



FALKLAND ISLANDS Photo Journey

December 2013

Tour Leader: Iain Campbell

Trip report adapted from notes by tour client Sue Post

Many thanks to both Sue Post and Michael Jeffords for providing additional photos for this report



Magellanic Oystercatchers displaying at Volunteer Point. Sue Post

The two week Falkland Photo trip allowed us to experience the Falklands just as Charles Darwin did—as self-paced visitors with inquiring minds, but with the nice addition of some camera gear. This is a place where a long lens (400 mm+) is not a necessity; have a little patience and the wildlife comes to you.



King Penguins at Volunteer Point. Michael Jeffords

We arrived into Stanley in the afternoon, got into the hotel and settles in for what was going to be an obscenely early departure. When you want to be at a place at dawn and sunrise is at 4am, I will let you do the math. For the first two hours we were dumbfounded—where do you point my camera as everywhere you look there are so many things to see. Volunteer Point is a novel, penguin playground with 1000s of penguins—Gentoo, Magellanic, and King—presenting limitless possibilities and opportunities.



Iain Campbell working way too hard. Michael Jeffords

We spent time at each colony, photographing and watching their antics. Curious colony members came to investigate until we surrounded by penguins! Make sure you spend time not only at the colonies, but also head to the beach to watch their incessant comings and goings—penguin tracks and shadows in the sand, sea lions watching and waiting for “lunch”, Flightless Steamer Ducks tucked into the rocks, and diminutive Two-banded Plovers, the color of sand, skitter all about. Here at the Point we were “privileged” to experience all of Falkland’s weather—a mix of rain, sleet, snow, fog, hail pellets, even some sunshine – and of course, the ever-present Falkland winds. There is a hut at the point and once we figured how to get the heater to work, we would run out and shoot when the weather was good (not bad) and then run back in as the sleet started.



Magellanic Penguins deciding if it is worth coming ashore. Iain Campbell



Snowy Sheathbill at Volunteer Point. Iain Campbell

The next morning we headed off to the airport for the first of our small commuter flights to Carcass Island. You do not know your flight time until the day before and your route until you are on the plane. Our trip involved a pickup and drop-off on Pebble Island before arriving at Carcass Island.



Cobb's Wren on Carcass Island. Sue Post



Striated Caracara at Carcass Island. Iain Campbell

Carcass Island, a jewel of the Falklands, provided ample experiences.—walking through a maze of tussock grass on penguin pathways only to stumble upon hidden elephant seals; watching Gentoo penguins “play” in the Kelp Beds at Leopard Beach; observing Kelp Geese molting and feasting on the abundant sea kelp; noting Johnny Rooks (Striated Caracaras) everywhere, waiting for food or for a shiny dropped treasure; visiting an Imperial Shag colony with their mesmerizing, violet-blue eyes and gorse colored caruncles; being among elephant seals jousting and sounding like fifth grade boys in a lunch room; and, of course, enjoying the food and hospitality of the McGill’s. This place would be an amazing B&B if it were in England, but here is it just amazing. If anything I would like to change the program to allow more time here, as we did not have time to visit the Rockhopper and Black-browed Albatross colony on West Point Island which can be done as a day trip.



Striated Caracara and a Magellanic Oystercatcher going for it. Iain Campbell



Austral Thrush on Carcass Island. Iain Campbell

We then headed over to Saunders Island which is a real come down in terms of food and accommodation, but it is what it is. We spent a few days at the bunkhouse at The Neck and then a night at the “Settlement”. At The Neck we “discovered” two more penguin species —Macaroni and Rockhopper. While there was only a single

pair of Macaroni's, there were 100s of Rockhoppers, and watching their jubilant comings and goings (porpoising in the surf to hopping up the cliff face), feeling their scratch marks on the cliffs occupied many an hour. Ever curious, they soon are near and you become just a part of the colony. Be aware of the Johnny Rooks, as they will shadow you, look you in the eye, and may even bonk you on the head.



Imperial Shag
Sue Post

Imperial Shags coming in to land at The Neck. Sue Post



Imperial Shag
Michael Jeffords

Imperial Shag colony at The Neck. Michael Jeffords



Brown-headed Gull near The Neck. Iain Campbell



Rufous-chested Dotterel. Iain Campbell

Black-browed Albatross, sitting on their tubular nests with glider length wings and ice blue feet, present infinite photographic possibilities. We did a long walk up to a pond on the north of the island, which is easy when the strong wind is behind you but was brutal when it was a head wind. The walk however was worth it with Black-necked Swans, Brown-headed Gulls and a host of other waterbirds up there.



Yellow-billed Teal from Saunders Island. Iain Campbell



Black-browed Albatross doing a fly over the colony. Iain Campbell



One of the two Macaroni Penguins in a mass of Rockhoppers. Iain Campbell

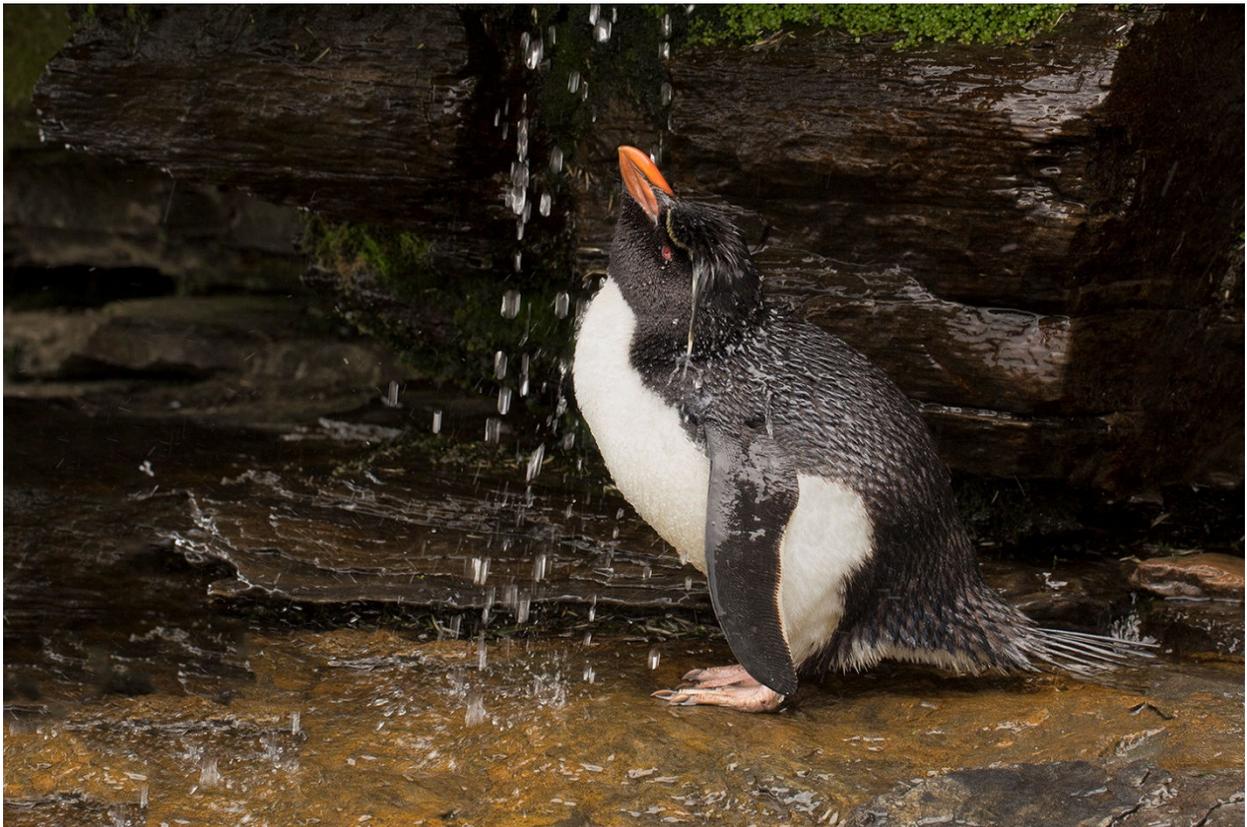
The colony near the Settlement was spectacular for the setting. The steep cliffs here were loaded with Black-browed Albatross, Imperial and Rock Shags, and a landing spot for Rockhoppers. It is here where we saw the rockhopper taking a shower from a small waterfall. Well, in reality it was one guy hogging the shower for himself for nearly an hour, fighting off all newcomers. A sudden heavy shower forced me to hide behind a small ledge. When the shower stopped, I hoped up to find that my face was only two feet away from an albatross facing the other way. The bird, who was as surprised as me, let loose, and I narrowly avoided a horrible walk back. Never think that birding does not have its perils.



A Gentoo Penguin photographed underwater. Iain Campbell



Rockhoppers coming ashore... Michael Jeffords.



...and then showering. Iain Campbell

Then it was off to one of the world's top spots. The southernmost English hotel, and so very English it is. How is it that you can spend an evening with penguins and Orcas and then come back to a cozy lodge with a Boddingtons waiting for you. The Falklands have been described, as a magical place in the world, one that captures the imagination, and perhaps Sea Lion Island best typifies this. Here, if you are up early, you might observe Orcas spy-hopping or even circling elephant seals for a kill, as we did on our second day.



An Elephant Seal pup playing chicken with a hungry Orca. Iain Campbell

Seeing elephant seals up close and personal is a given. Yes there are rules about approaching wildlife, and you keep your distance, repeat, keep YOUR distance. However, sit still and they will often come to you. We had a young female Elephant Seal take a shine to us. She started by hoping out of the water to come and bite my boot. I thought that was cool so I stayed still. She then came up and nudged me, which I thought was magical. Now I have nothing against fat lasses, but when she flopped onto me I realized just how heavy she was and thought it was time to end our short relationship.

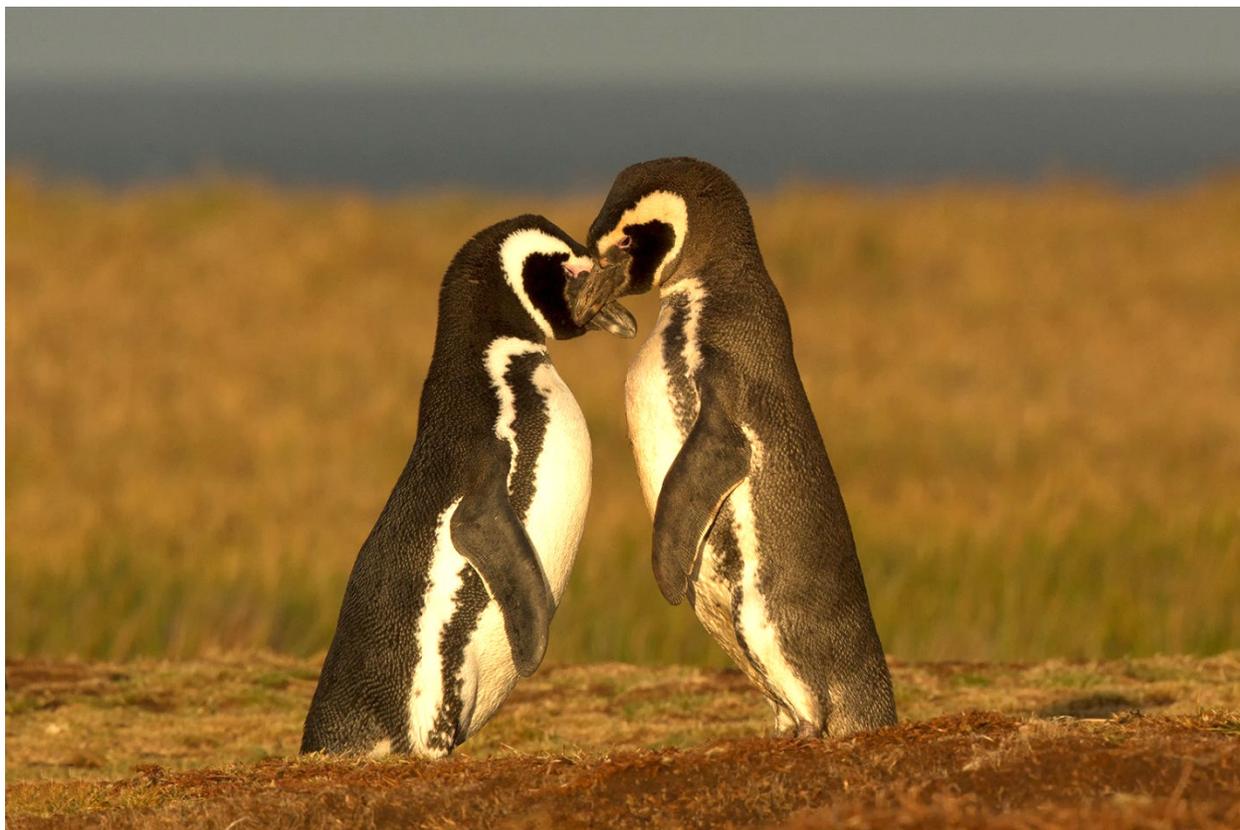


I had never heard of marine mammals with a foot fetish before. Iain Campbell

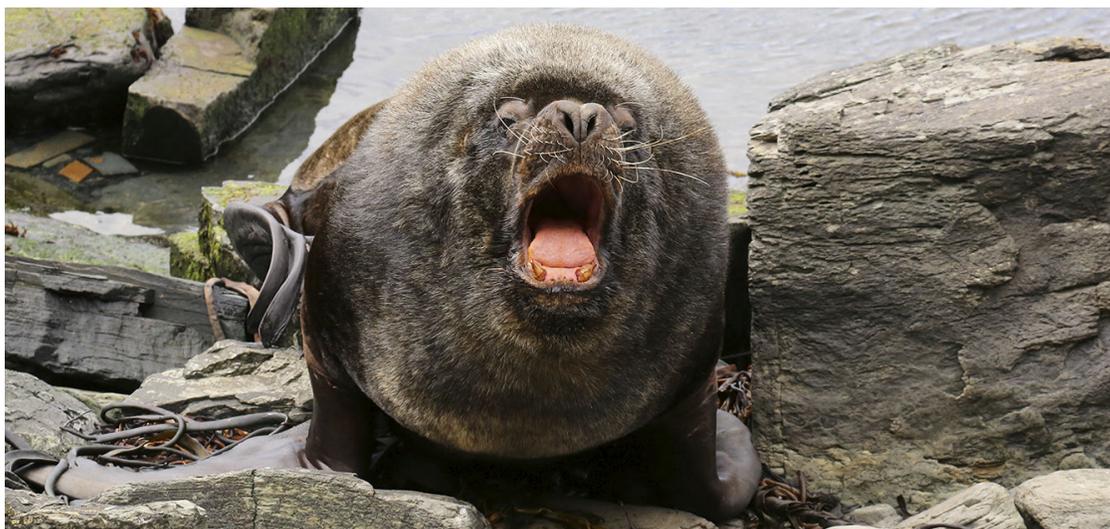


Lucky my wife is not a jealous woman because this filly was flirting like crazy. Michael Jeffords

Quizzical Magellanic Penguins bray at dawn and dusk, startled in the tussac, or just playing on a sea shelf, so you almost always go back out after dinner for that superb evening light. We observed Gentoo Penguins porpoise out of the water and then follow the line back to the colony. Be wary of the Brown Skua's as they patrol the penguin colonies and the Sea Lions at the beach can “run” faster than you.



A pair of magellanic penguins doing a change of shift at the nest. Iain Campbell



This Sea Lion was not only mean, but had appalling breath. Iain Campbell

Heading inland (well 200 yards) on Sea Lion Island provided us with a load of other opportunities. We staked out one pond for some Silvery Grebes that were feeding with young on their backs. We relocated the Falklands race of the Short-eared Owl, the Peregrine falcon and the Arctic Skua.



A Gentoo Penguin coming ashore at dusk on Sea Lion Island. Iain Campbell



Silvery Grebe feeding another with young on its back. Iain Campbell

Heed the warning to bring plenty of memory cards and a device to download photos, as each day we shot hundreds to even thousands of images. A photo trip to the Falklands is like eating a bag of chips, no one could ever just take one!



King Penguin is one of the coolest birds on the planet. Iain Campbell