

The Falkland Islands

By Dr. Madeline Kalbach

Travel study is one of the best ways to learn about wildlife and wildlife behaviour whether here on the Refuge or in far-away places. I was lucky enough to go on travel study with the University of Calgary for three weeks in October and November, 2017. This article covers the first two weeks of my wildlife study sojourn which took place in the Falkland Islands. The Falkland Islands are an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom. They are self-governing and financially viable. The archipelago has its own constitution, and by it the UK is responsible for their defence and foreign affairs.

The Falklands are a cluster of isles 350 kilometers east of Tierra del Fuego at the Southern tip of South America. East Falkland is the largest island in the archipelago, while West Falkland is the second largest. Other islands, of which there are more than 750, are scattered around the edges of East and West Falkland. The large and most visited of the outer islands offers something different, both in terms of flora, fauna, and natural beauty. The hospitality of the hosts on the outer islands and the wildlife have made it a trip to remember. It is a wonderful experience to be among and with folks who are conservation minded, hold the wildlife in high regard, and do everything they can to protect it. The lodges are located on working farms. Sheep are the mainstay for their wool as well as for meat.



PHOTO: The King Penguin is the second largest of the penguins. It averages about 3 feet in height and can weigh up to 35 pounds.

Visiting Stanley, the capital city of the Falklands, offered the opportunity to study and photograph King Penguins at Volunteer Point. The King is the largest and most striking of all the breeding species of penguins found in the Falklands. Volunteer Point is a major breeding site in the Falklands, and is known the world over for its accessibility. King penguin chicks are friendly and curious. When I stood still, the youngsters didn't hesitate to come close to stare at me to see just what or who I was. Volunteer Point is also home to a large colony of Gentoo penguins as well as the Magellanic Penguin. Magellanic penguins nest in borrows and generally return to the same one year after year.

PHOTO: Magellanic Penguin sitting at the entrance to its burrow.



I visited five of the “other” major islands to study penguins, elephant seals and South American sea lions. In total I tallied 50 species of birds including 5 different species of penguin plus one hybrid bird. Penguin colonies are located on all of the five islands and each offered a unique opportunity to study penguin behaviour as well as that of Rock cormorants, Imperial Shags, and Black-browed Albatross. It is spring in

the Falklands during our Autumn, so courting, mating and sitting on eggs are top priority.

PHOTO: A gentoo penguin dancing its way out of the ocean.



Pebble Island was the first stop on our journey to the outer islands. It lies just off the coast of West Falkland. It is the third largest offshore island in the archipelago. We studied Gentoo penguins here. The three large Gentoo colonies were located very near each other. They were home to about 2500 pairs. We were able to get close to the birds for observation and photo ops. They were not disturbed by human presence. Most of the pairs were

already incubating their two eggs, unlike other penguin species that generally only lay one egg.



Pebble Island is also home to many Southern Rockhopper penguins which are also colonial nesters and the smallest of the crested penguins. It is also the most common Falkland Island penguin. Pebble Island is home to 8,500 breeding pairs of Southern Rockhoppers with the largest colony being around 5000 pairs. There about 35 sites around the islands.

PHOTO: Southern Rockhopper. It is about 22 inches in height and weighs around 4-6 1/2 pounds.

Rockhoppers have fancy yellow streaks projecting out from the side of their heads. They show great affection for one another while courting and during the time of incubation. The male often sticks his head high in the air to trumpet for his chosen partner. This evidently, helps to keep the bond between them secure.

The Pebble Island colony produced a surprise. A hybrid penguin (Macaroni with a Southern Rockhopper) was sitting paired with a Rockhopper. It had the look of both species. The bright orange feathers slicked back on the forehead of the Macaroni were evident, but parts of its body was more like that of a Southern Rockhopper. We wondered what the offspring would look like and whether it would survive.

Carcass Island is rodent-free island with exceptional wildlife. Rodent-free means that songbirds can survive well and are abundant. In fact, there are no mammal predators on Carcass Island which means that the ground-nesting birds can thrive. There are 9 species of Falkland Island breeding songbirds. I was lucky enough to see them all. Carcass Island is notable as an important site for the endemic Cobb's Wren. The other species of songbird include the Long Tailed-Meadowlark, Tussacbird which hangs around the tussac grass, Black-chinned Siskin, White-bridled Finch, Falkland Thrush, Falkland Grass Wren, Dark-faced Ground Tyrant, and the Falkland Pipit.

Carcass is also home to a large colony of Magellanic Penguins. They come to the island to breed. They return to the same burrow year after year. They are shyer than other species of penguins. Gentoo Penguins also breed on the island. There are two major colonies and they remain on Carcass all year-round. Gentoos feast on lobster krill, fish and squid. They have been known to dive up to a depth of 100 meters when foraging for squid and small fish.



PHOTO: Black-browed Albatross courting. They clack their beaks, and make graceful circles with their heads.

West Point Island was the next destination. The highlight here was a colony of Black-browed Albatross situated on a rocky promontory that juts into the sea. The sandstone cliffs of the coastline of which the nesting site is part of is particularly dramatic. These birds have an enormous wingspan of 12 feet. There were about 2000 breeding pairs of the albatross in the colony and about 400 pairs of rockhopper penguins. In total, West Point Island is home to about 14,000 pairs of Black-browed Albatross.

Sea Lion Island was next on the agenda. As you can guess one of the stars of this island are the Southern Sea lions. The island is known as an important breeding site for this species. However, the population has gradually been on the decline since the 1930's. Fewer pups are being born yearly. They still breed in small numbers along the coast. They will prey on penguins, but their main food source is octopus, lobster krill, fish and squid.

Ninety-five percent of the Falklands Southern Elephant Seal population resides on Sea Lion Island. Over 1,000 individuals are often found here at the height of the breeding season in October. Many hours were spent observing the behaviour of these mammals. Tiny Tussacbirds would often sidle up to large male who had bleeding cut on its skin from a fight with another male. The male's response was to thrash around in an effort to discourage the bird. Pups were being nursed by their mothers, but only for 23 days. After that the pups were on their own. They lie around for a few months, lose the body fat gained from their mother's very rich milk and then go out to sea.

Bleaker Island was our last stop before returning to Stanley. The feature here included 13 Gentoo breeding colonies. The biggest treat was watching the Gentoos dance their way out of the surf on to the white sandy beach after their adventure at sea. Forty different species of breeding birds have been recorded here including Southern Rockhopper, Magellanic, Macaroni and Gentoo Penguins.



PHOTO: An Imperial Shag taking nesting material to its mate.

Another major feature of Bleaker Island is the extremely large colony of Imperial Shags (cormorants). A conservative estimate is 6,000-7,000 breeding pairs. The colony was wide spread but the birds huddled together to avoid predation by Dolphin gulls, Kelp Gulls and Falkland Skuas. The Skuas were busy setting up their nests around the perimeter of the colony. This provides easy access to chicks and eggs for their young.

On all of these islands there were excellent opportunities to observe the predators that predate on the penguins and cormorant eggs, chicks and food dropped by parents at the nesting site. The Falkland Skua, Southern Giant Petrel, and the Turkey Vulture were ever present hovering and swooping over the breeding colonies. Kelp gulls and Dolphin gulls were also prevalent at the colonies, and were always on the hunt for tasty morsels. The birds relegated to the outside edges of the breeding colonies were most at risk.

PHOTO: Two Dolphin gulls sit at the edge of the Imperial Shag colony just waiting for an egg to roll out from under one of the incubating birds. 6000-7000 birds nest in this colony.



Much of the land on the islands is peat and difficult to drive on. Generally, it is very wet and easy to get stuck even with a Land Cruiser or Land Rover, but getting stuck wasn't all that bad. The wettest boggy areas produced Magellanic Snipe, Two-banded Plover and Rufous Dotterel.

The Falkland Islands are a mecca for nature lovers. It is

an ultimate destination for any traveller seeking to experience nature. These words only skim the surface of the adventures I experienced here. If you ever have the opportunity to travel to the Falklands, jump at the chance. You will thoroughly enjoy the flora and the antics of the adorable penguins.



PHOTO: Young King Penguins like this one love to get up close and personal. They are curious to say the least. Once they have had a good look they turn wander away.