled the air as we settled down to enjoy the entertainment and take a vast quantity of photographs! There are few birds more amusing to watch and the youngsters in their preposterous 'fur' coats were ever willing to oblige. The boldest individuals soon began to shuffle towards us, drawing ever nearer with much craning of necks and excited bursts of wing flapping. Encouraged by these, others followed along until we had a little semi-circle of admirers standing just metres away - peering at us in a myopic fashion as if having difficulty in focussing on such strange creatures! Any object on the ground was duly inspected with great interest and subjected to a few exploratory pecks before returning to their favourite pastime of staring at us!

Some of the adult males (?) were engaged in establishing dominance but as with most King Penguin actions they succeeded in creating a comical spectacle for the human watchers. The display consisted of 3 or 4 birds standing closely together then one would vigorously slap the other with his flippers. After a while the action would be repeated then perhaps the victim would respond with a few slaps of its own making the performance look like some strange Bavarian folk-dance. Numbers at the rookery were constantly changing as some birds headed off to sea whilst others returned from the beach, a trek of some 20 or 30 minutes along well trodden trails through the dunes.

From time to time an adult would be spotted being followed closely by a youngster and I watched some of these to see what transpired. Usually the youngster would pester the adult for some 10 or 15 minutes, constantly demanding food and jabbing hopefully at the adult's beak. After initially seeming completely unresponsive, the adult would eventually begin making urging movements until finally the youngster was rewarded by an exchange of some no doubt thoroughly delicious fishy pulp which it quickly swallowed. This was repeated many times as it seemed that the recipient was only satisfied for a few minutes before it began asking for more!

We were entranced by the truly wonderful King Penguins, but there are other birds to see at Volunteer Point as we soon discovered. A nearby colony of Gentoo Penguins contained several hundred birds tightly packed into a fairly small area. (c700 pairs) These less extrovert penguins were mostly prostrate on their seaweed nests incubating eggs but there was some movement to witness as returning birds wandered up from the seashore to relieve sitting mates. At least one never made it as we noticed a number of Giant Petrels and gulls picking at the carcase of a Gentoo at the tide edge.

The third penguin species for the day, the Magellanic, is a burrow nester and we discovered a number of homes in the sand dunes, the entrances to the chambers marked by discarded items of nest material and stained with droppings. A good many of the occupants were in residence and stood watching our progress with a mixture of curiosity tempered by mild alarm if we came too near the burrows. Flocks of Upland Geese grazed the turf admixed with smaller numbers of the more petite Ruddy-headed Geese, a combination we would see repeated many times during the next few weeks.

The pristine white beach with its underlying pink suffusion was somewhat wind-swept today but we spent a little while watching the armies of penguins going to and from the sea, walking with a jaunty nautical roll, flippers extended on either side to add to the comic effect. A few Antarctic Skuas added menace as they bullied the Kelp Gulls and Giant Petrels glided up and down the tideline looking for another unlucky penguin. Behind the King Penguin colony a number of Turkey Vultures were engaged in a similar search for their next meal which in their case may have been lamb as many sheep roam the moorland and not all the lambs survive the traumas of birth. Less predatory residents encountered during our visit included Speckled Teal, Flightless Steamer Ducks, Magellanic Oystercatchers and a charming little group of Two-banded Plovers.

We returned to the King Penguins for one last time, then at 3pm began the long journey back to Stanley pausing for a perfunctory look in the farm house garden for the Mockingbird. The long drive back was relieved by encounters with some of the moorland residents such as Rufous-chested Dotterel and Black-throated Finch but the penguins are a hard act to follow and these beautiful birds were perhaps less appreciated than they would be on following days.

Back in Stanley we said goodbye to our excellent guides and wrestled with the complex problems of what to order from the evening menu and whether to leave any items behind at the Malvina House in order to meet the FIGAS weight limit of 20 kilos the following morning!

Day 3

Saturday 5th November

The Falkland Islands Government Air Service (FIGAS) provides a remarkable air link between the scattered islands of the archipelago, operating to schedules drawn up the preceding day according to local demand. We had been notified that we were to travel to Port Howard on the first flight of the day at approximately 0830 and that all seven of us would be on the same aircraft, something that is not always possible.

Stanley airfield is situated a few kilometres to the west of the town, just beyond a sprawl of small industrial sites which now creep along the shoreline from the older buildings. As we drove there we noticed a number of white Pale Maiden flowers by the roadside, a sign of summer that had been missing on the journey to Volunteer Point and according to Arlette had only just appeared at this site. Following the formalities of check-in we cast anxious glances at a bank of sea-fog rolling in over the airfield but managed to avoid any delay and with chief pilot Troyd at the controls were quickly airborne and back into the sunshine as the fog seemed confined to the west. I was able to live out my Biggles fantasies by being in the co-pilot seat and during the flight had an interesting chat with Troyd ranging over subjects as diverse as politics, Falkland life and which birds represented the biggest hazard to flights. The last subject was raised following a sudden change of direction to avoid a soaring Turkey Vulture but I gathered that Upland Geese were the most likely to collide with aircraft as they tend to congregate on the air strips and sometimes fly the wrong way!

The flight route initially followed the road to Port Louis which we had driven along to Volunteer Point but once through the gap in the hills we headed northwest over the deserted moorland interior of the island, a white-grass landscape studded with small pools and virtually devoid of human habitation. Eventually the waters of Falkland Sound came into view ahead of us and crossing this broad channel dividing West from East Falkland we gradually descended to Port Howard, the airfield easily picked out by the blaze of yellow gorse bordering the strip.

We were met by Wayne, our convivial host for the next few days, and driven to the lodge where tea and cakes awaited. Port Howard is a working sheep farm extending over 200,000 acres and the very comfortable tourist lodge was converted from the former farm manager's house, each spacious room now having private facilities. We admired an assortment of plants growing in the conservatory and as we demolished the cakes knew we were going to enjoy our stay. Wayne once drove lorries for a living in Hampshire but his partner Sue is a Port Howard girl and when the opportunity arose to manage the tourist lodge they wasted no time in applying. I last met them in 2004 soon after they had moved in but when I asked Wayne whether he had enjoyed the last 7 years, a wide grin was his response!

The cluster of buildings which constitute Port Howard settlement are situated at the head of a long inlet extending east to Falkland Sound and are overlooked by ranges of hills grazed by some of the thousands of sheep belonging to the farm. About 30 people live at Port Howard, a major community on this sparsely populated island, and focus of activity during our stay were the large shearing sheds where the shearers were working at full speed from 6am each day to fill the adjacent stores with fleeces for export. Hundreds of sheep waited patiently in the holding pens for their turn to come and it was tempting to think that they were looking forward to losing the burden of their wool in these summery conditions. The inevitable casualties of such a large sheep farming operation ensure rich pickings for scavengers and some 20 or 30 Giant Petrels were waiting around the harbour for any scraps along with many gulls and several Antarctic Skuas. We wandered down to the sheds for a quick look at the shearing but unfortunately coincided with the morning 'smoko' break so had to content ourselves with a look at the refurbished jetty where several Rock Shags and an Imperial Shag viewed our arrival with some concern. Other inhabitants of the inlet included Kelp Geese, Flightless Steamer Ducks and Antarctic Terns but on this initial visit we were limited for time and vowed to return later.

Because we had arrived so early in the day Wayne suggested we used the time to fit in a visit to Fox Bay and we readily agreed. Prior to the construction of the road linking Port Howard with Fox Bay the journey would have taken considerably longer but now the 70 kilometres can be completed in a couple of hours although our plans included a lunch stop at Hawk's Nest Pond. The predominant habitat for most of the drive is Diddle-Dee and White-grass moorland inhabited by countless pairs of Rufous-chested Dotterel, Falkland Thrushes and Black-throated Finches. Various small rivers flow across this landscape and also some larger ones such as the Chartres which is popular with Trout fishermen. Upland Geese were once again a conspicuous roadside bird as we headed south and we also encountered several Crested Caracaras although considerably less than the 100+ counted by Wayne on a previous visit.

The weather remained fine and sunny although on the distant horizon there was evidence of cloud gathering and this would prove a nuisance over the next few days.

The evocatively named Hawk's Nest Pond was our lunch site and we enjoyed an hour's stop beside his large lake which lies just a short distance from the road but is completely concealed from view. Large growths of sedge at two corners of the lake afford cover for water-birds and make it more attractive for wildfowl than many other ponds in the area. First scans of the lake revealed a pair of Black-necked Swans shepherding two very young cygnets on the open water, and a dozen or more White-tufted Grebes, but it was a little breezy and we decided to move to the western end where it was a little more sheltered for us to eat our packed lunches. From here we added a pair of Silver Teal, Speckled Teal, Yellow-billed Pintail and some very distant Silvery Grebes as well as obtaining better views of the swan family. Several Grass Wrens were engaged in a vocal contest from the sedges and by walking around the edge we were rewarded by reasonable views of the singers making far more noise than should be possible from such small bodies. We also had brief views of a Falklands Pipit and a male Black-throated Finch whilst also gaining better views of the Silver Teal, Pintails and a male Flying Steamer Duck swimming bizarrely half-submerged towards the sedges. Our final sighting before leaving the pond was of an immature Black-crowned Night Heron ending a very enjoyable lunch-stop. Botanical interest was also provided by a few Pale Maidens and some patches of Scurvy-Grass.

The settlement of Fox Bay is somewhat larger than Port Howard with many of the buildings adorned by the brightly painted roofs characteristic of both the Falklands and Patagonia. It has more of the feel of a small village than the haphazard scatter of farm buildings at Port Howard but both communities depend upon the wool trade and there was much evidence of this around Fox Bay in the large numbers of animals roaming the countryside. The human residents are invariably harder to glimpse and as usual we saw very few people as we drove around although washing on lines betrayed their presence and we did meet a farmer on a quad bike!

Kelp Point is an attractive low headland where shelving rocks afford a good landing stage for penguins coming ashore. Sadly the once flourishing Gentoo Penguin colony has been deserted but about 50 penguins were standing on the white splashed rocks along with several Imperial Shags and we took many photographs as the birds sprang ashore like guided missiles causing great amusement. Pairs of Kelp Geese were standing around on the rocky shoreline and a family party of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants gave the group our first chance to gain close views of these hardy flycatchers which are very plentiful on the islands particularly around the cliffs. The moorland leading to the penguin site was typically full of Black-throated Finches, Falkland Thrushes, Rufous-breasted Dotterel and a number of Two-banded Plovers but there was one addition to our list, a Magellanic Snipe, which posed just a few metres from the vehicles. It may have been disturbed from a nest as many of the waders were clearly occupied with the difficult task of guarding small chicks from predators as evidenced by a nervous pair of Magellanic Oystercatchers on the cliff edge trying to draw our attention from a gawky youngster.

The long drive back to Port Howard was accomplished without any stops and by the time we arrived back at the lodge I am sure I was not alone in relishing the prospect of the evening meal Sue had been preparing for us. I am glad to relate that it lived up to the promise!

Day 4

Sunday 6th November

The tinkling of Siskin song heralded a new day and a short walk around the settlement on a cold, breezy morning was enlivened by the sight of these beautiful little finches feeding on seed heads and singing from the pines. Falkland Thrushes were also busy finding food for their young and Long-tailed Meadowlarks added colour to the scene.

Wayne's destination for us today was White Rock, a coastal site almost opposite Pebble Island which was going to be new territory for me. It was an overcast morning with low cloud lingering over the hills but it later transpired that it was a lot foggier elsewhere and this was to have repercussions for us the following day. The first few kilometres of the journey to White Rock was on the Fox Bay road but we soon turned off this and began over two hours of cross-country driving on surfaces that varied from bumpy stone-runs to boggy white-grass moorland. Wayne of course was more than a match for the terrain as was his friend Glen driving the second vehicle. Driving over the 'camp' is second nature to Falkland Islanders and having been brought up at Port Howard Glen was adept at finding the best tracks to follow through a landscape that looked impossible to less experienced eyes. Astonishingly, all the land we travelled over belonged to the Port Howard farm and before very much longer the sheep that we encountered scattered over the moors would be rounded up by shepherds on motor bikes and with the aid of indefatigable collies taken back to the farm for shearing. Today however they were free to roam where they pleased and indeed we did not see another human being until we returned to the settlement at the end of the day.

The birdlife during the drive conformed to the now predictable handful of species characteristic of this habitat. Upland Geese were almost everywhere, Rufous-chested Dotterel ushered tiny chicks away from the advancing vehicles and the quartet of Falkland Thrush, Long-tailed Meadowlark, Black-throated Finch and Falklands Pipit provided regular sightings as we headed to the coast. Turkey Vultures and a few Crested Caracaras represented the birds of prey and no doubt found plenty to scavenge with so many sheep around. About half way to White Rock we stopped at a now deserted cottage which is used on occasions by the shepherds and contains a few stores for their stay. Radiators on the walls seemed a little incongruous but it seems even tough Falklanders appreciate a little home comfort! Wayne had been in this area many times and knew that Barn Owls could be found in one of the outbuildings so we approached with suitable caution and once our eyes had become accustomed to the gloom were able to see an adult sitting in the rafters and could hear the wheezy calls of youngsters from the darker recesses behind. Unfortunately a second adult was accidentally disturbed when Glen tried to see how many young were in the nest so we hastily retreated to allow the bird to return, although the original adult remained unmoved.

At length the coast came in view, albeit a somewhat murky and misty view, and the track led down to the edge of a large tidal pool which Wayne informed me had once hosted a long-staying Lesser Yellowlegs. Today it held only Speckled Teal and Crested Ducks but we used the leg-stretch to telescope a nearby Falklands Pipit which was using some fence-posts as song perches.

White Rock proved to be an inspired choice, a classic cliff-top Rockhopper Penguin rookery admixed with Imperial Shags and attended by a dozen or more Snowy Sheathbills, Antarctic Skuas, Dolphin Gulls and Turkey Vultures. We parked close to the colony and spent the next few hours enjoying the spectacle of these hugely entertaining little birds going about their business. The noise generated by a penguin colony is astonishing, the constant throaty growling of the Rockhoppers augmented by the raucous contributions of the shags and the screaming of the gulls. The Rockhoppers were mostly brooding eggs whilst the shags seemed to be still working on their seaweed nests, incoming birds bringing beaks-full of weed having to run the gauntlet of their neighbours snatching whatever they can grab before the bird reached its partner. Sometimes the shag would lose everything but usually enough of the material remained to add to the structure. The ever watchful skuas and gulls were kept at bay by the jabbing beaks of the penguins but from time to time one managed to snatch an egg as evidenced by the discarded shells littering the ground around the colony.

A short distance from the main concentration of many hundreds of birds was a second smaller assembly and close by this was the steep path up from the sea used by the penguins. Watching them come ashore through the breakers crashing onto jagged rocks one could only marvel at their toughness! A few Black-browed Albatrosses were gliding off shore but the misty conditions prevented us seeing very much of Pebble Island which is just a short distance across the water from White Rock. Rather unexpectedly, an immature Striated Caracara flew along the cliffs and loitered for a while around the colonies and 4 or 5 Dark-faced Ground Tyrants were flitting around the cliffs searching for insects.

Before heading back to Port Howard, Wayne took us a little further along the coast to a third big rookery and here we were delighted to see a pair of Macaroni Penguins among the Rockhoppers. It was soon evident that one was brooding an egg and Wayne was particularly pleased to see this as it might be the first proof of nesting at White Rock although Macaronis had summered in previous years. This Antarctic species remains the rarest of the penguins breeding in the Falklands but may be slowly increasing which perhaps reflects changes further south. One final wildlife encounter came as we peered over the edge of a nearby cliff at about 20 Southern Sea lions sprawled on the rocks below, including a fearsome looking bull maintaining a bellicose guard over his harem.

The long haul back to Port Howard was incident free but as we neared the settlement we could see that the clouds were again forming over the hills and with a flight to Carcass Island scheduled for the following morning I wondered whether flights would be affected.

Day 5

Monday 7th November

The answer came in a morning announcement that flying had been suspended because of fog and would be reviewed later in the day. With no immediate deadline we wandered down to the shearing sheds where the seemingly endless work continued at full tilt, and annoyed the rock Shags by walking onto the jetty. Several very confiding pairs of Kelp Geese watched us walk by and some Antarctic Skuas posed for photographs. I had been told many times that flicking stones in the sea would attract Commerson's Dolphins so we tried this for a while without any real conviction that it would work although a swimming Sea lion near the opposite bank caused a false alarm. Surprisingly several dolphins did eventually appear and passed quite close to the jetty although I suspect they might well have done so regardless of our actions!

Back at the lodge we had no choice but to wait around for a further announcement but I was not surprised when this eventually confirmed that all flying had been abandoned for the rest of the day. At least this allowed us to make alternative plans and after lunch we set off to walk south from the settlement in the general direction of the sea. My memory of the route initially failed me as we headed uncomfortably close to the minefields which ring Port Howard but at least we remained on the right side of the barbed wire and our diversion did provide close views of two Crested Caracaras swearing at us from atop their nesting tree! After circumventing the minefields we continued parallel with the main inlet and visited the site of the old settlement where both Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers were vocal in their disapproval of our arrival. En route we had seen the 'usual suspects' which included the ubiquitous Upland Geese, Rufous-chested Dotterel, Two-banded Plovers, Falkland Thrushes, Long-tailed Meadowlarks, Falkland Pipits and Black-throated Finches.

Flocks of newly shorn sheep were galloping over the hillsides as if celebrating their new sleek bodies, but with them was one that has somehow escaped the shearers and I wondered if she was puzzled why her companions looked so different. Although being a sheep I doubt any such thoughts crossed her mind!

Careful examination of the earth banks bordering the inlet revealed one flowering Lady's Slipper, arguably the most exotic of the Falklands flora. Although not related to the Lady's Slipper orchid from Europe, these very attractive little flowers have a superficially similar appearance which presumably led to their name. They are not a common plant on the islands so it was pleasing to find this individual and nearby there was more botanical interest with numerous Pale Maiden flowers. At this juncture, the onset of showery rain encouraged us to set a course for the lodge which this time we managed to reach without circling the minefield! Two-banded Plovers were particularly conspicuous during the return walk and our enthusiasm for getting back to the afternoon 'smoko' at the lodge was temporarily interrupted by an absurdly tame Black-crowned Night Heron fishing the stream near the settlement. It had been a frustrating day in some respects but Port Howard is a great place to be stranded and our extended stay did mean that we were able to enjoy another of Sue's excellent dinners!

Day 6

Tuesday 8th November

I went for a pre-breakfast walk to the small cemetery which is situated beside an arm of the main inlet about a kilometre from the lodge. It was still quite grey and murky but I told myself that it was the weather in Stanley not here that would dictate our fate. We had been notified the previous evening that the group would travel to Carcass in two aircraft which would be about 20 minutes apart and first to depart Stanley. I had also spoken to Rob McGill, the manager on Carcass Island who informed me that it had been bright and sunny all day on his island! Returning to more immediate matters I enjoyed a fine performance from 10 or more Two-banded Plovers engaged in some territorial dispute and also glimpsed an immature Variable Hawk near the lodge but it had gone by the time I returned for one last Port Howard breakfast.

News reached us that the aircraft were indeed finally on the way so we headed up to the air strip, drove up and down to frighten off the geese, and watched the first of the red painted FIGAS Islanders touch down. It was time to say farewell to Wayne and Sue who had looked after us so well and also to bid a temporary goodbye to the three of our party who would follow on in the second aircraft.

The long flight to Carcass took us along the north coast over Hill Cove and skirted Saunders Island before flying along the west coast of Carcass and dropping down onto the airstrip on the north of the island. Rob was waiting to greet us and as discussed the previous evening our plan was to explore this end of Carcass for most of the day to avoid an influx of cruise ship passengers around the settlement. Rob had brought packed lunches which he left inside a land rover parked near the airstrip in case we needed to shelter from the rain. A second vehicle was there for him to return home but we intended to walk back and the rapidly dispersing cloud suggested that we would have no need for shelter. As we waited for the second aircraft to land, several Striated Caracaras came to see what the new visitors may have brought them and excited Tussacbirds homed in from every side, twittering noisily as they scuttled at our feet and investigated the roof of the rover. It felt good to have arrived and the welcome suggested we were going to enjoy our stay. In less than ten minutes we were reunited as the second plane arrived then Rob drove off with our luggage leaving us to enjoy the unspoilt wildlife paradise of Carcass Island.

The fecundity of the Falklands spring was immediately obvious as we looked around at masses of Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese gathered on the short turf surrounding the air strip, many of the former accompanied by goslings of varying sizes and number. Magellanic Snipe were performing their strange drumming display flights overhead adding their eerie noise to the carpet of sounds that hung over this end of the island, other components being the clamour of Oystercatchers on the shore, cackling of geese, the song of Falkland Pipits and the sonorous belching noises emitted by Elephant Seals on the beach.

We made our way towards the tussac fringed sand dunes bordering the beaches but before reaching the shore came upon a delightful cluster of about 20 Lady's Slippers in what seemed a perfect setting for these little gems. Moving on we met with several adult Striated Caracaras and our first Cobb's Wrens, funny little mouse-like creatures which abound on rat-free islands as do the Tussacbirds which occur in numbers all over Carcass. The wide beaches around this northern tip were littered with Elephant Seals whilst out in the open water we could see 5 Peale's Dolphins patrolling the edges of the kelp forests a few hundred metres offshore. Our progress was slow as we stopped to photograph the various occupants of the shoreline but we also had to walk carefully as many pairs of Magellanic Oystercatcher were nesting in this area and we did not want to make life any easier for the caracaras which we had already witnessed taking one unlucky chick. Some of the young male Elephant Seals were practicing their fighting skills hence the appalling noises but most of the smaller animals were simply relaxing in the sun looking like bloated maggots as Tussacbirds relieved them of any irritating tics or flies. Vast rafts of Flightless Steamer Ducks were also floating in the kelp and South American Terns dived for small fish among the strap like fronds of this impressive seaweed. Other inhabitants of the bay included a Magellanic Penguin and at least three White-rumped Sandpipers, the latter long-distance migrants from North America. Further out to sea great lines of Imperial Shags were passing by on their way to unknown colonies elsewhere, perhaps Saunders or Pebble Islands.

An area of pools near the beach was popular with the geese families and there were even some Ruddy-headed goslings, a slightly unexpected sight as they usually nest a little later than the Uplands. Speckled Teal also had young and a pair of Chiloe Wigeons may well have had eggs nearby. A vociferous Grass Wren also perched in open view for the cameras offering comparison with the Cobb's Wrens seen earlier. The biggest surprise here was several juvenile Barn Swallows, a scarce migrant from the South American mainland which seemed content enough on this sunny morning but would no doubt struggle to survive on the colder days. I always feel sorry for these lost strays but Nature exacts a harsh punishment for any migrant that makes a wrong turn.

As we made our way back to the Land Rover for lunch we were amazed to see a long crocodile of blue clad cruise passengers walking in our direction and discovered that these were the more intrepid cruise members who had elected to make the 2 mile trek to see the Elephant Seals. Unfortunately no-one seemed very sure where to go and we helpfully pointed the leaders in the right direction causing a series of radio messages and an abrupt U turn for the main column which had marched blindly along the line of the fencing unaware that they simply had to hop over to reach the shore. After eating our packed lunches under the watchful eyes of Tussacbirds we began the walk to the settlement taking a shorter route recommended by Rob which did however entail a fairly steep climb between two hills. It had become decidedly warm and we were glad to crest the top of the ridge and begin the downhill sector gradually discarding layers of clothing as we did so. We were soon overhauled by the cruise passengers on their way for a 3 pm departure and sat for a while on a grassy bank watching them file past in varying states of distress. Some were clearly fit walkers but others struggled and it did not help that many were clearly kitted out for rather colder conditions and were wearing Wellington boots.

As soon as the last few had limped past we continued on our way and were soon at the settlement where a number of Striated Caracaras waited to welcome us. It had been a fantastic morning and I was glad that we had made the decision to look around the north first. Caracara settlement is simply sublime, the large white painted main building set amid thickets of tall pines and surrounded by a number of smaller buildings which are mostly used by self-catering holidaymakers. Discreetly tucked away in a fold of land, the settlement is barely visible from the sea and as we sipped the inevitable warm drinks in the conservatory we felt pleasantly detached from the outside world! There was a wonderful homely feel to the lodge engendered by Rob and Lorraine McGill who were consummate and erudite hosts having lived there for over 25 years. The Chilean kitchen staff under the leadership of jovial chef Rolangussman (apologies for spelling!) quietly got on with the task of producing endless quantities of food for the visitors and made sure that we had plenty to eat during our stay.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon investigating the shoreline outside the lodge enjoying the tranquillity, now the cruise ship had departed. Black-chinned Siskins were very common around the settlement and so too were Striated Caracaras which lined up on the outbuilding roofs keeping watch for any kitchen hand-outs. The adults are extremely attractive birds but they possess sharp claws and beaks which are readily deployed when required. We witnessed a serious altercation on the beach when one immature caracara was set upon by 20 or 30 of its relatives and subjected to a fearsome pecking accompanied by much screeching. It was hard to understand what this was all about but even when I intervened the unfortunate victim continued to be pursued by the flock and I feared the relentless assault would not have a good ending. Away from this melee, pairs of Kelp Geese stood tamely beside a small stream entering the beach, Flightless Steamer Ducks guarded ducklings among the rocks and Magellanic Penguins began their evening braying outside their burrows. We saw more Cobb's Wrens and of course swarms of Tussacbirds which competed with Falkland Thrush for the title of 'most abundant land bird' A perfect end to a magical day...

Day 7

Wednesday 9th November

Today was to be our day excursion to West Point for albatrosses and a mirror-calm sea at first light encouraged me to think all would be well. Rob's dry comment that we should 'be sure to catch the yellow boat' became clear as we gathered at the jetty and the daffodil yellow 'Condor' arrived to pick us up. Skipped by Mike Clarke from West Point the boat had a sturdy look to it and it came as no surprise to learn that it had been sailed from Europe when he bought it. Today's more modest navigation was to West Point Island just 7 miles away but as we set off Mike told us that in view of the calm seas he would take us right around the island, a rare treat that is often denied visitors by the sea conditions.

At first we saw comparatively few birds apart from fishing Magellanic Penguins and more chevrons of Imperial Shags but approaching West Point a Common Diving Petrel took off ahead of the boat and we had reasonable views of two Wilson's Petrels pattering over the surface. Soon there were Black-browed Albatrosses everywhere we looked and although many were settled on the sea in these calm conditions, others glided close by the vessel. We had barely had time to appreciate the seabirds when splashing water attracted our attention to a pod of about 20 Commerson's Dolphins frantically racing each other to reach the boat. There followed almost an hour of dolphin entertainment as these amazing animals, swam beneath the bows of our vessel, keeping pace as we peered over the side just a couple of metres above. The beautiful pie-bald Commerson's are particularly endearing creatures and at such close range we could see every scar on their bodies and breathe the exhalation from their blow-holes as they surfaced.

It was also possible to make eye-contact and I found this a particularly emotional experience. After a while two of the larger Peale's Dolphins joined in the fun then, after about 25 minutes, the Commerson's dropped back and handed over escort duties to about 20 Peale's which took up station under the bows. They remained with us until almost back at the West Point settlement when the Commerson's again appeared and remained with us until the boat had been tied up at the jetty. It had been worth the trip just for the dolphins but circumnavigating West Point also permitted privileged views of the great towering cliffs along the north coast scored by deep gullies in which were crammed thousands of pairs of Black-browed Albatrosses and Rockhopper Penguins. It was an amazing spectacle and I was very grateful that we had been granted the chance to witness it.

The Clarkes are the only inhabitants of West Point and after securing the boat wasted no time in putting on the kettle and producing some excellent cakes for 'smoko'. Flocks of Siskins flitted around the extensive garden of the big cottage and morose Turkey Vultures perched tamely on the roof. Flocks of sheep do roam around the island and live a very free-range existence as they are left to fend for a few months each year when the Clarkes go away. Little wonder that Turkey Vultures seemed particularly numerous here!

After 'smoko' we were driven to Devil's Nose for a closer encounter with the albatrosses but before leaving the settlement a Barn Swallow skimming over the pines looked so appropriate to this sunny summer day that it took some moments to remember that it should not really be here! Twenty minutes later we arrived at Devil's Nose and here we were able to access some of the nesting seabirds at the top of one of the gullies we had observed from the sea. With plenty of time at our disposal we settled down to watch the Rockhopper Penguins and Black-browed Albatrosses at just a few metres range and in-between demolishing packed lunches absorbed all the sights and sounds of the colony.

I chose to lie down on a tussac mound and watch the activity in front of me which included Rockhoppers looking at me with total indifference and the albatrosses sat on their potter's wheel mud nests. Traffic to and from the nests caused a high degree of chaos as albatrosses 'crash-landed' among the penguins and received some annoyed pecks for their impertinence. Albatrosses on the wing are masters of the element but landing and taking off present them with some difficulties as I was soon to discover! I was engrossed in watching the unfolding scene when I was suddenly aware that an albatross had climbed onto the top of the tussac mound next to the one I was occupying. This off-duty bird was clearly accustomed to using the successive mounds as a route to a take-off point and couldn't understand why the route was blocked by this odd bearded creature. It paused for just a moment then decided to do what it always does and with wings outspread jumped down onto my tussac. Albatrosses are big birds with formidable hook tipped beaks and I rather wisely withdrew my head a fraction of a second before the bird landed on the mound I had vacated. I could only retreat a metre or so and the albatross glared at me in admonishment before continuing to the next tussac and eventually its favourite launch point to take off. I have been lucky enough to see nesting albatrosses on a number of occasions but this incident was such an intimate encounter that I am sure I will never forget the moment I almost wore an albatross as a hat!

Delighted with our haul of photographs we walked back to the settlement and had time for afternoon 'smoko' before boarding the boat for the return to Carcass. Mike and his wife had been very hospitable to us and we were very grateful for the bonus trip around the island. Other birds seen during a day mostly devoted to seabirds included about 20 Striated Caracaras, Dark-faced Ground Tyrants, Long-tailed Meadowlarks, Cobb's and Grass Wrens plus a Variable Hawk which obligingly soared over the garden as we prepared to leave.

The return sailing was not quite as spectacular but we were joined on occasions by dolphins and flock after flock of Imperial Shags continued to stream past. A Night Heron was waiting to greet us on the jetty at Carcass and it reminded me to add to my notes the adult which had observed our departure earlier in the day. Back in the lodge everyone was preparing for the visit of two cruise ships the following day and cake production went into overdrive.

Day 8

Thursday 10th November

The first ship was already offshore at 6am and whilst we hated to leave this superb island it seemed a good morning to depart. A final circuit of the gardens and shore produced all the usual birds and it almost seemed as if the vultures and Caracaras had lined up to bid farewell. Rob and Lorraine drove us back to the airstrip where our Carcass adventure had started and we were soon on our way to Pebble Island, once again split between two aircraft. We had now flown with three of the four FIGAS pilots and only Derek remained to be added to our tick list!

The manager of the Pebble Island lodge Alan White was waiting to meet us and we were soon unloading our bags at the lodge where Alan's partner Jacqui had prepared the now accustomed morning 'smoko'. I was pleased to hear that a vagrant Eastern Kingbird had been frequenting the surrounding gardens but although Alan saw it on his way to collect us an initial search failed to locate this rare visitor. Whilst looking for the bird I did however see a female House Sparrow with two others in the bushes and was astonished to later discover that sparrows had not yet colonised Pebble and these had not been recorded previously! They flew off almost immediately and were not seen again!

To occupy the period before lunch we dispersed to take a look at Elephant Bay, a wide bay which almost divides Pebble Island and is surrounded by many miles of broad white sand sometimes used by the FIGAS aircraft. Impressive numbers of Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese were grazing the rough pasture outside the lodge and with them over 50 Magellanic Oystercatchers although quite why there was such a large flock at nesting time seemed strange. The shoreline of Elephant Bay was frequented by a number of Brown-hooded Gulls, these individuals showing a much stronger pink suffusion to the underparts than exhibited by the flock at Johnson's Harbour. South American Terns were congregating offshore and a lone moulting King Penguin was discovered standing on the beach with the resigned air of a creature destined to spend the next few weeks doing nothing in particular!

After lunch we headed to the Big Pond, the nearest of the many pools on East Pebble and one of the best for birds. It was quite windy and rain threatened but when we reached the pond we found plenty of waterbirds to occupy us. Rarest of these was a Neotropical Cormorant perched on a rickety wooden jetty but in truth this was not unexpected as two cormorants had first been seen almost exactly one year earlier and his individual was the one remaining from that pair. They had actually been found by the 2010 Naturetrek group so it was nice to preserve the continuity! About 20 White-tufted Grebes were distributed around the pool, some only metres from the bank, and an assortment of duck included Chiloe Wigeon and Speckled Teal. As usual, geese were everywhere but a scan of the pool failed to reveal any Black-necked Swans on this occasion.

We made our way through the towering sand dunes onto Elephant Bay and walked back to the lodge along the beach arriving in time for afternoon 'smoko'. We also connected with the Eastern Kingbird which was perched in the trees and fences below the lodge flying down to the ground from time to time rather like a shrike. This big grey and white flycatcher has only rarely been seen on the Falklands but like the swallows, I fear it may struggle to find sufficient insect prey.

Day 9

Friday 11th November

A dawn visit to the jetty proved rewarding with 11 Snowy Sheathbills congregated on the structure and at least 9 Night Herons visible on the struts underneath, both adults and immatures suggesting a decent size colony. My hunt for the missing sparrows was however fruitless!

Over 30 kilometres long, Pebble Island divides naturally into east and west sections with the settlement and tourist lodge in the neck of land separating the two. Like Port Howard the lodge is a former farm manager's house and is where a number of islanders, including Nobby Clark, were held captive during the Falklands War. The west is dominated by three conical hills and is mostly open moorland whilst the east is low-lying and studded with numerous ponds. Both halves merit a full day's exploration and today we drove to the east with Alan's uncle Ken driving the second vehicle. Although now a resident of Stanley, Ken had lived many years on Pebble and, like Nobby, had been one of the captives. With two such knowledgeable guides we were sure to learn a lot about Pebble as well as enjoying a fine day's birding.

We were soon bathed in sunshine as the weather improved and spent an absorbing few hours threading our way along the network of sheep trails and wheel ruts leading us from one pool to another. Cumulative totals for the morning included about ten Black-necked Swans, 60+ Speckled Teal including some with ducklings, c6 Yellow-billed Teal and 6+ Chiloe Wigeon. At least 40+ White-tufted Grebes were counted and only slightly fewer Silvery Grebes, both species performing beautifully for the photographers and swimming just metres from the bank. Families of Upland Geese were once again very conspicuous throughout the day with smaller numbers of Ruddy-headed admixed. Small birds included Falkland Thrushes, Black-throated Finches and the occasional Falklands Pipit along with Long-tailed Meadowlarks. Mention should also be made of the Neotropical Cormorant once again on Big Pool and a single Silver Teal at the same place.

After scanning all the ponds we arrived at the first of the day's two seabird colonies, this one on Cape Tamar. The now familiar sights and sounds greeted us as we reached the cliffs but here we witnessed the novelty of seeing scores of Imperial Shags gathering grasses from the moorland surrounding the colony, not perhaps the habitat best suited to a seabird designed for an aquatic life. As with the seaweed gatherers at White Rocks, each returning cormorant ran the gauntlet of its neighbours and many lost much of their harvest. The Rockhoppers were as amusing as ever and the attendant skuas, gulls, Turkey Vultures and sheathbills kept the rookery alert. Other species seen here, and later at Tamar Point, included several Dark-faced Ground Tyrants, a male Variable Hawk and yet another Barn Swallow. A few Black-browed Albatrosses glided offshore from the cliffs but more unexpected was a flock of about 10 Southern Fulmar settled on the sea off Tamar Point. The penguin colonies also revealed one brown-toned individual which had been present for many years but after being an outcast had now mated with a 'normal' Rockhopper and joined a rookery. A hybrid 'Rockeroni' was also spotted. The rocks at the base of the cliffs at Tamar Point were populated by about 25 Southern Sea lions with a powerful looking bull keeping them all in order.

Our itinerary included a stop at a large Gentoo colony where many hundreds of birds were incubating on their nests, and a drive back along Elephant Bay beach. Before returning to the lodge for afternoon 'smoko' and another viewing of the Eastern Kingbird, Alan took the group to the airfield where he explained what had happened during the famous SAS raid which resulted in the destruction of various Argentinean aircraft stationed there during the brief occupation of Pebble. It was a fascinating story made all the more vivid by Ken's personal experience. The Kingbird was indeed back on the fence when we reached the lodge and was still in view when we ate the evening meal prompting me to set up my telescope at an upstairs window for a closer look.

Day 10

Saturday 12th November

We headed to the west today, again with Alan and Ken at the wheels of the vehicles. First stop was the memorial to the sailors who were lost on HMS Coventry during the conflict with Argentina. As we viewed the cross on the top of First Mountain Alan provided the details of how the audacious attack by two Argentinean aircraft was executed and the unfortunate combination of events which led to the sinking just eleven miles from Pebble Island. It was a sombre and poignant visit made a little lighter by the discovery of Dog Orchids and Pale Maidens growing on the slopes below the memorial. A family party of Grass Wrens also added birding interest to the drive from the lodge.

Continuing westwards we negotiated the extensive tracts of moorland to eventually arrive for 'smoko' at the beautiful Green Rincon bay where the sandy beach is much used by Gentoo Penguins on their way to and from their colonies. Although a common daily sight, there are comparatively few Giant Petrel breeding colonies on our tour and here at Green Rincon we were able to telescope an assembly of some 150 nesting adults including every plumage shade from dark brown to almost white. A great diversion from our coffee and cakes was provided by the antics of four Peale's Dolphins out in the bay. Some quite large waves were rolling onto the beach and the dolphins were delighting in catching the larger ones to surf towards the shore. From our elevated position we could clearly see their bodies encircled by the clear water as they hurtled along for a few hundred metres before shooting away with a few flicks of their tail to await the next wave. As a resident of West Cornwall I could not help comparing the astonishing grace and speed of these dolphins with the human surfers back home...

Before reaching the penguin colonies north of Marble Mountain we stopped at another war memorial, this one marking the graves of two Argentinean airmen killed when their Lear Jet observation aircraft was shot down at 40,000 feet by a British missile. Once again Alan delivered a short but compassionate account of the incident, describing how the missile destroyed the tail section of the aircraft leaving the four men in the cabin powerless to prevent the jet plunging into Pebble Island. The other two crewmen are buried in the Argentine Cemetery on East Falkland but this memorial was built by Argentineans after the war, and is the only one of its kind on the islands. All such deaths in war are tragic but there is something about this crash that I find particularly disturbing and I hope that the families of the airmen derive some solace from this memorial to their loved ones.

A fine display of Pale Maidens and Lady's Slippers delayed our arrival at the coast but we eventually reached the largest of the Pebble Island Rockhopper rookeries where we stopped for an hour or so to enjoy these charismatic little birds. As we sprawled around eating our lunches some of the bolder individuals sauntered up to inspect our tripods, feet, vehicle and anything else of interest causing great hilarity and entertainment for us.

This impressive congregation of Rockhoppers also attracts Macaronis and we saw at least four amid the colony plus a fifth which was either a hybrid or an immature. It was good to hear that the numbers here have been increasing in recent years and in many respects it is arguably the definitive Rockhopper colony. The gradual return to the lodge took us via a large Gentoos colony in which a lone King Penguin was standing with that typical slightly bemused expression. Although most of the Gentoos were still on eggs the appearance of several very small chicks suggested that incubation was almost complete. A diversion to the upper slopes of Middle Mountain afforded views of a Variable Hawk nest with the female perched atop a nearby crag. A number of Dark-faced Ground Tyrants were prominent here and for botanists, large clumps of the rather peculiar Balsam Bog which looks like a prop from Dr Who!

Back at the lodge we reflected on another excellent day in the field. Apart from the species mentioned, we had also seen the usual mix of geese, Rufous-chested Dotterel, Two-banded Plovers, Black-throated Finches, Falkland Thrushes and Long-tailed Meadowlarks plus 'extras' such as offshore Black-browed Albatrosses and one or two Magallenic Snipe. We had picked our way around vast Magallenic Penguin 'cities'; the ground honeycombed with burrows, and bid good morning to the jetty Night Herons but one bird missing from the list today was the Eastern Kingbird which failed to appear on the fence when we returned for afternoon 'smoko' In its place a male Red-backed Hawk perched on top of a pole outside the lodge making up for his absence at the nest earlier!

Day 11

Sunday 13th November

Time to move on again with two aircraft scheduled to take us to Sea Lion Island mid-morning. I was sad to leave Pebble Island which is up for sale at the end of the season and may not be available as a tourist lodge in the future. It was also sad to take our leave of Jacqui, Alan and Ken who had all worked hard to make our stay a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Before making our way to the airstrip, John scooped the new record total of 12 Night Herons at the jetty, and I had one last check through the Black-chinned Siskins in the gardens for the elusive House Sparrows!

I was on the first aircraft piloted by Troyd and our route took us via Fox Bay partly following the ribbon of road which we had driven along earlier in the holiday and passing over Hawk Nest Pond. After picking up a passenger at Fox Bay we carried on over the flat expanse of Lafonia in East Falkland and touched down on Sea Lion Island in perfect time for lunch. Troyd took us on a quick look for Orcas before landing but we were not as fortunate as our friends on the second Islander piloted by 'Steady' Eddy as they arrived about 15 minutes after our flight and glimpsed a big male Orca in the kelp as they made their approach.

Our arrival was welcomed by Jenny Luxton, the very affable manager of the lodge, and was observed by the twittering Tussacbirds and a few Striated Caracaras giving a taste of what to expect. We also coincided with a number of day visitors from Mount Pleasant who were distributed around the garden and in the lodge enjoying the facilities. The comfortable, centrally heated lodge is an amazing hotel. Brought to the island in prefabricated form by Chinook Helicopters in 1986, it sits inside a compound at the site of the former farm buildings but there are no longer any sheep on the island which is now designated as a Nature Reserve. Just over five miles long and a mile wide it is a fantastic place for wildlife and a paradise for photographers.

After a delicious lunch, Jenny took us on a land rover 'orientation drive' visiting the various places of natural history interest. On the Long Pond we found several Silvery Grebes and Speckled Teal whilst large numbers of geese grazed the turf beside the water. The eponymous Rockhopper Point held a small colony of our favourite penguins but the Imperial Shags which once bred here have now moved to the West End of the island where we looked down at their noisy and somewhat chaotic nest site where the now familiar processes of nest building and robbery were taking place under the careful gaze of attendant skuas, caracaras, sheathbills and gulls. Looking out to sea we observed a few Black-browed Albatrosses gliding past and four Southern Fulmars off Rockhopper Point but a single Wilson's Petrel from the shag colony was rather more of a surprise.

Down at the neck of land dividing north from south there was a great deal of activity with several big Gentoo Penguin rookeries, embankments full of Magellanic Penguin burrows and even larger numbers of geese. There were constant penguin movements to the sea but the biggest inhabitants of this area were the Elephant Seals. Posturing young males, females and pups littered both beaches whilst the interior was dotted with pups stretched out on the sand or mud like huge caterpillars with big, dark eyes to tug at the heart strings. A few males were also lumbering about in search of fresh battles, the scars and wounds on their body testament to ones that have already been fought. Hundreds could no doubt have been counted but at peak times there can be over 2,000 animals on the island.

Among the afternoon's waders were Rufous-chested Dotterel, Two-banded Plovers, Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers but of particular note were the 15-20 White-rumped Sandpipers on the pools and a healthy population of Magellanic Snipe. The latter were particularly obvious in the grasses near the lodge where several pairs were evidently nesting and showed amazing tameness, often moving around with little concern at just a few metres range.

More correctly called Blackish Cinclodes, the engaging sooty-coloured little Tussacbirds occur in very large numbers on Sea lion Island. They live terrestrial lives foraging in ground vegetation and are very vulnerable to predation by cats or rats. Wherever we wandered the ubiquitous Tussacbird was invariably present and would fly from a hundred metres or so to determine whether you are disturbing any potential food with your footsteps. Several pairs live around the lodge and one nest was actually beneath the wooden steps leading to the restaurant. The other confiding resident was the handsome Striated Caracara or 'Johnny Rook'. Matching the cinclodes for tameness, the caracaras are arch scavengers always looking for a potential meal and lack any fear of humans regarding every visitor as a food source to be investigated. Somewhat fiercer than the Tussacbird, with a powerful hooked beak, the caracaras are perhaps not quite so endearing when they peck your boots and you realise that given half a chance they would be only too happy to eat the contents!

There is so much life on Sea lion Island and fortunately much of it can be found within an easy walk of the lodge. Large numbers of Flightless Steamer Ducks occur around the shores, South American Terns fish the floating islands of kelp offshore and noisy flocks of both Kelp and Dolphin Gulls assembled on the pools. Falkland Thrushes and Black-throated Finches were as numerous as ever and both Cobb's and Grass Wrens were singing in the expanses of tussac which cloak large sections of the island. After an exciting day, and another excellent meal, we were lulled to sleep (!!) by the braying of numerous Magellanic Penguins carrying on nocturnal conversations in their 'city'!

Day 12

Monday 14th November

Cloud had built up overnight resulting in a few showers around dawn but these soon dispersed leaving a mostly fine and sunny day. One of the joys of Sea Lion Island is the ease with which guests at the lodge can pursue their own agenda whether this is to seek out particular photographic subjects or simply going for walks. Although we did have a group walk on each of our days, the rest of the time was free for personal activities and thus each tour member will have a slightly different recollection of the species seen.

Pre-breakfast walks on Monday produced more of the superb birdlife seen the previous day but John established his credentials as 'Orca finder' by reporting 4 Killer Whales off Elephant Corner. We all went there after the meal and fortunately the quartet soon appeared offshore including the huge male with a vertical dorsal fin that almost looked like a windsurfer when it appeared. The views were reasonably distant but we were pleased to catch up with these very mobile creatures. Closer at hand, life for the Elephant Seals continued as normal with one particular male trying to defend his harem from the attentions of another young male which wasted no time in trying to move in the moment the other was distracted. It was quite amusing to watch but of course in deadly earnest for the two individuals as they manoeuvred for supremacy.

Later, Jennie gave us a lift to Rockhopper Point from where we walked back to the lodge. Another Antarctic, or Southern, Fulmar was noted here but we soon left the coast behind and made our way to the Long Pond where 4+ Silvery Grebes, Chiloe Wigeon and several Speckled Teal were the highlights. Whilst here we witnessed an enormous scrap between two Upland Geese ganders which seemed certain to result in the drowning of one or another before they finally separated. The cause seemed to involve an unfortunate gosling which was chased through the ranks of grazing birds by several irate geese but the story evidently had a happy ending when the family was eventually reunited.

Having already encountered the usual miscellany of moorland birds I took it in my head to steer a course through the Diddle-dee in a direct line to the lodge and had not progressed very far when a superb Short-eared Owl hopped up from under my feet and perched on top of the vegetation a few metres in front of me. It clearly had either eggs or young so I remained where I was and pointed towards the owl to attract the attention of the other tour members. I then carefully retreated to a safer distance and set up the telescope so everyone could appreciate these amazing views as the owl fixed us with a withering stare from its big yellow eyes. We were anxious to not cause any further disturbance so quickly left the spot hoping that the bird would forgive our brief trespass. It had been a great piece of luck but perhaps the owl might view this differently as it transpired that an American couple also staying at the lodge walked into perhaps the same bird later in the day.

After R&R at the lodge we explored the neck area circling the shoreline and the big pools frequented by flocks of gulls and littered with Elephant Seals. Blackish Oystercatchers were displaying in a manner recognisably like the piping rituals of European Oystercatchers and some 30 White-rumped Sandpipers were running around the muddy edges. We had two surprises; a seemingly adult King Penguin which walked briskly towards us before standing a shot distance away as if waiting for inspiration, and a Cape Pigeon or Pintado Petrel which flew by offshore. About 30 Brown-hooded Gulls were paddling in the shallows of the pools, looking very pink in the afternoon light. Two Orcas were swimming off the south beach at 1730 providing a suitable finale for another astounding day.

Day 13

Tuesday 15th November

This morning Jennie drove us to near the Beaver Pond, so called because it used to be where a floatplane landed not because of any mammal inhabitants. Our intention was to walk along the narrow rock embankment separating the pond from the sea but the stones were difficult to walk on so we soon abandoned that plan in favour of circling around the pond. Before leaving the shore we did however see two Orcas carving through the kelp not too far off the beach. Carefully picking our way around scores of Magellanic Penguin burrows, we rejoined the coast east of the pond and here there were several Elephant Seals hauled out on the beach with a courting male and female Southern Sea lion surfacing from time to time offshore. Cobb's Wrens seemed particularly numerous in this location and were making good use of various debris on the beach.

Following the coast eastwards we visited the Gulch, where Rock Cormorants nest opposite a recently constructed structure to aid the landing of stores, and shared 'smoko' with a Striated Caracara above a beach where some large Elephant Seals were loafing around and Dark-faced Ground Tyrants flitted after insects. At this stage it had become quite warm and humid so we were quite glad to eventually reach our lunch stop at the northern end of the Long Pond and peel off some of the layers of unwanted waterproofs. Once again a Caracara arrived to share the picnic and was rewarded by a veritable feast including a hard boiled egg which it seemed to particularly enjoy. We were pleased to see a pair of Flying Steamer Ducks on the pool and as they chose to come ashore for a while close to where we were sitting they became the first subjects for photography after lunch.

The rest of the walk back to the lodge was completed on the main track and after a period of relaxation we spent the remainder of the day enjoying the sights and sounds of the birds and mammals near the lodge. Vanilla Daisy was an addition to the botanical list today and earlier Catherine had alerted us to the presence of numerous Violets tucked away among the grasses near the buildings. For one last afternoon the Sea lion Island spectacle was ours to enjoy and in our different ways we took full advantage. I wandered down to look at the Elephant Seals and penguins before circling back around the Tussac where Cobb's and Grass Wrens were pouring out their songs. A pair of Striated Caracaras was nesting at the edge of the Tussac but I gave them a wide berth having been dive-bombed earlier in our stay and given a warning blow on the head. The prospect of being on the receiving end of the claws or beak discouraged me from making the same mistake again! Magellanic Snipe scuttled from underfoot as I headed back to the lodge and as I entered the building I could hear the evening conversations beginning among the inhabitants of penguin city.

Day 14

Wednesday 16th November

Our return flights to Stanley were scheduled to be at 11am, and last mornings are usually limited to packing and sitting around waiting for the incoming aircraft, but Sea lion had arranged a rather different farewell for us! I went down to Elephant Corner with Pete before breakfast and we were soon alerted to a recent Orca kill by the presence of some fifty or more Giant Petrels and gulls around a spot on the sea about half a mile to the east. Through the telescope occasional glimpses of an Orca fin amongst the throng of scavengers confirmed our suspicions but before we set off to get a closer look, four Orcas suddenly appeared circling around the rocks at Elephant Corner just in front of where we were standing. This is an Elephant Seal nursery made famous when the BBC filmed the tactics employed by one particular female Orca which had discovered that at certain high tides it could pass through the entrance channel into this natural lagoon and feast on the fat-rich pups.

It is a dangerous move as the risk of stranding is high but as the film demonstrated, the Orca had become skilled at judging the precise moment it could enter the pool. It soon became clear that one of this quartet was very probably this female and as she was accompanied by a small calf we speculated that she was showing her infant how to make this judgement. Time and again the pair approached the entrance channel as if testing the depth but then turned back only to return a little later. A bull Elephant Seal trapped in the pool looked distinctly alarmed as the fins circled around just the other side of a protective ring of rocks but a number of pups dozed in the pool oblivious to the danger. Standing on the shore we had amazing views of the Orcas especially when they made exploratory forays into the kelp just metres offshore and we could see their entire bodies in the clear water. Eventually at least six Orcas were present including another female and calf.

We raced back for breakfast then after the meal everyone staying at the lodge came down to Elephant Corner to witness the scene. Fortunately the whales were still there and obliged with a wonderful performance for the small crowd. Some of the Elephant Seals on the beach provided a support act by engaging in some mock fighting but the stars were definitely the Orcas. Fortunately for the pups in the pool the tide was evidently not quite high enough today and the determined female never entered the channel but perhaps that was not her intention and she was simply showing the youngster how to do it? Whatever the motives, the six Orcas were still cruising offshore when we were finally obliged to leave in order to catch our flights.

Once again we were divided between two aircraft for the flight to Stanley, one going via Darwin the other direct. I was on the direct flight piloted by Derek who thus completed our tally of FIGAS pilots! As we left Sea Lion we could see signs of another kill near the north shore so plainly the Orcas were in hungry mode today! Arlette welcomed us back at Stanley and the second aircraft arrived just minutes later re-uniting the group.

After settling back into the comfort of Malvina House, and enjoying lunch, we went our separate ways for the afternoon, combining sightseeing with shopping and a little birding along the shore although after the, last few weeks, the Stanley seashore appeared a little tamer than it had on the first day!

Day 15

Thursday 17th November

A fine bright morning was however a little windy and the forecast was for the wind strength to increase later in the day. For this reason it was decided to bring forward our late afternoon boat trip to Kidney Island to a 3pm sailing. There was also a threat to the departure of the RAF flight the following morning but we would have to wait for news of that.

Two cruise ships were 'in town' and as we ate breakfast we saw the passengers from one of the ships straggle past the Malvina House, some pausing to take photographs of a man painting a white fence opposite. I hope I never have to view their holiday snaps! Later we met more of the passengers in the rather fine Stanley Museum where the group spent an interesting few hours looking at the exhibits and listening to some unusual versions of the Falklands conflict from some American cruise passengers!

Arlette collected us at 245 and we drove a short distance to the jetty where the 'B Mar' was tied up waiting for us. It was quite a small vessel and the captain Peter was concerned about the sea conditions ahead of the gale but we decided to give it a try and see how big the waves were outside the shelter of the land.

Rounding Mengeary Point the answer was 'pretty large' and as we bounced around from one big wave to the next it seemed a rather masochistic exercise to continue but the appearance of numerous seabirds encouraged us to persevere a little longer. Some 'chum' was discharged into the sea and immediately attracted a number of birds including several Antarctic Fulmars, Black-browed Albatrosses and Pintado Petrels. A Peale's Dolphin also briefly accompanied us but was difficult to watch in these rough conditions. Peter sought the calmer waters on the land side of Kidney Island and here we had a respite from the waves as he took the boat close to the shore where 20+ Southern Sea lions were gathered. We had fine views of the pinipeds, perhaps the best of the tour, and a number took to the water approaching quite close to the boat and helping revive our slightly green passengers.

Unfortunately this tranquil scene, with Tussacbirds twittering on the shoreline, could only be a temporary relief and to get back to Stanley we had to head once again into the waves. Sooty Shearwaters were numerous on the seaward side of the island but we had little chance to admire them as Peter skilfully steered us towards Cape Pembroke then back into the Sound passing a large flock of Imperial Shags en route. We arrived back in Stanley somewhat earlier than planned but despite the lumpy seas it had been an interesting excursion and I think everyone enjoyed the Sea lions. My highlight had been the seabirds on the 'chum' but I appreciate that the motion of the boat prevented everyone sharing my enthusiasm!

Day 16/17

Friday 18th/Saturday 19th November

There was time for an early morning continental breakfast at the Malvina House before we departed for Mount Pleasant. I had been told that the flight was still scheduled to leave on time and after the usual tedious check-in formalities and wait in the small terminal building, we did indeed board the aircraft at the appointed time. It was extremely windy as we climbed the steps but we were soon on our way and climbing up into the blue skies over the South Atlantic. There followed an uneventful journey to Ascension Island and then the overnight sector to Brize Norton arriving back to a misty Wiltshire at 0730.

As we exited the air base on our way to different parts of the UK I reflected on what had been a hugely enjoyable visit to the Falklands and I thank my travelling companions for being such good company. We had seen so many wonderful sights over the two weeks and I can only hope that the unique Falkland Islands remain unspoilt for future visitors to enjoy.

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Species Accounts

Birds (Figures in paranthesis = the number of days seen)

King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus* (4)

We visited the large colony at Volunteer Point on 4th; one was with Gentoo Penguins on Pebble Island and another on Elephant Bay beach. Finally, one on Sea Lion Island.

Gentoo Penguin *Pygoscelis papua* (10)

Colonies were visited at Volunteer Point, Pebble & Sea Lion, others seen at Fox Bay.

Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* (6)

Large colonies visited at White Rock, West Point, Pebble & Sea lion.

Macaroni Penguin *Eudyptes chrysolophus* (3)

Breeding pair with egg White Rock, 4-5 in Marble Mountain Rockhopper colony Pebble Island. Hybrid also seen Pebble Island

Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus* (11)

A widespread breeding bird in suitable habitat, seen at Volunteer Point and on Pebble, Carcass, and Sea Lion Islands. Also on sea off Kidney Island & Stanley

White-tufted Grebe *Rollandia rolland* (3)

6-10 Hawk Nest Pond, c40+ on Pebble Island Ponds

Silvery Grebe *Podiceps occipitalis* (5)

At least 2 Hawk Nest Pond, 30+ Pebble Island ponds, 4+ Long Pond Sea lion Island.

Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophris* (8)

Seen offshore in small numbers with more noted from Sea Lion Island and West Point where colony viewed (c14,000 pairs) – also came to chum off Kidney Island.

Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus* (14)

Commonly seen from all islands and Stanley. Colony on Pebble Island (c150 birds) and Sea lion. Particularly numerous around latter island.

Southern (Silver-grey or Antarctic) Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialoides* (5)

C10 off Pebble Island, up to 4 from Sea lion island and c25 during trip to Kidney Island

Cape (Pintado)Petrel *Daption capense* (2)

One off Sealion Island and c5 during Kidney Island trip

Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus* (1)

Numerous off Kidney Island. Probably also White-chinned Petrels with them but viewing conditions precluded confirmation!

Common Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix* (1)

One flew off sea on way to West Point

Rock Shag *Phalacrocorax magellanicus* (13)

Seen from all locations nesting in a variety of sites, from the offshore wrecks in Stanley to the low cliffs and jetties elsewhere in the archipelago.

Imperial Shag (King Shag) *Phalacrocorax atriceps albiventer* (9)

A few individuals with Rock Shags at Stanley, Port Howard and Fox Bay but big colonies Pebble, White Rock and Sealion Islands. Large flocks also noted between islands particularly off Carcass and near Mengeary Point.

Neotropical Cormorant *Phalacrocorax olivaceus*

One Big Pond Pebble Island

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax falklandicus* (9)

Immatures Hawk Nest Pond and Stanley Seafront, also immature Port Howard, several Carcass and up to 12+ Pebble Island.

Black-necked Swan *Cygnus melancoryphus* (2)

A poor year; pair with cygnets Hawk Nest Pond, total of about 10 on Pebble Island ponds.

Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps* (9)

Locally numerous on verdant grassland in most locations, but not as widespread or common as next species. A few noted with goslings, especially on Carcass Island.

Upland Goose *Chloephaga picta leucoptera* (16)

The commonest goose on the Falklands, seen in all locations including Stanley and at times in very large numbers

Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida malvinarum* (14)

Widely distributed in pairs around most coastlines. Local concentrations occurred where a number of pairs associated in same areas such as around Carcass Island settlement and on Sea lion Island.

Crested Duck *Anas specularoides* (12)

Seen most days along shorelines, and in small numbers on the larger pools. Widely distributed but rarely numerous.

Falkland Flightless Steamer Duck *Tachyeres brachydactyla* (16)

Common along all coastlines and on all pools close to the shore - often seen with ducklings occasionally well away from the shore. Large flocks were present around Sea Lion Island and big concentration in kelp off Carcass Island.

Flying Steamer Duck *Tachyeres patachonicus* (2)

Male Hawk Nest Pond and pair Long Pond Sea lion Island but perhaps overlooked elsewhere

Speckled Teal (Yellow-billed Teal) *Anas flavirostris* (11)

Small flocks were present on most ponds and often along the more sheltered coastlines. Biggest count 60+ on Pebble Island ponds. Several broods of ducklings encountered.

Chiloe Wigeon *Anas sibilatrix* (7)

Low numbers this year with just occasional pairs and a few singles. Largest counts only 4+ Pebble Island and 6+ Sea lion

Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica spinicauda* (2)

Pair Hawk Nest pond and 6+ Pebble Island

Silver Teal *Anas versicolor fretensis* (2)

Pair Hawk Nest Pond, single Pebble Island

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura falklandicus* (15)

Widespread over all habitats, with concentrations around the larger seabird colonies and near lodges

Variable (Red-backed) Hawk *Buteo polyosoma* (4)

One Port Howard, one West Point, male Tamar Point Pebble, female near nest Middle Mountain Pebble, and male near lodge Pebble Island.

Striated Caracara *Phalacrocorax australis* (8)

Immature White Rock then numerous Carcass, West Point and Sea lion Islands

Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus* (7)

Up to 5+ Port Howard area then several on Pebble Island

Blackish Oystercatcher *Haematopus ater* (7)

Usually in pairs or singles around rocky shores with a maximum of ten plus noted on Sealion

Magellanic Oystercatcher *Haematopus leucopodus* (11)

More numerous than previous species, often gathered in small groups on sandy beaches or short grasslands, a number of chicks seen. Largest gathering - Pebble Island where 50+ in one flock.

Two-banded Plover *Charadrius falklandicus* (11)

Often seen at top of sandy beaches or on short grassy turf where young were noted on several occasions. Seen on most islands but not in large numbers. Perhaps commonest on Sea lion

Rufous-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus* (9)

Present on many Diddle-dee heaths where chicks seen on a number of occasions. Often extremely numerous in this habitat

Magellanic Snipe *Gallinago magellanica* (7)

Met with at Fox Bay and a number of birds Carcass, Pebble and Sea lion Islands where drumming display seen. Invariably very confiding. Commonest and most obvious Sea lion.

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* (4)

Three Carcass and 20+ Sea lion. A winter migrant from North America.

Snowy Sheathbill *Chionis alba* (7)

C20 White Rock, 10-20 daily around penguin colonies Pebble and Sea lion Islands. Also seen on jetty at Pebble Island.

Antarctic (Falkland) Skua *Catharacta Antarctica* (13)

Seen almost daily but in small numbers. Usually present around penguin colonies where often predated eggs.

Dolphin Gull *Larus scoresbii* (14)

Seen around the coasts in small numbers most days, often around mixed penguin and shag colonies. Most seen on Sea Lion Island where many nesting

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* (16)

Commonly seen around all coasts

Brown-hooded Gull *Larus maculipennis* (8)

Following first flock of c50 on way to Volunteer Point, small flocks also seen on Pebble and Sea lion Islands.

South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea* (13)

After a few noted offshore from Stanley on the first day, birds were noted daily from Pebble, Carcass and Sea Lions Islands, usually feeding over the offshore kelp beds.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* (1)

On Sea Lion Island one was seen at close range in Diddle-dee

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

Pair on way to White Rock

Tussac-bird *Cinclodes antarcticus* (8)

Only found on cat and rat free islands thus very common on Carcass and Sea Lion Islands and seen from boat around Kidney Island

Dark-faced Ground-tyrant *Muscisaxicola macloviana* (10)

After first birds at Fox Bay, encountered most days with day maximum of 8+ on Pebble. Commonest around cliffs and in rocky habitats. The local name 'news birds' i.e. coming to tell one the news, comes from their habit of following people to see what food we disturbed was frequently illustrated.

Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*

Immature seen around Pebble Island settlement

Falkland Pipit *Anthus correndera grayi* (5)

Regularly noted beside the roads and tracks, but often difficult to see on the ground. A numerous but unobtrusive resident of moorland.

Falkland Grass Wren *Cistothorus platensis falklandicus* (6)

First seen Hawk Nest Pond, then Carcass and Pebble Islands. Noted daily on Sea Lion Island where birds were heard singing and seen zipping low over the clumps of white grass.

Cobb's Wren *Troglodytes cobbi* (8)

Common on Carcass & Sea Lion Islands where they occupy most habitats but particularly fond of Tussac

Falkland Thrush *Turdus falcklandii* (15)

Commonly seen in all habitats and locations, often heard singing their rather plaintive song from an exposed perch. Possibly the most widespread and abundant Falklands land bird

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*(3)

Three Carcass Island, one West Point and one Pebble

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common in Stanley but absent elsewhere on in the archipelago apart from brief sighting of female Pebble Island settlement with possibly two others

Black-chinned Siskin *Carduelis barbata* (15)

Seen daily around settlements with fondness for the pine shelter brakes. A number of young noted. Particularly numerous Port Howard and Carcass.

Black-throated Finch *Melanodera melanodera* (13)

Commonly seen on all islands with males singing on calm days. A characteristic moorland bird

Long-tailed Meadowlark *Sturnella loyca falklandica* (11)

Common in most habitats but absent from Sea Lion Island.

Mammals

Killer Whale (Orca) *Orcinus orca* (4)

Up to 7 Sea lion Island including one big male and 2 calves.

Peale's Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus australis* (4)

4-5 Carcass Island, 20+ off West Point, 4-5 Pebble Island and 1 on Kidney Island pelagic

Commerson's Dolphin *Cephalorhynchus commersoni* (2)

Two Port Howard, 20-30 off West Point

Southern Sea Lion *Otaria flavescens* (10)

One Volunteer Point, c15 White Rocks, then 20-25 Pebble Island, and a few Sea lion Island. Finally 20+ Kidney Island. Some big males included in these totals.

Southern Elephant Seal *Mirounga leonina* (6)

C40+ Carcass Island then commonly on Se lion Island with 50-100 daily



2011 Naturetrek Group - dining out (Cath Hamblin)