



UKOTCF

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Welcome everyone to the July edition of the SOWG e-Newsletter. I hope you are all keeping well in these strange times and are managing to stay safe.

I'd like to start by saying great thanks to Nicola Weber for all her hard work over the last three years as Secretary of the Group. Due to various other responsibilities and demands on her time, understandably she has had to step back from her role as Secretary of SOWG. I am happy to say I have been passed the torch, and this is my first e-Newsletter since following in Nicola's footsteps as SOWG Secretary, in a voluntary capacity. I am an MSc graduate whose fieldwork plans were casualties of Covid19 lockdown, so am volunteering with UKOTCF where home-working has been the norm for many years.

Over the last few months there have been some interesting activities in the Southern Oceans UKOTs, and we are pleased to share some of these with you in this e-Newsletter. If you have any queries or suggestions for the next edition, please don't hesitate to send them to cporter@ukotcf.org.

Catriona Porter & the UKOTCF Team



Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski / UKOTCF

Male upland goose leads goslings, guarded at the rear by the female, Falkland Islands.

Cross-Territory News

Increased Darwin Plus Funding from 2021

Funding for the Darwin Plus programme will be tripled to help protect and conserve biodiversity found in the UKOTs. In March 2020 Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced the Darwin Plus funding scheme will increase to £10m per annum from 2021.

Source:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/871799/Budget_2020_Web_Accessible_Complete.pdf

Ascension Island

15th Year Anniversary: Green Mountain National Park



Photo: Sam Weber

Land Crab *Johngarthia lagostoma*

25th June 2020 marked 15 years since Green Mountain became Ascension's first (and only) National Park. Encompassed by the National Protected Areas Ordinance, 10.2km² of the mountain is a designated park, including the peak (which is the highest point on the island at 859m) and a number of walks. The mountain supports an array of interesting plants and creatures, including the island's iconic land crabs *Johngarthia lagostoma* and an impressive six out of Ascension's seven endemic plants – all of which are Critically Endangered (bar one,

Ascension Spleenwort *Asplenium ascensionis*, which is classed as Vulnerable). It's also a valuable space for people, helping to connect visitors with nature by offering beautiful viewpoints, camping spots and a network of paths to explore. Green Mountain was also a base for Ascension's first settlers, likely due to a natural spring and more inhabitable climate, and hosts several historic structures dating as far back as the early 1800s.

More information about Green Mountain and the mitigation techniques implemented by AIG to help find balance between endemic flora / fauna and introduced species can be found on the Government's webpage: <https://www.ascension.gov.ac/green-mountain-celebrates-15-years-as-a-national-park>

New Biosecurity Legislation

New biosecurity legislation concerning imported goods will come into effect this month. On 5th May 2020, the Council voted legislation be put in place to protect Ascension's endemic and native species, as well as its economy and human health, from the introduction of non-native plants and animals. As Ascension is a remote island and relies on imports for everything from food to building materials, there is a continuous risk of introducing invasive species. Ascension Island Government (AIG), with support from the RSPB, communication with St Helena and funding from DPLUS, have developed a tailored inspection system fitting for the island. Species identified to be of highest risk to invade Ascension were decided as: red fire ants, mosquito species, lionfish and brown rats, all of which have their own potential negative impacts. The new legislation will involve high risk goods undergoing a thorough inspection process.

British Antarctic Territory

Disappearing Sea Ice in Weddell Sea

A recently published study has found summer sea-ice in the Weddell Sea area of Antarctica has decreased by one-third in the past 5 years: losing one million km², an area roughly twice the size of Spain. The Weddell Sea falls within BAT, with overlapping claims from Chile and Argentina (but all claims are effectively held in suspense under the Antarctic Treaty).

The study looked at weather analyses from the late 1970s and satellite records of sea-ice extent, finding that a series of severe storms in 2016/17 and the consequential polynya (a stretch of open water surrounded by sea-ice) are responsible for a warmer ocean temperature anomaly, which continues to persist today. The research found storms that developed in the Weddell Sea drew in warm air, melting a large amount of ice and exposing the ocean to the sun's energy, which it then absorbed. The polynya was created by strong winds and warm ocean temperatures brought by the storms. Lead author Prof. John Turner says the drastic decline "will have implications for ocean circulation and the marine wildlife of the region that depend on it for their survival". It is uncertain whether this is the beginning of a long-term decline in sea-ice, or if this loss will recover to previous levels.



Photo: Susie Grant / BAS
Sea-ice in the Weddell Sea

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Sources: <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2020GL087127>
<https://www.bas.ac.uk/media-post/antarctic-sea-ice-loss-explained-in-new-study/>

British Indian Ocean Territory

BIOT Crustacean Stamp Issue



A set of five new collector's stamps and a first day cover were released on 23rd March 2020 by the British Indian Ocean Territory Administration. They feature crustaceans found within the Territory, and are available for purchase online at www.biotpostoffice.com/index.asp, or at the Stanley Gibbons stamp shop on the Strand in London. In keeping with BIOT's stamp releases, this latest set is designed to promote conservation of the territory's many crustacean species. Stamp prices range from 60p to £5.

Research: Illegal Fishing in BIOT

New research published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology* (May 2020) relates to illegal fishing in BIOT. Looking at how movement ecology can help support MPAs and prevent illegal fishing, the research used long-term shark tracking data and enforcement patrols, as well as data from Marine Resources Assessment Group (MRAG) on illegal activity in the BIOT MPA. Findings demonstrate silvertip sharks are more connective and dynamic in movement, have larger activity spaces, and are statistically more vulnerable to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The study's implications for MPA management include highlighting seemingly important movement corridors which, if regularly patrolled, could reduce mass removal of sharks. Overall the authors are hopeful this research looking at patterns in movement data could assist the BIOT Patrol Vessel (BPV) to intercept illegal fishing activities.

You can read the full paper and an interesting blog summary in the links below:

Full paper: https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1365-2664.13654?fbclid=IwAR18gxoOSREVL1tY_UBBIQfeCg_ERBkForg04nyvE-HKuXglG2tEXHFtKfM

Summary: https://appliedecologistsblog.com/2020/06/25/how-can-movement-ecology-support-marine-protected-areas-in-preventing-illegal-fishing/?fbclid=IwAR3JG8kjoU7Ca7jFTssOpuuJlaYY3I19DSfQhW0TSGN18BhyQLXaoGXx_U

Falkland Islands

Citizen Science: Seaweed Surveys



The Natural History Museum, Falklands Conservation, and the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute (SAERI) have collaborated to create a new citizen science project, “The Falkland Islands Big Seaweed Search (FIBBS)”. Funded by the Falkland Islands Government and Darwin Plus, the project focuses on 12 types of seaweeds considered important indicators of ocean health, and encourages members of the public to contribute to the scientific research by completing seaweed surveys and sending off their observations. Seaweeds are vital to the coastal ecosystems of the Falkland Islands, providing habitats, feeding grounds and shelter for a variety of fish, marine birds, invertebrates, and marine mammals. Ocean acidification, sea-temperature rise, spread of non-native species and environmental changes all affect these seaweed species and the habitats they create. The ongoing project will first provide baseline data on species distribution, so monitoring efforts can then accurately measure changes over time—expanding current knowledge to better protect these ecosystems.

Ecological Restoration Grants

A series of small grants (up to £7,000) for ecological restoration are available to help Falklands wildlife (application closing date 19th July). The grants are intended to help boost existing projects or start new initiatives, and all ideas are welcome - e.g. trialling new restoration methods for eroded ground with native species; setting up or restoring ponds; training community groups or land managers; fieldtrips to share knowledge and boost inspiration; and propagating native plants. More information can be found at habitatsrestore@conservation.org.fk and applications at adminofficer@conservation.org.fk.

Pitcairn Islands

Blue Belt Programme: Coral Survey

On 9th June 2020, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) shared a bulletin containing annual updates on the Blue Belt Programme. Over the past year the Programme supported the Government of the Pitcairn Islands, helping to develop a management plan for their Marine Protected Area (MPA) which will ensure effective management for the next five years. In January 2020, the Blue Belt Programme completed an expedition to Pitcairn Island alongside the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) – collecting 4,000 still images and 10hrs of seabed footage. The surveys looked at marine habitats and the health and extent of coral communities, using satellite imagery and a drop-down camera system. As well as providing insight for a new permanent mooring (to reduce potential damage from vessels anchoring around the island), the survey will act as a baseline dataset for assessing changing coral conditions. Local staff and community members on Pitcairn have been trained in monitoring techniques, and local people received training from Conservation International and Whales Alive to put the Pitcairn Islands' whale watching code of conduct into action.



Photo: Enric Sala / National Geographic
Whitemouth moray and whitetip shark around Pitcairn Islands

More information on the Blue Belt Programme and its work around the Territories can be found here, in the latest annual update: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/890468/Blue Belt Programme Annual Update 2019 2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/890468/Blue_Belt_Programme_Annual_Update_2019_2020.pdf) .

570,000 Hermit Crabs Killed by Plastic



Photo: Lavers et. Al (2019)
526 hermit crabs found trapped inside a single container

A new study has found roughly half a million hermit crabs are trapped each year by plastic. The research was first available online in November 2019 and published in the *Journal of Hazardous Materials* in April 2020. Looking at Henderson Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the research estimates 61,000 and 508,000 crabs are entrapped in debris and die on Henderson and Cocos Islands every year, respectively. Researchers

found 526 hermit crabs trapped inside a single plastic container on Henderson Island. The sheer scale of plastic continually washed up on Henderson means clean-up efforts are futile: located near the centre of the South Pacific Gyre Ocean current, it is a focal point for plastic carried mostly from South America.

You can read the study for free here: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304389419316577>

St Helena

Photography and Art Competitions

To celebrate World Oceans Day (8th June) and National Insect Week (23rd June), Saint Helena National Trust (SHNT) hosted art and photography competitions respectively to raise awareness of marine conservation and abundance of insect life on the island. Members of the public were encouraged to enter their snaps of insects or anything entomologically related into the 'Young Bug Photographer' or 'Adult Competition' categories. To reflect this year's theme of calling on world leaders to 'protect 30% of our blue planet by 2030', art entries on how to achieve '30 by 30' were encouraged in the forms of poetry, pledges, photos or art projects. Winners for World Oceans Day were announced on 23rd June.



Photo: Cilla Isaac
One of the World Oceans Day art competition winners

Youth Engagement: Marine-Themed Online Game Released



Photo: Planetari Ltd.
Screenplay of the Secrets of St Helena

Following the launch of free interactive 'makerzines' presented to St Helena primary pupils in late 2019, the latest interactive, educational output to be launched is the 'Secrets of St Helena' - the island's first marine-themed online game. Released April 2020, the game is available to download from both the Apple Store and Google Play Store, and aims to "immerse our young community in the marine environment of St Helena, where they can learn about our IUCN Category VI, Marine Protected Area, our unique marine wildlife and what they can do to protect it!" - Beth Taylor, SHNT's Head of Marine Conservation.

The game is part of a wider collaborative Plastics Project funded by DEFRA, aimed at sustainably managing plastic waste on St Helena. The £72,000 grant-funded project is being used to quantify use of single-use plastics on the island and how much ends up in the water; establish a marine debris monitoring programme along the coastline; develop engagement programmes for school children and the wider public to educate on marine debris; and incentivise plastic recycling on the island.

For more information on the wider plastic project visit: <https://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/directorates/environment-natural-resources-planning/environmental-management/marine-division/sustainably-managing-plastic-waste-on-st-helena-to-minimize-marine-debris/>

South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

Blue Whales Return to South Georgia

In Jan 2020, the final leg of the South Georgia Right Whale project (a long-term survey led by BAS on the recovery of whales from historical exploitation in South Georgia waters) found a remarkable number of blue whales in the coastal waters around South Georgia. The expedition comprised of 10 international experts from 5 countries (UK, USA, Canada, Brazil and New Zealand), and was jointly funded by the Darwin Plus Initiative, the South Georgia Heritage Trust and Friends of South Georgia Island. The territory's waters are a key summer feeding ground and so considered an important place for whales due to their location in a highly bio-productive zone, which

sees a large train of krill move up from the Antarctic on strong currents. This encouraging whale activity reflects a pattern as many Southern Hemisphere whale populations are increasing. Preliminary data does not suggest the spike in whale numbers could be due to a short-term bounty of krill, and so it seems the prohibition on commercial whaling is working. The team sighted 55 blue whales during the 2019/20 expedition to South Georgia. South Georgia was a good place for whales prior to historical industrial exploitation (the island's whaling industry decimated whale populations, killing over 176,000 in 60 years and over 42,000 blue whales) and now, after thirty years of protection, it appears the endangered species is starting to return to the territory's waters to feed.

More information can be found at: <https://www.bas.ac.uk/blogpost/blue-whale-comeback-at-south-georgia/>.



Photo: Martin Collins / BAS
Blue whale sighted on BAS expedition to South Georgia

£11m Wharf Completed at KEP



Photo: Daan Alderberg / South Georgia Newsletter
Aerial shot of the new wharf at KEP

The long-awaited wharf has been completed in time for Shackleton Day 2020 - a holiday in South Georgia commemorating explorer Ernest Shackleton's iconic journey from Antarctica to South Georgia.

The new wharf at King Edward Point Research Station (KEP) was a feat of engineering, completed in just 108 days and a full 3 weeks ahead of schedule. It is considered an essential upgrade to the station's infrastructure, and was constructed as an extension to the pre-existing

wharf to minimise damage to the seabed. The new wharf consists of a retaining wall wrapped around

the former structure, a new mooring platform enabling larger vessels to dock, and slipway upgrades which enable small boats to be launched in various tidal conditions. It was commissioned as a joint effort between the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI). The research station, owned by GSGSSI and operated by British Antarctic Survey (BAS), is an important facilitator of interdisciplinary research and collaboration. The expanded capabilities offered by the new wharf will ensure these joint efforts can continue—accommodating GSGSSI fisheries patrol vessel *MV Pharos SG*, polar research vessel *RRS Sir David Attenborough*, and Royal Navy ships *HMS Protector* and *HMS Forth*. It will also be used to operate Government harbour patrol boats, rigid inflatable hull boats, scientific survey boats and workboats; welcoming scientists and visitors, as well as transporting cargo.

Source: <https://www.bas.ac.uk/media-post/new-kep-wharf/>

Sustainable Fishing = Effective MPA Management



Photo: John Dickens

The MPA covers important Grey-headed Albatross colonies

New research funded by the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project and Bertarelli Foundation was published a few months ago, in April 2020. Led by BirdLife's Marine Programme, it shows the design of GSGSSI's Marine Protected Area is working well to protect key foraging areas of seals and seabirds by minimising fishery overlap (through temporal and spatial fishing limitations). The research, in association with BAS and RSPB, utilised over 30 years worth of data on 14 species of seabird and seals breeding across the sub-Antarctic islands to

pinpoint specific sites crucial for the survival of these species. The study applied Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) to satellite tracking data for the first time.

Sources: <https://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/news/new-research-shows-sustainable-fishing-and-conservation-can-coexist>
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ddi.13041>

Tristan da Cunha

Natural Predator Introduction—Invasive Scale Insect Project

Tristan da Cunha is among the successful projects announced from the 2019 Darwin Plus funding round. Tristan Conservation Dept., RSPB, FERA and CABI will be working together in a partnership project to target an invasive scale insect *Hemiberlesia rapax* which is infesting the island's only native tree species, the Phylica tree *Phylica arborea*. The project will involve introducing a natural predator of the invasive scale insect—as well as providing agricultural pest training



Photo: RSPB Community
Wilkins' Bunting on Nightingale Island

for local farmers and educating Tristan school children in horticulture. The insect is considered a threat towards the forest ecosystem and some unique bunting species threatened with extinction—e.g. the Wilkins' Bunting *Nesospiza wilkinsi* on Nightingale Island, of which there are less than 85 pairs remaining and which have evolved a large beak to specialise on the fruit of the Phylica Tree.

Source: <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/martinharper/posts/good-news-for-world-environment-day-a-boost-for-nature-conservation-in-the-uk-s-overseas-territories>

Gough Island Restoration Project Postponed



The much anticipated Gough Island Restoration Project aimed at removing invasive 'super mice' has been postponed due to Covid19, as it had become logistically impossible and went against government guidance for the specialist team to travel to South Africa and on to Gough. The island is an extremely important seabird nesting site and hosts many birds under threat, e.g. the Critically Endangered Tristan albatross *Diomedea dabbenena*. Breeding success of the island's seabirds is hindered by the mice, who feed on live chicks and also adults as confirmed by recent video footage. Only 21% of Tristan albatross chicks survived to fledge during the 2017/18 breeding season. The ambitious project, if successful, is



Photo: Chris Jones
Gough Island shot from the SA Agulhas II helicopter, 2019

thought will prevent the death of at least 2 million seabirds each year. A team was part-assembled on the island in Feb 2020, only for members to return home by sea and air in April. Only three RSPB field biologists (Michelle Risi, Christopher Jones and Alexis Osborne) remain. Though disappointing news for everyone involved, the team on the island have made good inroads on the initial project set-up which will stand them in good stead for next year, when the project can hopefully get underway.

Sources: <https://www.tristandc.com/wildlife/goughrestoration.php#news-2020-04-29-goughteamreturn>
<https://www.goughisland.com/>
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/projects/gough-island-restoration-programme/>

Other Upcoming News

- In September 2016, the Tristan Island Council in consultation with the UK government committed to establishing a marine protection regime in the 758,771 km² exclusive economic zone of the archipelago. The goal for this was 2020, so this should be formally announced later this year.
- Biosecurity Measures for Visiting Vessels have been introduced to prevent introducing potentially damaging organisms to the Tristan Islands.

To find out more about the UK Overseas Territories, research and work being done by various organisations to protect the unique biodiversity of these special places, and the role UKOTCF plays, please visit our website: www.ukotcf.org.uk.

For more information about the SOWG, comments, or contributions to the newsletter, please contact Voluntary Secretary / Voluntary Conservation Officer, Catriona Porter: cporter@ukotcf.org

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