

A [Tropical Birding Tours](#) SET DEPARTURE **Birding with a Camera®** Tour



SUMMARY and SPECIES LIST

FALKLAND ISLANDS BwC

December 2023

Text and photos by ANDRES VASQUEZ N., the guide for this tour



This is probably my favorite photo of all time: a group of King Penguins (photo above) heading towards the ocean from the famous Volunteer Point Colony in Eastern Island.

INTRODUCTION: The following is a short summary of the 2023 Falkland Islands Birding with a Camera® Tour I led during the first half of December. It was one of my favorite tours I have ever guided for countless reasons. Some of these were the incredible landscapes (with cliffs overlooking the ocean and inexplicable rock formations in the mountainous parts of the islands), huge numbers of approachable wildlife, the history of the 1982 war, the quirkiness of the islands, the relaxed and super nice locals, and good food too.



A baby **Elephant Seal** (photo above) "greeting" me when I approached for a photo

After having guided my first tour in the Falklands, I **cannot understand why this is not a much more popular destination** for birding and bird photography. With an extraordinary amount of wildlife along the beaches and the interior moorlands, there are endless photographic opportunities and colossal amounts of quality-time with curious and gorgeous birds. This translates into having awesome encounters and not only just record shots, no, I am talking about being able to get amazing photos (repeatedly) of virtually every species recorded during the tour including some of the world's neatest birds and animals. As a matter of fact, it has been very hard for me to pick up my favorite photos to show in this trip report due to the vast number of them obtained during the two weeks we spent touring around the marvelous archipelago. BTW, this trip report is not going to have a day-by-day narration since the wildlife is vastly distributed along the islands and it's pointless when we had already found 95% of our total trip list in the first 3 days of the tour; the beauty of this tour comes from being able to spend time with the incredibly approachable and fantastic wildlife.

LAYOUT OF THE TRIP: This two-week long trip covers the main spots of four different islands of this remote archipelago. With only one commercial flight a week into the Falklands, we need to spend two weeks to really do justice to this destination since one week would feel way too short. To start describing the tour, check out the map I photographed inside the FIGAS Airport (Falkland Islands Government Air Service) in Stanley to create the route map of our tour (see below). In order to travel between islands, we used the small airplanes of FIGAS that allow up to 8 people (including pilot) on each plane. Depending on the island you visit, the allowance may drop to 5-6 people due to the length of the respective island landing strips. It is obvious that the weight limitation is a factor to consider but we worked around it by leaving stuff in our "base" hotel in Stanley when visiting other islands for a few days.



The day after arriving on our international flights to the main island, **Eastern Island**, where the capital **Stanley** lays, we took our first flight to **Pebble Island** located on the western portion of the archipelago. A few days after we headed back to Stanley for a night and then we flew to **Bleaker Island** for a few days, and then on to **Sea Lion Island** for other four nights. During the last few days based out of Stanley, we took a couple daytrips to the famous **Volunteer Point** and **Murrel Farm**. We did not have to use any boats during this tour. Due to lack of availability, we could not visit Saunders Island and its breeding colony of Black-browed Albatrosses but we saw and photographed plenty of them in flight from close distance in various places. This also meant that in all the lodges that we stayed, we had the comfort of full board of meals and did not have to deal with bringing and preparing our own food as is required on Saunders.

In order to reach many sites, we used old but reliable Land Rovers with high clearance, either driven by locals or at times even by me where there were actual roads (but not in the areas where you make your own track, where even the local drivers get stuck from time to time - see photo on next page.)



It only took a little while to get us out of this little misfortune. I was not driving in this one.

These rides offer a some great adventure, and they are quite memorable in various respects. Some rides are very bumpy and a bit uncomfortable since these cars are not super spacious but for the most part the amazing suspensions provide a surprisingly smooth journey. It's the only way of reaching sites like Volunteer Point and Murrel Farm for instance; so they are essential.

It is worth mentioning that this tour is a great alternative for people that want to see the amazing austral wildlife like penguins, seals, orcas, albatrosses, etc., without the expense and possible seasickness of an expedition cruise. This is for sure a comfortable and more relaxed alternative. On this tour we use small planes, which although they can be intimidating for the first timers, the pilots are among the best in the world and the standards of security on this flights are very high and they would never fly in dangerous conditions. This is precisely why there needs to be flexibility and patience on travel days because the schedules of the flights vary tremendously depending on the weather and winds.

Each small island has its own landing strip which is maintained by the owners of the lodges where we stayed at. They are the ones in charge of providing the info on winds and visibility for the landing of the planes. It is amazing to land on the on the grassy airstrips of some islands.

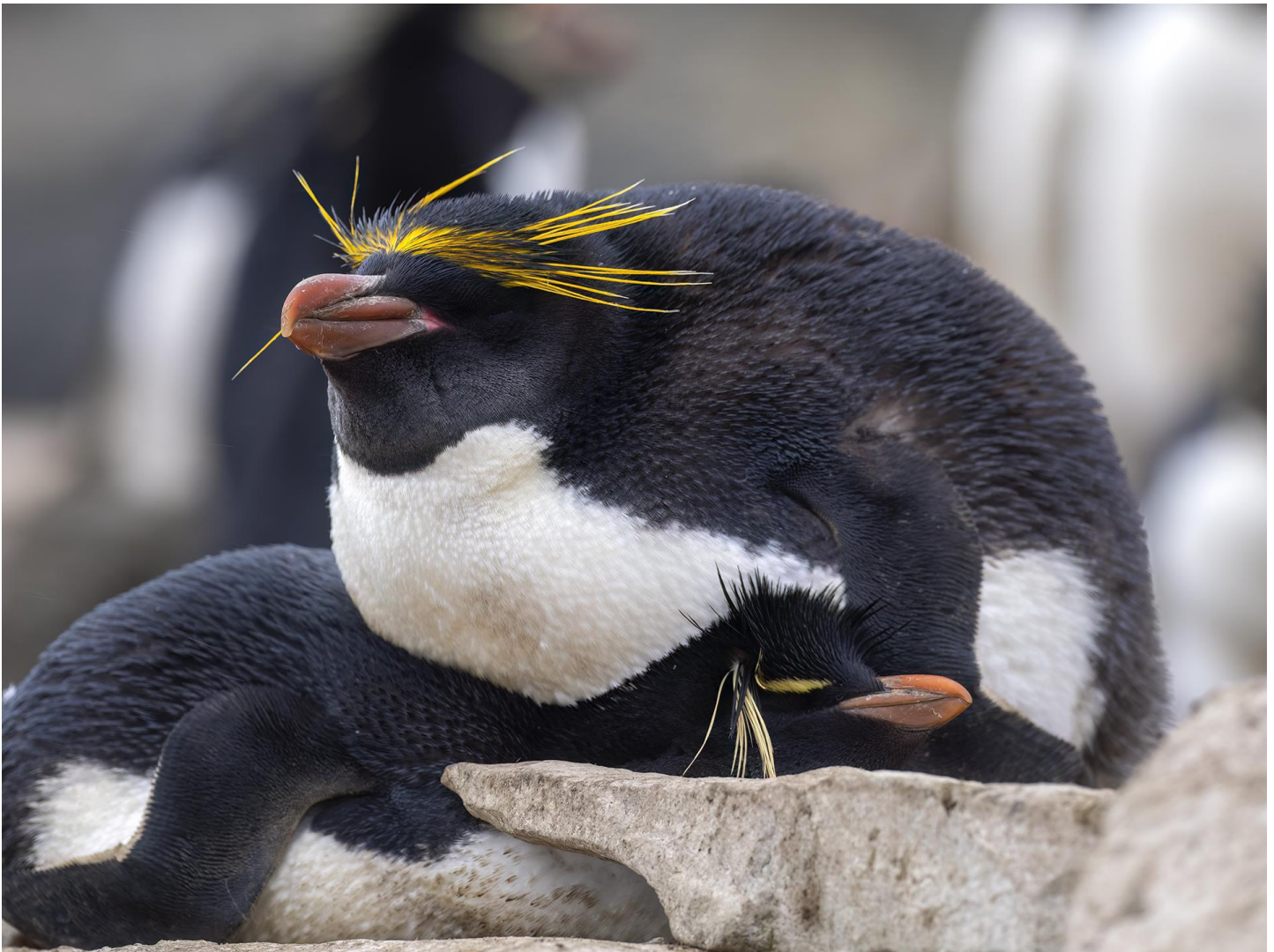


Our group on the first flight to Pebble Is. with Mary Lou as the captain and me as the “co-pilot” (*above*) and our plane Mike Charley (*below*).



BIRDS AND WILDLIFE: The Falklands are for sure not a very diverse birding area but what they lack in variety they more than compensate for in quality, uniqueness, cuteness, and sheer numbers. The eBird lists I created required some serious thinking on the estimations of numbers of various thousands of individuals when we visited the many breeding colonies scattered along the islands. Not only birds were abundant but also colonies of sea lions and elephant seals made the beaches feel crowded at times, and there were even a couple families of Orcas patrolling the southern shores of Sea Lion Island taking advantage of the abundance of potential prey.

That said, the final trip list only reached 51 species of birds but, but, but....., to start with, 6 of those were Penguin species! There were various colonies (of thousands each) of **Southern Rockhopper Penguins**, which for sure were the most charismatic of the bunch. The current estimate of the **King Penguin** colony in Volunteer Point is around 1500+ adult individuals plus over 600 chicks raised each year. There are also many colonies of **Magellanic** and **Gentoo Penguins** in all of the islands we visited, again in four digit counts. The other two species of penguins were scarce and the total number of birds could be counted on one hand. We found 4 or 5 individuals of **Macaroni Penguins** scattered in between the Rockhopper colonies. Lastly, after tweaking the itinerary a bit, we visited Murrel Farm where this one individual of **Moseley's Rockhopper** has been in a hybrid relationship with a Southern Rockhopper for a couple years now.



An adult male **Macaroni Penguin** (photo above) with its mate, a lady **Southern Rockhopper** in affectionate cuddling



*The lonely Moseley's Rockhopper (photo above) having an argument with its Southern Rockhopper mate.
Not sure which is the male here but I had a feeling...*

We also visited various colonies of **Imperial Cormorants**, **Magellanic Cormorants**, and even **Southern Giant Petrels**. With all the huge number of birds laying eggs at this time of the year, various species of predators and opportunistic snatchers were in abundance. **Brown Skuas**, **Dolphin Gulls**, and **Striated Caracaras** are the main menaces for the colonies which try to protect their offspring by defending communally.

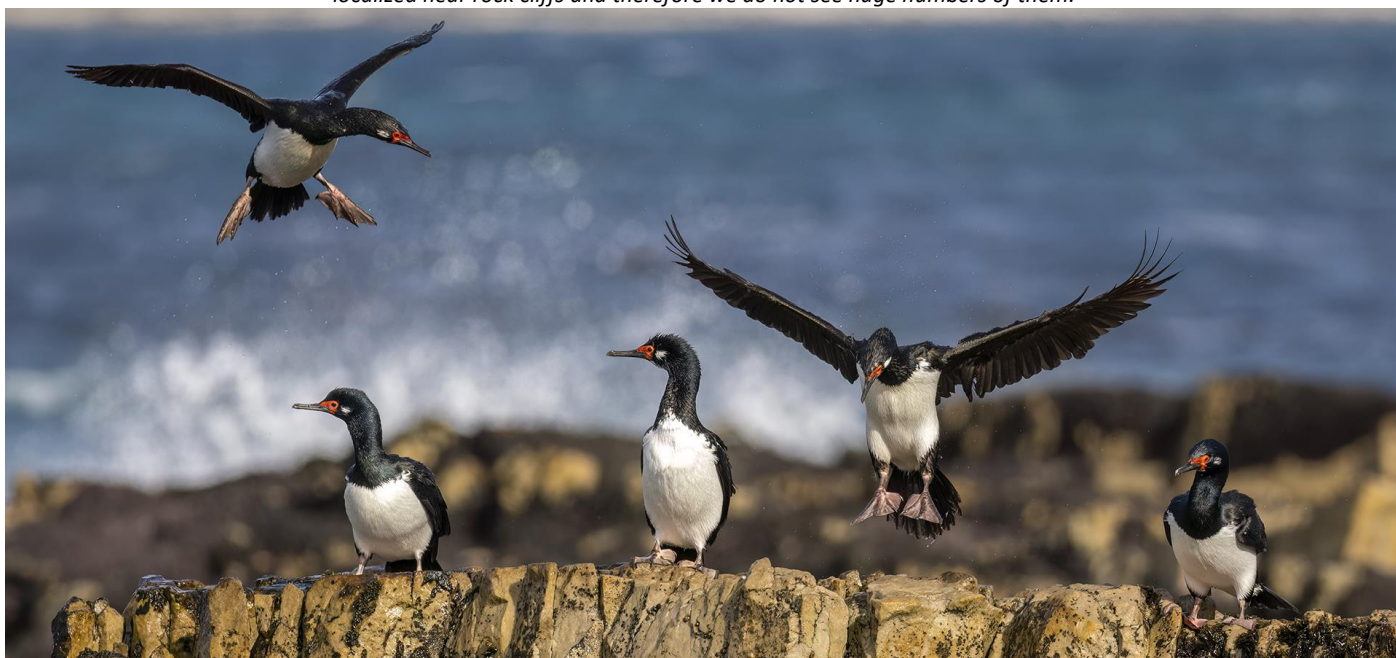


*Dolphin Gulls (photo above) try to snatch eggs or little chicks from the colonies of **Imperial Cormorants** but it gets repelled by sharp bills.
An adult **King Penguin** (photo below) standing tall in between many hundred others in Volunteer Point.*





Colonies of **Southern Rockhopper Penguin** (photo above) are common in most islands, the ones of **Magellanic Cormorants** (photo below) are localized near rock cliffs and therefore we do not see huge numbers of them.



Apart from the colonies of the various species mentioned above, we found large numbers of scattered individuals of various other species like the dazzling **Black-browed Albatross**, the bulky endemic **Falkland Steamer Duck**, **Magellanic Snipes**, **Rufous-breasted Dotterels**, **Two-banded Plovers**, the always desired **Snowy Sheathbill**, two species of **oystercatchers**, and various other non-passerines of which the most abundant were **three species of geese** and other waterfowl. By night (notice that it gets dark at about 10h30pm this time of the year there) we found the endemic subspecies of **Short-eared Owl** and a few **Gray-backed Storm-Petrels** coming into the nesting sites close to midnight.



The passerine lineup is not very abundant or diverse with only about 9 species regular on the islands. For sure the most wanted of them is the endemic **Cobbs's Wren** (photo above) which is one of the two endemic birds of the islands. This wren is only locally common in the few islands that had not suffered from introduced mice or rats.

Other notable songbirds in the order seen and photographed were the bright **Long-tailed Meadowlark**, the dull **Correndera Pipit**, the common **White-bridled Finch**, **Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant** (the only flycatcher of the islands), the small **Black-chinned Siskin**, the tame **Austral Thrush**, the surf-loving **Blackish Cinclodes** (which is among the southernmost passerines in the world) and an endemic subspecies of **Grass Wren**.

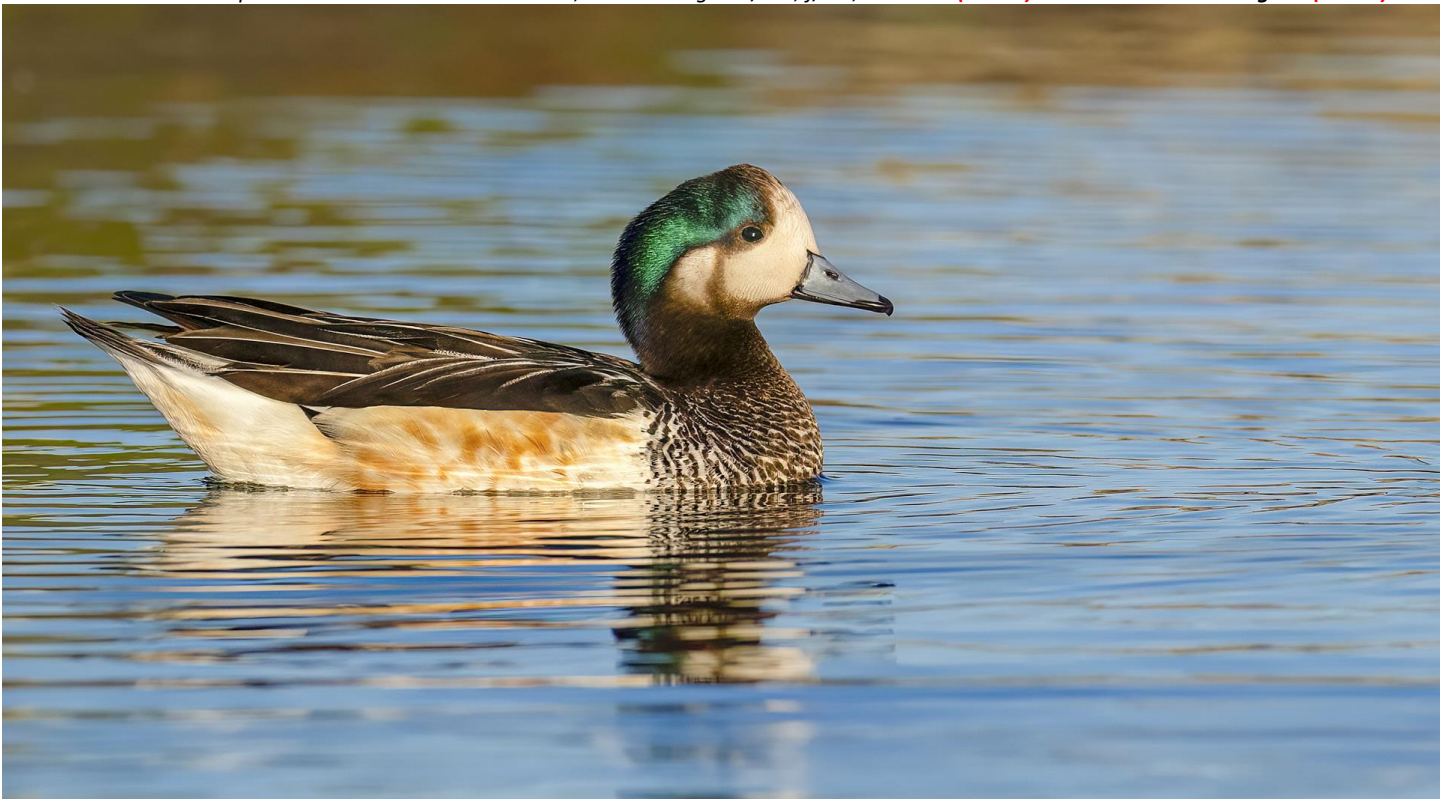


The scary looking **Southern Giant-Petrel** (above) and **White-brikkled Finch** (below)





Short-eared Owl – photo was shot almost in darkness, handholding at 1/13s, f/4.0, ISO 3200 (**above**) and the nice *Chiloe Wigeon* (**below**)





Blackish Cinclodes (above) and a gorgeous individual of *Rufous-chested Dotterel* (below)



Besides the birds, the mammals were a huge part of the amazing wildlife experience this trip is all about. One of the best moments that we had on the tour (my personal favorite in fact), was the “Nat Geo” time we had with **Orcas** (*photos below*). We spent three very early sunrises (4h15am) scanning the oceans from South Beach on Sea Lion Island where a family of Orcas were patrolling almost daily in the waters in front of a colony of Elephant Seals. One of the mornings we had an incredible show when the Orcas caught a young seal and for about 45 minutes they were using it to teach the young member of the orca family how to hunt, catch and ultimately kill a seal. They seemed to be playing with the poor animal keeping it alive but tossing it from side to side giving the youngsters a lesson. See the IG Video Reel I created of this moment here: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2QzHCbRwxb/?igsh=dnM0ZWVva3VzOHg2>



FAVORITE PHOTOS OF THE TRIP: All the previous photos shown above (besides the King Penguin photo on the cover page) are not even my favorite pictures I took during the tour. I decided to save the best for last in this trip report. I'll post my best photos chronologically below. I hope you enjoy them.



A Magellanic Oystercatcher (photo above) was very tame in a beautiful grassy field in Pebble Island



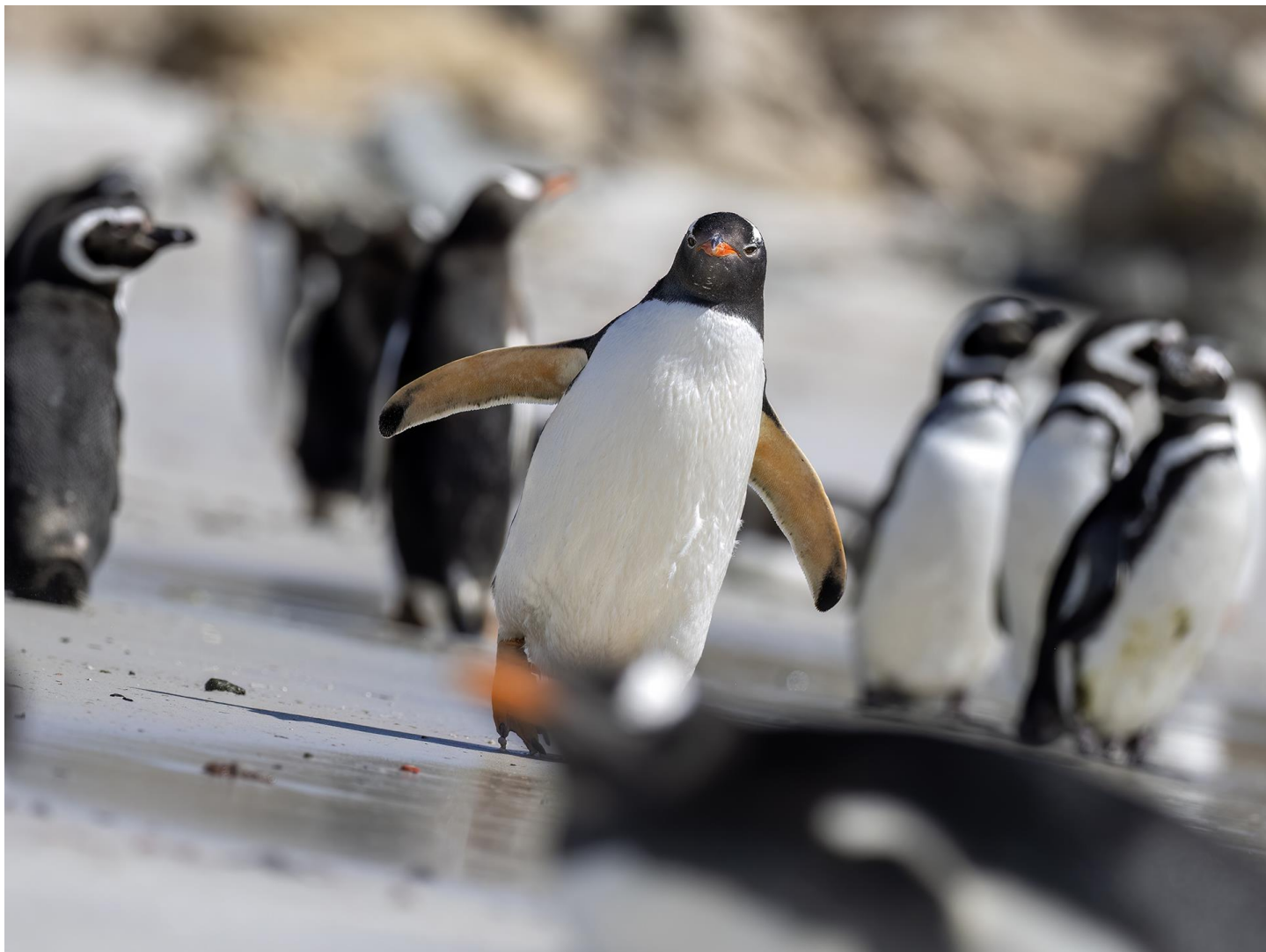
Magellanic Penguins (above) dig burrows in soft terrain to have their nests in Pebble Island



Upland Geese (above) not intimidated by the breaking waves: a mom ventured onto a rocky shore filled with kelp with two chicks



*Birds in flight are common subjects to photograph on these islands, this is a **Magellanic Cormorant** (above).*



A very confident looking **Gentoo Penguin** (*above*) walks with personality along the beach of Pebble island raising eyebrows from other penguins. I imagine this scene with the soundtrack of Disco Science by Mirwais



*This other **Gentoo Penguin** (**above**) runs away instead.*



*In the colonies of **Gentoos** (**above**) some individuals do a display call from time to time.*



Black-browed Albatrosses (above) can be photographed from a few cliffs overlooking the oceans as they come in good numbers close to shore doing maybe recognition flights or maybe some sort of display.....



The locally named Johnny Rook or **Striated Caracara** (*above*) is one of the most intelligent birds in the world according to some recent studies. They surely look very smart and menacing



*Our first encounter with **King Penguins** (above) was not in a colony but out of coincidence on a white sandy beach in Pebble Island.*



*With faces that only a mother could love, **Snowy Sheathbills** (above) are seen in various different coasts, both rocky and sandy.*



The endemic **Falkland Steamer Duck** (*above*) doesn't care if the seas are rough when it needs to feed.



*This was the penguin version of the Three Wise Men coming to the first **Southern Rockhopper Penguin colony** (above) we visited.*



Magellanic Penguins (above) overlooking the landscape from their burrows in Pebble Is.



*This was for sure my second favorite photo of the tour and it's up there with my top 3 of all time, **Southern Rockhooper Penguins** (above) from the colony of Pebble Is. These birds are curious.*



A cub **South American Sea Lion** (*above*) peaks from the Tussuck Grass



A mean look from an **Imperial Cormorant** (*above*) on Bleaker Is.



*I dedicated more time to portraits in Bleaker Island and the results were great. **Southern Rockhopper Penguin** (above).*



*I tried to capture both the amazing birds and the absolutely gorgeous landscape of Bleaker Is. in one shot, I think It did a good job here. **Southern Rockhopper Penguin** (above). When you have this much time with these amazing creatures you start trying to be creative with your shots*



Even some typically difficult birds to find are quite obliging in the Falklands. This is a **Magellanic Snipe** (above) from Bleaker Is.



*The sandy beaches of Bleaker Island host plenty of **Gentoo Penguins** (above) that run around all over the place*



Ruddy-headed Geese (above) are common on some of the islands, particularly on Bleaker Is.



*The gorgeous late afternoon light (9pm really) is awesome for **Long-tailed Meadowlarks** (above) on Bleaker Is.*



A portrait of Johnny Rook (Striated Caracar) (above) on Sea Lion Is.



A common shorebird in the islands, seen both in the grassy fields and Moorland and along the beaches of Sea Lion Is: **Two-banded Plover** (above)



*You can never get enough of **Southern Rockhopper Penguins** (above) especially if you have many angles to try to photograph them from in the colony of Sea Lion Is.*



A Blackish Oystercatcher (above) hiding in the shadows at Sea Lion Is.



South Beach on Sea Lion Is. is now one of my favorite places on Earth **(above)**.

So much wildlife happens at once, it is overwhelming, a sensory overload when you have Elephant Seals on territorial fights, two species of Penguins scattered along the sandy beach, and a few gulls, sheathbills, and giant petrels adorning the photo taken with gorgeous dawn light



There are many heart-melting moments when you are observing the colonies of penguins, probably the babies of Gentoo (*above*) are the cutest.



*The breathtaking views over the **rocky cliffs of Sea Lion Is.** are nearly unbeatable **(above)***

Just to finish, see below some photos with our tour participants enjoying the place!!! And right after, the final trip list.

For more photos and videos of this fascinating trip, follow our social networks and YouTube channel.



FINAL LIST:

A total of **51** species of **BIRDS** were recorded on this tour. Out of this total, only 1 was seen only by the Tour Leader. In terms of **MAMMALS**, we recorded **5** species only but nearly all were incredibly memorable. See the final list below:

Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)

1	Black-necked Swan	<i>Cygnus melancoryphus</i>
2	Upland Goose	<i>Chloephaga picta</i>
3	Kelp Goose	<i>Chloephaga hybrida</i>
4	Ruddy-headed Goose	<i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>
5	Flying Steamer-Duck	<i>Tachyeres patachonicus</i>
6	Falkland Steamer-Duck (Endemic)	<i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>
7	Crested Duck	<i>Lophonetta specularioides</i>
8	Silver Teal	<i>Spatula versicolor</i>
9	Chiloe Wigeon	<i>Mareca sibilatrix</i>
10	Yellow-billed Pintail	<i>Anas georgica</i>
11	Yellow-billed Teal	<i>Anas flavirostris</i>

Grebes (Podicipedidae)

12	White-tufted Grebe	<i>Rollandia rolland</i>
13	Silvery Grebe	<i>Podiceps occipitalis</i>

Sheathbills (Chionidae)

14	Snowy Sheathbill	<i>Chionis albus</i>
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Oystercatchers (Haematopodidae)

15	Blackish Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ater</i>
16	Magellanic Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus leucopodus</i>

Plovers and Lapwings (Charadriidae)

17	Two-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius falklandicus</i>
18	Rufous-chested Dotterel	<i>Charadrius modestus</i>

Sandpipers and Allies (Scolopacidae)

19	White-rumped Sandpiper	<i>Calidris fuscicollis</i>
20	Magellanic Snipe	<i>Gallinago magellanica</i>

Skuas and Jaegers (Stercorariidae)

21	Brown Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>
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Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)

22	Brown-hooded Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus maculipennis</i>
23	Dolphin Gull	<i>Leucophaeus scoresbii</i>
24	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>
25	South American Tern	<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>

Penguins (Spheniscidae)

26	King Penguin	<i>Aptenodytes patagonicus</i>
27	Gentoo Penguin	<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>
28	Magellanic Penguin	<i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>
29	Macaroni Penguin - VU	<i>Eudyptes chrysolophus</i>
30	Southern Rockhopper Penguin - VU	<i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>

Albatrosses (Diomedidae)

31	Black-browed Albatross	<i>Thalassarche melanophris</i>
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Southern Storm-Petrels (Oceanitidae)

32	Gray-backed Storm-Petrel	<i>Garrodia nereis</i>
	Shearwaters and Petrels (Procellariidae)	
33	Southern Giant-Petrel	<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>
34	Southern Fulmar (Leader seen only)	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
	Cormorants and Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
35	Magellanic Cormorant	<i>Leucocarbo magellanicus</i>
36	Imperial Cormorant	<i>Leucocarbo atriceps</i>
	Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
37	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
	New World Vultures (Cathartidae)	
38	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
	Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
39	Variable Hawk	<i>Geranoaetus polyosoma</i>
	Owls (Strigidae)	
40	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
	Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)	
41	Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>
42	Striated Caracara	<i>Daptrius australis</i>
	Ovenbirds and Woodcreepers (Furnariidae)	
43	Blackish Cinclodes	<i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>
	Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae)	
44	Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant	<i>Muscisaxicola maclovianus</i>
	Wrens (Troglodytidae)	
45	Cobb's Wren (Endemic)	<i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>
46	Grass Wren	<i>Cistothorus platensis</i>
	Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)	
47	Austral Thrush	<i>Turdus falcklandii</i>
	Wagtails and Pipits (Motacillidae)	
48	Correndera Pipit	<i>Anthus correndera</i>
	Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)	
49	Black-chinned Siskin	<i>Spinus barbatus</i>
	Troupials and Allies (Icteridae)	
50	Long-tailed Meadowlark	<i>Leistes loyca</i>
	Tanagers and Allies (Thraupidae)	
51	White-bridled Finch	<i>Melanodera melanodera</i>
	MAMMALS	
	Marine dolphins (Delphinidae)	
1	Commerson's dolphin	<i>Cephalorhynchus commersonii</i>
2	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
	Eared seals, sealions (Otariidae)	
3	South American fur seal	<i>Arctophoca australis</i>
4	South American sea lion	<i>Otaria flavescens</i>
5	Southern elephant seal	<i>Mirounga leonina</i>