

The new age of birding in the Falklands

A photo essay by Rod Martins and Eric Hosking



A typical Falkland Islands landscape. Photo/Rod Martins.

THREE HUNDRED FIFTY MILES EAST of the Patagonian mainland in the distant South Atlantic lives a community of typically British settlers, many now fourth generation. Some live the life of the gaucho while others tend their vegetable plots in a capital no larger than the average English village. This is a quintessentially British society—a world of cucumber sandwiches, fish and chips, and chrysanthemums.

Before the Falkland Islands were wrenched from relative obscurity into world headlines by the conflict with Argentina a few years ago, most people knew little of this far-flung British colony. Since then, its exotic birdlife and 'end-of-the-world' atmosphere has piqued a growing interest in the Falklands. Massive investment in development, the declaration of a fisheries protection/conservation zone, and its associated economic spin-offs have brought both prosperity and a place on the world-stage. New hotels and an international airport have been built to accommodate the growing tourist economy of this lovely outpost. Marketing agencies, both in Britain and elsewhere, have engendered greater public exposure of the islands as a prospective destination for travellers, and tour operators are now taking an active interest in the islands and offering package tours of various kinds.

Many images flood into my mind when I think of the islands, demonstrating the deep impressions of the Falkland experience on a birders soul—the distant roar of a colony of Black-browed Albatrosses, myriad shearwaters gathered along a dusky horizon, the startling sexual dimorphism of a pair of Kelp Geese, the ungainly appearance of the endemic Falkland Flightless Steamer Duck, the baleful stare of an incubating Southern Giant Petrel, a gang of Striated Caracaras (Johnny Rook) struggling with the fastenings of my unattended rucksack, the battle to save my sandwiches from the Tussock-bird (Tussac-bird or Blackbird) sitting on my boot.

Surely, it is the massive colonies of southern ocean seabirds which first capture the imagination of those interested in birds. Five species of penguin occur: Rockhopper, Gentoo, and Magellanic breeding in large numbers, small colonies of the exquisite King Penguin, and a few lonely Macaroni Penguins hidden amongst the colonies of Rockhoppers which, like the Black-browed Albatross, number in the millions. Many Falkland Island seabirds are



Black-browed Albatrosses are abundant in Falkland waters. The birds nest in several huge colonies, most of which are on the outer islands. Photo/Rod Martins.



Magellanic Oystercatchers are common breeding birds in the Falklands. Photo/Rod Martins.



The distinctive Gentoo Penguin is a common breeder in the area around Stanley and elsewhere. Photo/Rod Martins.

exclusively nocturnal, and the darkness of night masks all but a rudimentary understanding of their populations, status, and distribution. These include Thin-billed (Slender-billed) Prions (in vast numbers), White-chinned Petrels, Sooty and Greater shearwaters, Fairy Prions, and Falkland Diving Petrels.

An entirely different, but equally exciting aspect of birding in the Falklands stems from its potential for vagrants. A mere 350 miles or so from the South American mainland, with the most frequent winds from the west, the islands are ideally placed. Vagrants include Chilean Swallows regularly, Barn Swallows, Fire-eyed Duicons, and Rufous-collared Sparrows. Despite the growing number of birders visiting the islands, the westernmost islands where most vagrants might be expected to occur, remain severely underwatched.

Travel in the Falklands is an invigorating encounter with nature, elemental and raw. I cannot find better words than those of Robin Woods, who has written so much about the birds of the islands: "The silence, broken only by the cries of animals and birds, and the thunder of the surf, the solitude and the strong, cool winds combine to give a sense of exhilaration and freedom."



Rock Shags are frequently encountered in coastal waters. This species is widespread throughout the region. Photo/Eric Hosking.

That sense of freedom has much to do with what birding is all about. Come to the islands and experience birding's 'Falkland dimension.'

—Falkland Islands Tourism Service, 294 Tadcaster Road, York, YO2 2ET England



Striated Caracaras are restricted to the Falklands and a few islands off the South American mainland. Ridiculously tame and curious, this bird is one of the rarest raptors in the world. Photo/Eric Hosking.