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the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and
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FACT-SHEET ON:

Bird species depending on the Falkland Islands
UK Overseas Territory: Falkland Islands

The UKOT of the Falkland Islands is responsible for the conservation of several endemic species and subspecies of birds and very high proportions of the world population of others. Here we give three examples.

Cobbs Wren *Troglodytes cobbi*



© Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

The Cobb's Wren is unique to the Falkland Islands, but has disappeared from most of the inhabited islands due to the accidental introduction of rats, which eat the eggs and young. Up to 2016

it was classified as Vulnerable but this was changed in 2017, because surveys had now located this species on more than 120 islands. While it is only found on predator-free islands, rat eradication programmes appear to have helped this species and the population trend appears to have been stable for some time.

Nevertheless, with a total world population (all in the Falklands) of only about 2000 breeding pairs, it is vital that the tiny rat-free islands are protected against infestation – and more cleared of human-introduced rats – if the Cobb's Wren is to survive. It is fragmented into small populations which could disappear if their islands were colonized by rats or cats. The birds' habit of feeding and breeding at ground level makes them very vulnerable to ground predators.

Cobb's Wrens prefers boulder or rocky beaches, nesting in crevices or amongst tussac grass stems. Here it is safe from the avian predators with which it evolved, but not from introduced rats. The nest is a hollow ball of grass with an entrance hole, lined with feathers. Three to four eggs are laid from October to December.

Adults feed mainly on invertebrates taken from under stones and amongst rotting seaweed, but they also feed on terrestrial insects and grass seeds. Sexes are similar in appearance.

Falkland Steamer Duck

Tachyeres brachypterus

The remarkable Falkland Steamer Duck is the other bird species restricted to the Falkland Islands (although some endemic bird subspecies are likely to be reclassified as full species when reviewed). The name derives from its rapid movement across the



Drake Flightless Steamer Duck (or Logger) and his ducklings drink at a freshwater trickle on the shore at Stanley. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

water using its wings in a circular paddling motion. It is known locally also as Logger Duck. The birds are large: about 65cm in length.

The birds breed along all types of coast except steep cliffs. Each pair holds a territory comprising of a length of coastline which it guards vigorously. Nests are built behind the shoreline with 5 - 10 eggs being laid during September to December. Young fledge in January to March. Food is mostly shellfish and other marine invertebrates which it collects by dabbling or diving.

The Steamer Duck is by far the most numerous of the Falklands marine ducks, with about 30,000 breeding pairs – the entire world population, of course. About 400 pairs, known also as Canvasbacks and nesting around inland lakes, rather than rocky shores, can fly. These were previously thought to belong to one of the 3 continental species of steamer duck, *Tachyeres patachonicus*. However, recent genetic studies show them to be the same species as the flightless type, and quite distinct from the continental species. As there is no proof that flying and flightless Falkland Steamer Ducks interbreed, they may eventually evolve into separate (sub)species.

Black-browed albatross

Thalassarche melanophrys



Black-browed Albatross over nesting colony on New Island, Falklands. Next page: Part of this colony. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF



Falkland's 550,000 breeding pairs represent 2/3 of the world's population. Black-browed Albatrosses breed in dense colonies at 16 sites in the Falklands, on steep slopes with tussock grass, sometimes on cliff terraces, but the largest colonies are on flat ground along the shore line. Immature birds begin to return to land at the age of 2, but do not breed until 7-13, but can continue breeding until 35 years of age. This is a colonial, annually breeding species, although only 75% of successful breeders and 67% of failed breeders breed the following year. Adults (which look similar to us, but presumably not to them) pair for life and return to use the same pot-shaped nest each September, laying a large single egg in October which hatches in December. Chicks remain in the nest until they are ready to fledge in early April.

Adults feed on fish, squid, octopus, crustaceans and jellyfish. During chick-rearing, breeding birds stay in shelf to shelf-slope areas within c. 500 km of their colonies. Breeding sites are abandoned from May until September as birds migrate northwards towards Uruguay, an area where many birds die from being caught by fishing vessels. In some areas they are drawn towards discards from fishing fleets, which puts them at risk of being killed on long-line fishing hooks.

The species was classified from 2003 to 2012 as Endangered and then Near Threatened until 2016. This classification has now been dropped because of its wide geographical range and lack of continued evidence of decline, although there remains some uncertainty about trends and their possible geographical differences. The species is threatened by current longline fisheries and the development of new fisheries over much of the Patagonian Shelf. It is one of the most frequently killed species in many longline fisheries, including the long-liners targeting toothfish and kingclip on the Patagonian Shelf. Capture rates can vary greatly according to season, number of hooks and type of longline. Mortality in trawl fisheries has also been identified as a major source of mortality for this species over the Patagonian Shelf. This threat has since been significantly reduced, largely due to the introduction and use of mitigation measures.

Climate change also poses a significant threat to the species, as it has been shown that climatic fluctuations have a negative impact on survival. Extremely low or nil breeding success in some years at South Georgia has also been linked to periods of low prey availability in the krill-based trophic system of that region of the Southern Ocean, which could be a result of either or both climatic events or overfishing.

Introduced invasive mammals can pose serious threats, and Falkland colonies are mainly on offshore islands currently free of such predators. This needs to remain so.

Southern Rockhopper Penguin

Eudyptes chrysocome chrysocome

The Falklands hold 320,000 pairs or 36% of the global population (in 2010). Historically, the Falkland population has undergone serious



Southern Rockhopper Penguin, © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

declines from the 1930s. In 1986, numbers crashed due to a mass starvation event and in 2002/03 the population was affected by a harmful algae bloom, which killed many adults. Numbers dropped between 2000 and 2005 by 88,000 pairs, which was considered to be a reflection of the harmful algal event. The last Island-wide census in 2010 indicated signs of recovery between 2005 and 2010, but then followed a second starvation event during the moulting period in 2015. The Falkland population is unlikely to ever recover to the pre-1930 levels,

when it was estimated at least 1 million Southern Rockhopper Penguins populated the Falklands. It is classified as Vulnerable owing to rapid population declines.

From age 4, adults arrive at the breeding colonies in October. 2 eggs are laid in early November, but typically only 1 chick is raised. Both parents incubate in shifts for 32-34 days. After hatching, males brood the chicks for 24 days, while the female provides for the chick with daily forages. Chicks begin to crèche in January and by February have fledged. The adults depart on an extended pre-moult foraging trip, with colonies often deserted mid-February to early March. The adults return and moult between mid-March and April when they finally depart. Adults can live to over 25 years. Sexes are similar in appearance.

Some other important bird species

The Falklands hold some endemic subspecies of birds, including **White-tufted Grebe** *Podiceps rolland* (right), and Kelp Goose (below; both photos © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF).



Falkland's approximately 1,000 breeding pairs are widely distributed in coastal creeks, slow-moving streams and freshwater ponds. Floating nests are built under cover of water-margin vegetation September-October, with 1-3 eggs laid October-December. Adults dive to feed on small fish, invertebrates and aquatic vegetation. Sexes are similar in appearance. Adults remain in the Falklands throughout the year, and generally retain the same breeding territory.

Falklands Kelp Geese *Chloephaga hybrida malvinarum* are larger than their South American counterpart *Chloephaga hybrida hybrida*.

The ~15,000 Falklands breeding pairs are found around the Islands throughout the year, mainly on rocky coasts, where they feed primarily on green seaweed of the genus *Ulva*. Nests are made of grass, lined with breast feathers, and situated behind the beach in tall grass or shrubbery. 4-7 eggs are laid October/November.

Chicks hatch a month later, and are led from the nest to feed themselves. Adults watch over them until they fledge in February. The male has completely white plumage, making him prominent



as he holds territory and stands guard over the incubating female or young chicks. Breeding can begin at 2 years of age.