



UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum

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FACT-SHEET ON:

Endemic sea-birds

UK Overseas Territory: Tristan da Cunha

The Tristan da Cunha archipelago (37°08' S, 12°28' W) comprises six islands lying 1,900 km SSW of Saint Helena. Tristan Island, with an area of 96 km², is the only inhabited island of the archipelago, with a population of 293 people (2016) who claim it as the most remote settlement in the world. It was first permanently settled in 1810. At 2062m, the summit of the shield volcano that forms Tristan Island, is the highest point in the Tristan da Cunha archipelago. Within 40 km SW of Tristan Island lie Inaccessible Island (14 km², up to 600m high) and the Nightingale Island group comprising Nightingale Island (3.4 km², up to 400m high) and Middle (Alex) and Stolenhoff Islands (both < 1 km²). Gough Island (which is staffed by South African weather station personnel on 1-year shifts) is a further 350 km SE of Tristan Island, with an area of 65 km² and height of 910m, consisting of a main island and several islets and rocks. The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) attributed to the Tristan archipelago extends to around Gough Island, making it the second largest in the South Atlantic, at 754,720 km² in area.

This island group supports several endemic or nearly endemic seabirds. The impacts of human-introduced rodents, driving some other endemics to extinction have long been known on Tristan itself, and those of mice on albatrosses, other seabirds and landbirds have been identified more recently, leading to a major current project to remove the mice.

Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* Endangered

Breeds in loose colonies among fern bush, *Scirpus* bogs and meadows, and locally under *Spartina* tussocks. Occurs offshore year-round; adults return ashore in August- September; eggs laid mid-September-early October; chicks hatch in late November-December; fledge March-April. Most pairs breed annually, usually remaining together for successive breeding attempts, but may divorce or breed opportunistically with another bird if mate fails to arrive. Immatures return to island at 5-8 years old; start breeding at 6-13 years old; Nests in a bowl-shaped pedestal of mud up to 40 cm high, built with bill. Incubation by both adults for 64-70 days with shifts lasting up to 10-12 days. Chick fed by both adults; brooded for first three weeks; fledges after four months. Diet fish and squid with some crustaceans and offal; obtained by surface seizing, surface plunging and occasional plunge dives. Ranges through temperate South Atlantic and more widely. Widespread on all Tristan group. Population: 20,000 pairs estimated on Tristan in 1970s, but probably fewer now; 5,000 on Gough; 2,000 on Nightingale and 2,000 on Inaccessible. Endangered by drowning on long-lines; adult survival on Gough only 92%; too low to maintain a stable population; populations at Tristan and Gough decreasing by 1.2% per year; numbers breeding at The Ponds on Nightingale fell from 3,000 pairs in early 1970s to 1,000 in 1999.



Above: Yellow-nosed Albatross takes off near Gough. Below: Tristan Albatross flies in front of Gough. Bottom: Spectacled Petrel at sea north of Tristan. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* Critically Endangered

Large birds, of the Wandering group, spending most of day flying gracefully in strong winds, travelling at up to 100 km/h but often sits on water at night, ranging through temperate South Atlantic and beyond. Breeds in loose colonies on windswept uplands. Adults return in November-December; eggs laid January; chicks hatch March; fledge November-December; breeding season so long that the few (see below) successful adults take a year off after breeding to moult and recover body condition. Pairs usually remain together for successive breeding attempts. Immatures return to land at 4-5 years old; start breeding at 6-14 years old. Lays one large egg in a mound of vegetation. Incubation by both adults for 70-78 days, with shifts of 10-12 days. Chick fed by both adults; brooded for first few weeks and then guarded for another week until it can defend itself against giant petrels and skuas. Fledge after 8-9 months. Breeding success on Gough only 27% due to mice killing downy chicks. Diet mainly squid and fish. Endemic to Tristan group: breeds mainly on Gough (1,500-2,500 pairs annually), with 0-2 pairs on Inaccessible, and formerly on Tristan, where extinct by 1900 due to eating by humans. Near extinction on Inaccessible due to feral pigs prior to 1930s, with no recovery since. Endangered by long-line fishing and mouse predation at Gough: population decrease estimated 3-5% per year.



Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata* Vulnerable

Largely nocturnal at colonies, breeding in burrows 1-3 m long dug in peat, often in colonies of 10-100 pairs, all in higher parts

of Inaccessible plateau. Adults return to colonies in September; eggs laid late October, hatch in late December; fledge in March. Probably breeds annually, starting at 5-8 years old. Incubation by both adults for 56-60 days. Chick fed by both adults; brooded for first week or so; fledges after about 95 days. Diet squid, fish, crustaceans, fishery discards and offal; forages by surface seizing, shallow plunging and diving with wings and feet to at least 12 m. Endemic to Inaccessible. Disperses throughout temperate South Atlantic and beyond. Some 10,000 pairs at Inaccessible. Classified as Critically Endangered until 2005, but the population is still growing increasing at 7% per year since 1930s, following near-extinction caused by predation by feral pigs; so reclassified to Vulnerable because of tiny range and potential threats.

Atlantic Petrel *Pterodroma incerta* Endangered

Disperses widely in South Atlantic and beyond. Adults return to colonies late March-April; pre-laying exodus late-April-mid-June; eggs laid mid-June-late-July, in burrows 0.5-2.5 m long dug in peat; hatch August-early September; fledge December-January. Incubation by both adults for 50-60 days; chick fed by both adults; fledges 135-140 days. Gathers off breeding sites at dusk; starts coming ashore just before complete darkness. Breeding success on Gough only 20%, mainly due to high chick mortality to mouse predation. Adults and fledglings killed also by skuas. Diet mainly squid; also some fish, crustaceans and fishery discards; mainly forages by surface seizing. Endemic to Tristan group: 1.8 million pairs at Gough; may breed on Inaccessible plateau; almost extinct (< 100 pairs) on Tristan due to collecting for human food of thousands of chicks each October in 1950s - currently protected. but most chicks killed by introduced rats.



Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*

Near-endemic to Tristan: 2-3 million pairs at Nightingale (effectively habitat full), 2m at Inaccessible (possibly increasing), 1m at Gough; virtually extinct (possibly a few pairs remain) on Tristan due to collecting for food, habitat destruction and introduced predators. Elsewhere <100 pairs breed at Falklands. Impacted historically on Inaccessible by collecting and pigs. Currently protected at all islands except Nightingale, where adults, chicks and eggs harvested: up to 15,000 eggs and 50,000 chicks collected annually in 1970s, but fewer now. Chicks killed by mice on Gough. This species is the most frequently killed bird on long-lines set in Tristan waters. Almost all birds contain plastic litter eaten at sea. Gathers in large rafts off breeding sites. Nest sites and behaviour fairly similar to previous species. Adults return to colonies from late August to court and prepare burrows; pre-laying exodus in late October; eggs laid early November; hatch early January; fledge in late April-May, after adults depart in mid-April. Migrates to North Atlantic and beyond in winter.



Top: Atlantic Petrel off Gough. Above: Great Shearwaters off one of their breeding islands, Inaccessible. Below: Northern Rockhopper Penguins, Gough. Bottom: Tristan Skuas, Gough. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Northern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes moseleyi*

Endangered. More than 90% of world population breed at Tristan group: 10,000 pairs at Tristan, numbers increasing following protection; 10,000 pairs in two colonies at Nightingale; up to 100,000 pairs at Alex Is. but decreasing due to displacement by fur seals; 30,000 pairs at Inaccessible in eight colonies, possibly decreasing; recently 30,000- 80,000 at Gough, down from 144,000 pairs in 1984; reason for decrease unknown. Currently eggs collected on Nightingale and Alex Is; harvest sustainable provided disturbance minimised, but evidence of population decrease. Harvest 25,000-40,000 eggs/year in 1970s; consumption has decreased in recent years. Adults return in late July-August; eggs laid September; hatch mid-October-early-November; chicks fledge end-December-January. Incubation by both adults, 32-34 days. Chicks brooded for 20-26 days by male and fed by female; then gather in loose creches, where fed by female for one week while male recovers from long guarding fast; then by both adults.



Tristan Skua *Catharacta antarctica hamiltoni*

Subspecies endemic to Tristan (<10 pairs, population greatly reduced by persecution), Nightingale (100), Inaccessible (100) and Gough (1000); disperses at sea in winter. Pairs breed singly or in loose groups in open grassy areas. Strongly territorial, chasing intruding skuas. 1-2 eggs laid in shallow scrape September-early January; incubation by both adults for 28-32 days; chicks fledge December-March. Chicks, fed by both adults and guarded closely throughout, fledge in 55-60 days. Probably start breeding at 5-6 years old, but shortage of territories may delay breeding. Mainly kill seabirds at night on ground, walking around listening for movement; attack with bill only. Also catch birds in flight during day and dig up burrows to reach adults and chicks.

This note draws heavily on Peter Ryan's 2007 book: *Field Guide to the animals & plants of Tristan da Cunha & Gough Island*.