

Falkland Islands

A circumnavigation

December 3-17, 2016

Tour Report

PARTICIPANTS



Guests:

Jenny & Graham, UK
Ian and Anne, UK (USA)
Malcolm, UK
John, USA
Jack, USA

Guides:

Morten & Nozomi, as NozoMojo

Crew:

Dion, Juliette & Toby, Falklands



SUMMARY



Our extensive Falkland Island tour was a major success! Our group of 12 persons on board was delightfully enthusiastic, active, dedicated and good humoured. Our lovely crew of 3 on the rugged "Hans Hansson" were professional, chill and fun in just the right mix. We were very well taken care of indeed. And our 7 guests were simply good company in every way.

The weather was variable, as can be expected of a Falklands summer. What potentially adverse conditions we faced were expertly turned to our advantage by everyone involved. The mix of weather we had not only gave us the real deal, but sometimes made for extra dramatic wildlife scenes and photography. The Falklands were living through a prolonged drought during our stay, which reflected on the occurrence of some species, but our sightings added up to nothing short of spectacular never-the-less. The species lists here, the daily summary, and the included photos - will all reflect a highly successful voyage in all ways.

The eight species of mammal we encountered were equally divided between pinnipeds and cetaceans. Apart from the Sei Whale, which was not definitely identified, we saw them all really well. We managed to squeeze 59 species of bird out of the islands, of which we can thank Malcolm for several.

We are happy to take requests for a repeat voyage, but must face the current reality that the "Hans Hansson" is sold out in 2018 and cannot be booked for 2019. Never-the-less, we shall keep our focus on the islands and any opportunity that may arise for a copying of this wonderful adventure.



Logistics:

On December 3, at 0745, we flew with LATAM from Santiago via Punta Arenas to Mount Pleasant in the Falklands. Or that was plan A. High northerly winds (rare) meant that upon our arrival in Punta Arenas, we were informed that the onward flight was postponed until the next day. LATAM was only going to compensate hotels and meals for those who opted to fly back to Santiago, so we all did. We were installed in Santiago hotels by around 2200. The positive outcome of the drama was that two of our passengers this way managed to get reunited with their bags back in Santiago, which had otherwise not made it with them on the journey.

On December 4, at 0400, we were at it again - and this time, we made it. After a few hours of waiting in Punta Arenas, we boarded the flight to Mount Pleasant, and once there and having cleared immigration, we were shuttled by Penguin Travel past soft rolling hilly landscapes of stone runs and low shrub to our home for the coming 13 days, arriving at 1530 at the M/V "Hans Hansson", docked right in town in Port Stanley. The "Hans Hansson" is a very seaworthy vessel, originally built as a rescue boat. The experience on board is very personal, intimate, friendly. The wheelhouse is small, and often the boat rocks so much, that it is better for guests to be one deck down (or two). The communal area for drinking, eating, socializing, napping etc. is small but cozy. The cabins are small but comfortable. The bathrooms work as they must. The aft deck is an awesome place to hang out while cruising, and not a bad place for a sundowner either. The meals on board were very basic (breakfasts) to varied (lunches; depending on our itinerary, several times we opted for a packed lunch in order to stay out longer) to absolutely delightful (dinners).

The distance from ship to shore was almost every time very short indeed, those people know their anchorages and the capabilities of their ship. The shuttle to shore in the tiny little Zodiac was usually done by one of the crew, but a couple of times NozoMojo drove us around for short cruises too.

In the evening of December 16, we were back in the very same spot in Port Stanley where it had all begun. At 1000 the next morning, we were shuttled back to Mount Pleasant, and a rather disorganized and tedious check-in procedure ensued. Once again, the winds were high, easily gale force in gusts, but today the direction was not north, so no cancellations necessary. 5 hours later, we were airborne. Our Falkland adventure was over.



DIARY WITH ITINERARY AND WEATHER

NOZOMOJO

Dec 3:

Santiago - Punta Arenas - Santiago.
High winds from N had closed the airport at Mount Pleasant.

Dec 4:

Santiago - Punta Arenas - Mount Pleasant - Port Stanley - departure 2300 for Sea Lion Island.
4/8 (cloud cover). Mostly sunny. Force 4-5 (Beaufort) from the W, 2+ meter swell and a rough night!

At the boat, we briefly met our crew (Dion, Juliette and Toby), then we had free time to visit West Store for last minute supplies, or a gift shop, or just roam the waterfront and the oddly more-English-than-England streets. At 1900, we had a safety briefing by Dion, a housekeeping ditto by Juliette, and then we proceeded into a gin-and-tonic and some chatting about the days to come. A very welcome welcome dinner was soon served, and Nozomi handed out NozoMojo t-shirts and species lists.

The weather forecast looked promising for Sea Lion Island tomorrow, but it would probably be a rough night's crossing to get there, against the swell of today's winds. And as the crew had already by now told us many times: This boat rocks!



Falkland Islands 2016
NozoMojo Tours & Arts



Dec 5:

Ashore Sea Lion Island 1100-2000. Superb day!
2/8, sunny. 10-15 C. Light variable winds.

It was a rough night. All of us either did not sleep much in the night or only slept lightly. And it continued into the morning, our planned 0700 arrival became 1000. In the night, our speed had been slowed to 4 knots at times, the swells were rolling us too much to push any harder. The winds were easing since last night, but the sea takes longer to calm - gradually, it got better, but we did not really begin to feel comfortable until we were off the sheltered north side of Sea Lion Island.

We were at Cow Point, and what a contrast! After that night, we were treated to a glorious day of mostly sunshine, light variable winds and temperatures from 10-15 degrees C. The conditions were perfect for a full day on the island, which we enjoyed between 1100 and 2000 - only interrupted by a quick lunch stop on board.

The low island with its varied coastline of rocky shores and sandy beaches, and with solid stands of tussock grass, provides a haven for numerous species of bird and mammal. There are no sheep here, and there are no rats, so no unnatural over-grazing and no unnatural ground predators. Almost all of the Falkland Island songbirds are on the island, some of them in good numbers. We saw both the wrens, the thrush, the cinclodes or Tussock Bird (VERY abundant), the finch, the siskin and the ground tyrant. We also enjoyed good views of the snipe. But all these competed for attention with the many penguins (Gentoo and Magellanic). And the giant petrels. And the geese and ducks. And the birds of prey. And so on and so on. Ian got as far as the south-western end of the island to enjoy the Rockhopper Penguins and the Blue-eyed / King / Imperial Shags / Cormorants there. Others got as far north as the remains of the Orca on the beach, surrounded by hundreds of scavengers.

A highlight (at least for Malcolm) were the South American Sea Lions. The huge beastly males impressed, and their roar was indeed not un-lion-like. A major highlight at Sea Lion Island for everyone were the Southern Elephant Seals. Hundreds of "weeners", recently weened pups, littered the beaches, round-eyed, adoring and cute. Groups of immature and sub-adult males lay about molting. There was enough action at any given moment, snorting, farting, play-fighting, scratching, sand-lobbing. Researchers and volunteers are doing a long-term study of the species here, and we saw that just about every single animal had been handled, wearing a coloured tag on their hind flippers.





Dec 6:

Ashore Bird Island 0800-1700. Stunning experience! Then by ship past Horse Block to Beaver Island and a sheltered anchorage from 2000.

0/8 & sunny turning 6/8 afternoon. 12-18 C. Force 2-3 SW backing f4 S afternoon/evening.

After a pleasant night, we approached Bird Island in the morning, with sunshine hitting the cliffs and tussock-covered hills. As we anchored, a flock of Rockhopper Penguins swam about the boat. After a quick breakfast and time to make a sandwich for lunch, we went ashore to enjoy a most amazing day on this tiny island, hardly ever visited by humans at all. As Dion explained, this island is practically untouched, has never been grazed, and is probably a rare remnant of what the Falklands were like before discovery.

Once ashore, we had the freedom to roam about among the prolific wildlife, avoiding only the tussocky hills with their hidden petrel burrows. Everywhere, there were albatrosses nesting, calling, and flying. Everywhere, there were caracaras, bands of them, gangs, flocks. Inquisitive and bold, they were all around us at all times - but quick to take off and join others when a meal opportunity occurred. Everywhere, there were fur seals braying, sleeping, giving birth, fighting, and traveling between shore and higher ground. We soon learned how to behave around them - move slowly, give them some space, and if approached, stand your ground. The day slipped by, we had 8 hours ashore, and there was not a dull moment. Jenny photographed a Falkland Skua eating a prion. Malcolm saw a tide pool turn red as an unfortunate fur seal fell prey to an adult male sea lion. The Southern Giant Petrels were quick to join in. A fur seal birth on a distant hillside immediately became the scene of caracaras, Turkey Vultures and skuas eating the afterbirth. And there were Rockhoppers, coming ashore and hopping their way even high onto the hillsides in little groups, or simply standing around or incubating eggs.



Near the landing site, on a little headland, from the Zodiac we saw colonies of King Shags, Rock Shags, Dolphin Gulls and Black-crowned Night Herons, and there was a cave-like fissure in the rock with the most incredibly painted walls.

It had already been a full day, but it continued - we motored towards the north-east, to find some lee overnight - along the way, we had a Southern Royal Albatross fly by, and we paused the boat for a few minutes at the magnificent Horse Block, a dramatic sea stack off the shores of Weddell Island. The winds increased towards evening, and we headed in among the many islands that led us to our anchorage off Beaver Island.

Dec 7:

Beaver Island to New Island 0800-0930, ashore Coffin's Harbour and settlement 1000-1330, ashore North Harbour 1600-2000, night watch from the ship until 2300. A long, full and wonderful day!
4/8 to 8/8 overcast, afternoon showers with hail. 8-10 C. Force 6-7 S.

After a very peaceful night, we anchored up after breakfast and moved north to New Island. Along the way, we saw many Wilson's Storm-petrels, as well as many other birds. On the twin stacks called the Colliers, we could see fur seals, shags, skuas, gulls. We found shelter in Coffin Harbour and soon headed ashore next to the wrecked ship on the beach. A short walk across the meadows, complete with short grass, rabbits, and Upland and Ruddy-headed Geese, led us to the spectacular amphitheater of the cliffs of the western side of the island, battered by the sea, and covered in King Shags, Rockhopper Penguins and Black-browed Albatrosses. The wind was strong, but we were semi-sheltered. A few rainsqualls, even one with hail, passed by, interspersed with sunny spells. The hours went by fast, and soon we were having a delicious warm soup and other lunch goodies on board.

Malcom, Toby and Nozomi decided to walk the 4-5 km from this southern more bay to the north, while the rest of us had a quiet hour after lunch on board. Then at 1600, we landed in North Harbour, on the beach, right next to a Leopard Seal! Also, in the water, we saw a sea lion throwing a Magellanic Penguin about. There were groups of Magellanic Oystercatchers flying about, and one pair of Blackish Oystercatcher holding a territory on the beach. But the main attraction this afternoon were the many Gentoo Penguins, and their coming ashore on the north beach. The winds were howling something fierce, blowing the sand across the plains and clearly into the penguins' eyes - but they persisted. They were coming, and they were going - and of course many were incubating or sitting on their chicks. At the beach, we spent most of the afternoon, photographing and enjoying the flocks of penguins, gradually building in numbers, checking the shoreline time and again, before suddenly deciding to catapult themselves out of the water and onto the sand. Obviously, with the strong offshore winds, there was no swell - but they still jumped high and clear. The time flew by, and we reluctantly headed back over the hill, into the winds, and back "home" to the "Hans Hansson".

After dinner, we were still at anchor, and once it was dark, we did turn on the ship's spotlight, to see Thin-billed Prions flying through the beam. Most had gone to bed before, but Ian and Nozomi and Morten enjoyed the spectacle of a few hundred prions, both in the beam of the searchlight and in the beam of the half moon. It was late before the day ended.





Dec 8:

New Island to West Point ca. 0300-0800, ashore West Point 0930-1330, Ship's cruise around West Point 1400-1600, ashore at Grave Cove 1700-1900. A different and very varied day!
7-8/8. 10 C. Force 4-5 S dropping to f2 and swinging to WSW. Rain afternoon.

In the night, we headed the four hours north to West Point Island. Malcolm was on deck from 0600 and enjoyed Peale's Dolphins, Common Diving Petrels and much more. Over breakfast, we anchored in the sheltered east-facing bay of the settlement, we enjoyed the views of the island, and soon we headed ashore to be greeted by Allan White, manager of the island. Accompanying him was Lucky, the lamb that behaves like a dog, and Bosun, the dog that behaves like a lamb. Allan briefed us on the history of the island, and invited us to enjoy the colonies of Black-browed Albatrosses and Rock-hopper Penguins on the west side, on the huge cliffs. Most of us drove over there with Allan in his Land Rover, a few walked. Once there, we spent the rest of the morning enjoying close encounters with the birds. There was a newly hatched albatross chick in one nest, and many of the penguins were on chicks. The albatrosses were doing aerial maneuvers all around us, almost touching our heads at times, and the winds were gentle. Overcast, 12-15 degrees, a light drizzle at the end, timed perfectly for the pick-up by Allan. Soon we said good-bye and headed back for another delicious lunch on board.

After lunch, we cruised with the ship around West Point Island. Dion took us up really close to the cliffs and caves, and we enjoyed great views of albatrosses in their gullies, rock formations, and now low cloud. It began to rain a little, but that didn't prevent us from staying out. Soon we were rewarded by the presence of first two, later about eight, Peale's Dolphins, and the latter group particularly entertained us by bow-riding for more than half an hour. A few times, one of them breached right out of the water in front of the boat. The drizzle continued, and we continued over to Grave Cove, on mainland West Falkland, and here we went ashore for two hours, spending most of that time watching the Gentoos coming in in the surf. There were also hundreds of geese, both Upland and Ruddy-headed in large numbers. Back on board, we had a few drinks, a lovely dinner, and then did our species list. We had a early night, in the expectation of a possible early start tomorrow.

Dec 9:

Ashore Grave Cove 0445-0700, cruise to Carcass Island 0830-1030, ashore Leopard Beach across to the settlement 1300-1900. Wonderful conditions and surroundings!

1/8 & sunny turning 4/8. 8 C morning to 15 C afternoon. Force 3-4 SW.

Overnight, the front passed, and at 0400, there was hardly a cloud in the sky. The winds were light to moderate, from a westerly direction, and before 0500, most of us were ashore again, to enjoy another couple of hours with the geese, Gentoos, hills and rocks, driftwood and sand.

It was a mild summer's day, and the sun was out most of the morning, during which we cruised towards Carcass Island. But first, before we even had the anchor up, our first pod of Commerson's Dolphins showed up, and they gave us brilliant views as they first swam all around the boat, later accompanied us on the bow and the sides for quite a while.

En route towards Carcass Island, we cruised the shorelines and a few rocks, including one with some 20 South American Sea Lions on it, and The Needles, nearer to Carcass. We anchored off Leopard Beach, and some had a well-deserved snooze before lunch. After lunch, we went ashore again. The sun was out in strength, but winds were fairly strong from the west. Never-the-less everyone opted for the walk from here to the settlement, some two miles distant. There were hundreds of Magellanic Penguins in large flocks, and good numbers of many of the other Falkland birds with which we had already become well acquainted. Being rat-free, however, Carcass offers greater numbers of the smaller birds than most places. Wrens, finches, meadowlarks, cinclodes, etc. - plenty to enjoy. In the bay, a pod of Peale's Dolphins complete with several young individuals was feeding in the kelp. We took our time, but by 1600 most of us had arrived for the afternoon tea spread offered to us. We enjoyed a chat with Rob McGill, who was very keen to describe the worry that the ongoing drought brings - the water just might run out if the 14-months of lack of rain continue through the summer. While some opted for an early return to the boat, Ian went the full length of the afternoon on shore. At 2000, we had our evening meal, and were looking forward to a quiet and full night's sleep while remaining anchored in the bay.





Dec 10:

Ashore Carcass Island settlement and shuttle to and from Elephant Flat 0830-1315, ship's cruise 1430-1830 via South Jason, Elephant Jason and Grand Jason to Steeple Jason. Awesome adventure!

2/8, sunny. 15 C. Force 4 SW, increasing late to f6 and raising a 3-4 meter swell.

Sunny and warm'ish, the winds were still SW about force 4, but it was only partly cloudy and had a really nice feel. Once ashore, we had a brief stroll to look at Southern Crested Caracara near the nesting tree, then in two Land Rovers we did a lovely drive across the island to the NW corner. Malcolm walked it. Along the way, we could see the dryness of the island, but also enjoy many Tussock Birds, Long-tailed Meadowlarks, Austral Thrushes and the ubiquitous Upland Geese. At the point, more than 100 Southern Elephant Seals were spread out, mostly molting males of various ages. There were also a couple hundred White-rumped Sandpipers, many ducks and geese and oystercatchers. Particularly welcome were good sightings of an adult and an immature Red-backed Hawk. Along the way back, we stopped a couple of times, once near the remains of a baleen whale, probably a Sei, the bones covered in lichens. The other stop was at the only of the island's three ponds that still had some water in it - here were numerous geese and many Speckled Teal, as well as a few Yellow-billed Pintail. We drove back over the hills and down to the settlement, then meandered over to the pier for a pick-up by Zodiac to come on board for lunch.

After lunch, we headed towards the Jasons. It was a four hour crossing, and the seas were rolling! The winds were not extreme, although briefly they were perhaps force 6 in front of a rain squall, but the course we had to take caused a lot of motion of the vessel, and the tidal rips among the Jasons didn't help either. Most spent the hours in the bunks, a few were on deck - enjoying the porpoising South American Fur Seals (there were many hundreds hauled out on a rock near Elephant Jason), the flitting Wilson's Storm-petrels, and the increasing numbers of Black-browed Albatrosses. Come just before 1900, we were in the lee of the islands, and we anchored off the north side of "the neck" at Steeple Jason. The moon was getting fuller, and the sunset was prettily colouring the clouds, and all looked set for a wonderful day tomorrow.



Dec 11:

Ashore Steeple Jason 0830-1830, sunset cruise across to Grand Jason 2100-2200. Outstanding wildlife and wilderness experience all day! 2/8, mostly sunny. 15-18 C. Force 2-3 SW. Just picture perfect, awesome sunset too.

A sunny, reasonably warm (our warmest yet) and fairly calm day greeted us on Steeple Jason. The winds were mild, but strong enough for the albatrosses to be whirling, and the sun was strong enough to make it a thoroughly pleasant day. We were ashore by 0830 and returned after 1800. Malcolm took the southern or western end of the island under foot, walking the entire length of it - one of the prizes he had were very close-up views of two Red-backed Hawks. The rest of us spent the day at the other end, mostly on the southern side, where the southern hemisphere's largest albatross colony resides. Although there were plenty of other spectacles to enjoy - Gentoo Penguins, sea lions, Rockhoppers, Striated Caracaras, scenery, lichens and rock formations, majestic stands of tussock grass to name but a few - the majority of us spent almost the entire day enjoying close encounters with the gentle albatrosses.

The sheer numbers here are almost overwhelming. And in addition, you cannot from anywhere see the entire colony. As you stare at the far-stretching expanses of thousands of albatrosses, you have to imagine the rest! There were chicks just emerged from their eggs, and there were eggs with chicks just emerging. And there was a constant taking off and landing, and wheeling and wheeling.

The Striated Caracaras added their bit to the entertainment. There is something very sobering about large raptors that come to within inches of you, then lay their heads on the side and stare you in the eye.

The sunset this evening was most spectacular, but most were simply too tired or overwhelmed by the day to appreciate it. During sunset, the vessel was moved across to Grand Jason, a few Wilson's Storm-petrels flitting across the fairly mildly rolling seas. It had been a stunning day, a superb nature experience, in Graham's words right up there with such experiences as seeing an Emperor Penguin colony or the Kings of South Georgia!

Dec 12:

Grand Jason with two landings: Sea Lion Beach 0600-0800, by ship a slow cruise around the island to the S end, ashore 1430-1900. Grand scenes with mammals and birds!

6/8 all day. 15 C. Flat calm morning with the winds increasing from the S around 1100 to a force 5 and 2-3 meter swells by afternoon.

We woke up to a still morning, the sun shining through the occasional clouds. It was warmish, a sensation helped by the lack of wind. We landed on the left of a sandy beach on the east side of the north spit of Grand Jason. We were ashore here this morning because it is a South American Sea Lion haul-out beach. Sea lion numbers are growing in the Falklands, perhaps because persecution is easing (it has been illegal for a long time, but farmers have shot many over the years, because "it is what you do"). On the beach (and in the tussock behind), there were perhaps 150 or more males of all ages. Although mighty beasts, they are very sensitive to disturbance, and so we were very cautious in our approach, and remained low-profile at the far end of the area. There were elephant seal sub-adult males molting, and pups as well, some of which played with each other ridiculously close to us. One Southern Giant Petrel gave up its egg, and we realized it too late to do anything about it - the Snowy Shearwaters made a meal of it. Other giant petrels nearby maintained their nests. There was an abundance of other birds in the area too - the Striated Caracara of course (many of which competed for the nutrition to be had from the scat of the sea lions) - White-rumped Sandpipers and Two-banded Plovers found by Malcolm, who circled to the other side of the beach - Cobb's Wrens, one of which came and inspected Graham up close - 10 inches from his face. It was a delightful morning, beginning on the beach at 0600. At 0800, we were back on board for breakfast.





Over the morning, we cruised slowly counter-clockwise around the island, and enjoyed the views not least of the amazing Black-browed Albatross colonies on the south slopes. We eased the ship in towards the cove on the SE corner of the island, but about the same time, 1100, the winds began picking up from the south (as forecast), resulting in a swell that was uncomfortable. We repositioned the boat over to the protected west side of the island. After lunch, the landing was onto kelp-covered rocks (at low tide), and then the walk around to the southern coastline was about a mile long across beautiful mosses, lichens, grasses and flowers.

The spectacle on the south shore was incredible. Not only were there thousands and thousands of Rockhopper Penguins and Black-browed Albatrosses, and hundreds of Southern Giant Petrels, but the drama of the sometimes 4-5 meter swells pounding the rocky shores only added scope to the whole scene. There were at any given moment hundreds of the long wingspans in the air, and the many hundreds of penguins that had recently come in from the sea were standing around on the rocks everywhere, completely oblivious to our presence. Towards evening, new groups began their approach, crashing onto the rocks on the surf and somehow managing to bounce and hop their way up the steep slopes... It was very difficult to tear ourselves away.



Dec 13:

Ashore Steeple Jason 0800-1300, from 1300 across the N side of the Jasons to N side of The Neck, Saunders Island. Fantastic day in the elements!
First overcast, 8/8. A few showers. 10 C. A force 5 from the S pounding the shore-line all morning, then from 1300 turning to SE and easing to f4. In the evening clearing to 2/8 and a bright full moon.

At 0600, Dion anchored up and moved the ship over to "the neck" of Steeple Jason. We had had a gentle night, in the shelter. The crossing was fairly smooth, the island blocking the southerlies. After breakfast, we went ashore for one more experience of Steeple - be it with the sea lions, the Gentoos or the albatrosses, or a fair mix of all. The winds were causing the sea to pound the south shore, and impressive swells crashed against the rocks. This did not prevent some Gentoos from making their way ashore, riding on a swell as far as they could, and then hurrying up higher before the next. Over by the albatross colony, there was lively activity. It seemed there were noticeably more chicks now than just two days ago. And there were many birds in the air, and those who wanted got their shots of birds landing and taking off. The completely overcast conditions of the morning began giving way around 1300 to a clearing sky, the winds shifting slightly to SE. People came back to the ship with stories of albatrosses so close that when taking off, their wings hit them - and of caracaras knocking hats off.

After lunch, we headed back east - Dion and Juliette set a course which took us north of the Jasons, and that combined with the fortunate change of wind direction meant that the dreaded crossing was not too bad at all. Most managed a good snooze, those on deck enjoyed porpoising fur seals, some diving petrels and Sooty Shearwaters, lots of albatrosses and shags, and Malcolm managed to snap a few shots of a couple of Great Shearwaters - new bird for the trip. Later in the day, after we had arrived at a fairly sheltered anchorage off The Neck, at Saunders Island, Malcolm added another bird to the list - he found that he had unknowingly photographed a Black-bellied Storm-petrel earlier in the day!

Another evening meal was thoroughly enjoyed on board accompanied by a few drinks. It was a full moon night, but alas some bands of cloud hid the moon after dinner. We turned in early, planning an early start again tomorrow.





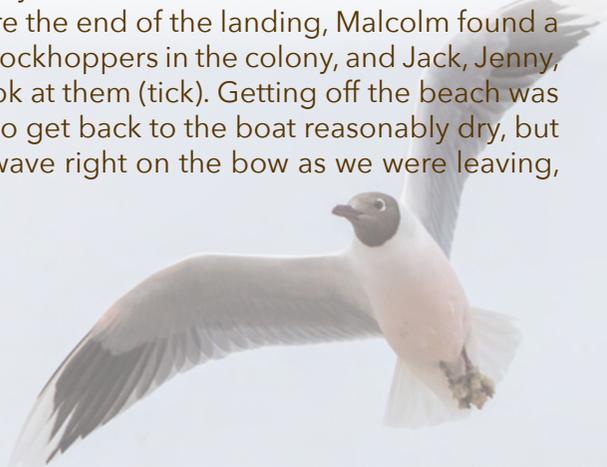
Dec 14:

Ashore 0730-1230 at The Neck, Saunders Island, then E along Saunders to Cliff Point and ashore 1600-1900, sheltered anchorage overnight. A different day full of delights!

8/8 overcast all day. 8 C, chilly! A light N wind increasing to f3, we retreated from the building swells at The Neck. Evening still increasing to f4 and later f5 from the N.

It was a chilly morning, overcast and grey, with light winds from the north, but surely no more than 8 degrees. Breakfast was interrupted (it had hardly begun) with the call that many Commerson's Dolphins were around the boat. For almost an hour, we enjoyed these charming little dolphins, as they swam around, checking us out. Sometimes they split up. A few times they came charging towards the stern of the boat in groups of up to 9 at a time. There were not less than 15 dolphins, and the show was magnificent! It was also great to see them follow the Zodiac in, as we did two runs to the beach. We landed in a swell on the white sand beach, stern in, and proceeded to enjoy the area and its abundance of species variety.

The dolphins, and some sea lions, were surfing the waves just off shore. On the beach, there was a myriad of birds - three species of gull including 21 Brown-hooded Gulls (another tick for the list), many Gentoo and Magellanic and a few Rockhopper Penguins, as well as a couple of King Penguins (tick). A few more Kings stood higher on the grass slopes, including two "oakum boys" (= brown down chicks) and one molting chick with the straggly down remaining on it's head (swiftly named Toby). Caracaras and skuas went about their business of stealing eggs and hatchlings, and the geese and ducks paraded as always. Oystercatchers flew noisily around - but the main attraction for most of this morning were the Rockhoppers, coming in on the swells and hopping their way onto dry ground, then hopping their way higher up towards their colony. As the winds slowly increased, ditto the swell, and we stood by for a pick-up at noon. But shortly before the end of the landing, Malcolm found a pair of Macaroni Penguins in among the Rockhoppers in the colony, and Jack, Jenny, Morten and Nozomi went up to take a look at them (tick). Getting off the beach was adventurous, the first lot of us managed to get back to the boat reasonably dry, but the second and last lot took a breaking wave right on the bow as we were leaving, drenching us ... but cameras were safe!





After a lunch while at anchor, we headed along the north side of Saunders Island in an easterly direction, watching albatross colonies on shore. In the late afternoon, we landed in the reasonably sheltered bay south of Cliff Point. Anthony was there with a lift offered to those who did not want to walk the two kilometers to the "Rockhopper shower". The location was a steep cliff overlooking the north, where albatrosses, Rockhoppers and shags breed. The wind was stronger now, force 4-5 straight in. The show was on. Rockhoppers came swimming in flocks, getting thrown onto the low rocks, and hopping frantically up and away. The albatrosses were nesting, preening, gamming, flying and squabbling. The shags stood majestically by and did not much at all. We were allowed to make our way halfway down the cliff, balancing between Rockhoppers on narrow ledges, and most of us enjoyed watching the penguins take their drinks and their showers under the light trickles of fresh water running off several overhangs. Some took their time in the showers, some just did a quick wash, some sang while doing so. It was yet another wonderful spectacle of the Falklands and of Saunders Island. Anthony kindly gave us lifts back to the landing beach.

Malcolm had meantime wandered off in the opposite direction, this time managing to find yet another species for our list - a White-tufted Grebe in the rather large - not dried out - pond nearby. He ventured further as well, but was a bit dismayed to find the island so "dead".



Dec 15:

0630-0930 ship's cruise in the lee of Pebble Island across to Ship Harbour, landings on first the W side (1000-1300) and then the E side (1600-2000). A day of harmony in nature!

2/8 and mostly sunny all day. 15-20 C, warm! Force 4 NW. Great sunset and moonrise!

The day's activities began at 0600, with our crew starting up and proceeding in the shelter of the island archipelago, maneuvering south of Kepple and the length of Pebble, what Dion called a "channel cruise". It was a sunny day, and rather warm, with the wind still fairly strong from the NW. We had a leisurely breakfast at 0800, and at 1000 went ashore on the west side of Ship Harbour. We headed for a large pond about a kilometer inland, but found it completely dried out. There was not much about in the way of birdlife, but Malcolm made the morning by alerting some of us to the presence of a pair of Rufous-chested Dotterel. We went to join Malcolm, and he then carefully walked the bird right up to us. Well done! Before heading back for lunch, Graham and Morten snoozed in the sun on a gentle green slope, while Nozomi took Ian and Anne for a little Zodiac cruise around the shoreline. After lunch, everyone had the opportunity for a siesta, before we headed ashore at 1600, this time on the east side of Ship Harbour.

Some walked to Swan Pond, finding it with some water, and the prizes there were a few more dotterel, Two-banded Plovers, and Malcolm continued until he bagged another new species for our list - a flock of nine Silvery Grebe. He also saw hundreds of Speckled Teal and some 50 Yellow-billed Pintail. Some turned around and headed for the colonies of Rockhopper Penguins and King Shags, where Jack, John and Morten had headed from the start. Jack spotted the lone Macaroni Penguin, to John's delight. There were many cormorants, and also many Rockhoppers, but the colony areas showed evidence of decline. Everywhere in the area, there were numerous Magellanic Penguins, and somehow they seemed less shy here than everywhere else we have been, allowing for good portrait photos. A few other good birds of the day were a pair of Variable Hawk and a Southern Crested Caracara.

The winds dropped gradually over the afternoon, and come evening, it was practically still, very pleasant in all ways. For appetizers, Dion, Juliette and Toby served up some chewy but tasty limpets, harvested at low tide at our landing spot.

Dec 16:

A rough night along the N and NE side, then ashore 0930-1300 and again 1500-1700 at Volunteer Bar at the entrance to Volunteer Lagoon, from 1800 towards Port Stanley via Kidney Island.

Overcast 8/8 until 0900, then clearing to 1/8 and strong sun. 15-18 C. Force 3-4 N turning into a f6-7 NW and then a more consistent f5-6 W.

After a rather roly night, with most of us not getting much sleep, we rose to a grey day, with the winds blowing a force 4 from the north. The swells were running strong onto the usual landing on Volunteer Beach, so we headed instead around the point into the shelter of the mouth of Volunteer Lagoon. During our breakfast, the sun came out as the clouds began clearing, and by the time we landed on Volunteer or Lagoon Bar, it was bright and sunny and fairly warm. We walked about the area for the better part of four hours, watching King, Gentoo and Magellanic Penguins, Upland and Kelp Geese, Patagonian Crested and Falkland Steamer Ducks, and not least numerous waders - flocks of White-rumped Sandpipers, numerous Two-banded Plovers and Magellanic Oystercatchers, and even one lone Rufous-chested Dotterel and a Sanderling. We noted the absence of caracaras (not very numerous at all in the East Falklands), but the "predatory" birds were plentifully represented by Falkland Skuas. It was a delightful morning, with beautiful turquoise waters and pure white beaches in all directions. The wind increased gradually, and by lunchtime, it was blowing near gale from the WNW.



Immediately after lunch, we all changed into the uniform - the NozoMojo t-shirt of the voyage - and we took group photos on the aft deck. The decision was to remain at anchor, and let those who wanted go ashore for another couple of hours in the afternoon. From here, it would be direct to Stanley, for an evening meal followed by a good nights' sleep in the peace and quiet of port. We departed at 1800.

Halfway there, we suddenly had a most unexpected and most wonderful and rare encounter. Those on deck saw some blows, quickly dissipating. Those below decks began hearing strange noises in the corridors, coming off the walls. The next we heard was Dion calling us all on deck: Killer Whale! A male Orca had charged straight at the boat, and now proceeded to bow-ride us, appearing again and again right on the nose of the boat. Nozomi got sprayed by the blow. Most of us got photos. All of us were awed by the animal and it's generous behavior. As the encounter continued, we began spotting more blows, and soon we saw two other animals approaching, then three more that swam right under the keel. By the time we left the Orcas, they had regrouped into a pod of seven. All the time, we were also surrounded by Sooty Shearwaters (we were near their breeding island Kidney), and there were also a good dozen White-chinned Petrels as well as three Great Shearwaters. What a stunning finale to our voyage!

We arrived at Stanley, and the winds increased even more. For appetizers, Nozomi had prepared some potato chips garnished with dried seaweed collected at Pebble Island. Juliette played a slideshow from our voyage, and most people said a few words of gratitude and satisfaction. It was late when we turned in.



Dec 17:

1-2/8, sunny. 12-15 C. Force 5-7 W.
Time to go home.

A severely strong wind, gale force, met us this morning, but it was westerly, so it would not prevent our flight. The sun was shining, and it was a pleasant temperature. We went about our packing, saying good-byes, etc. - and then we were picked up just after 1000 for a transfer to Mount Pleasant. Long and very slow queues passed the time, but come 1500, we were airborne. Our Falkland adventure was over.

SPECIES

Birds

King Penguin: 30+ Dec 14 (Saunders Island) & 70+ Dec 16 (Volunteer Lagoon).

Gentoo Penguin: Daily Dec 5 -16, sometimes in the 1000's.

Rockhopper Penguin: Daily Dec 5-15, sometimes in the 1000's.

Macaroni Penguin: 1 pair Dec 14 (Saunders Island) & 1 individual on Dec 15 (Pebble Island).

Magellanic Penguin: Daily Dec 5-16, sometimes 100's, Dec 15 perhaps 1000+.

White-tufted Grebe: 1 Dec 14 (Saunders Island) (Malcolm).

Silvery Grebe: 9 Dec 15 (Pebble Island) (Malcolm).

Wandering Albatross: 1 Dec 5 (at sea before Sea Lion Island) (Juliette).

Southern Royal Albatross: 1 Dec 6 (at sea off SW Weddell Island).

Black-browed Albatross: Daily Dec 5-16. 4 days with 1.000-10.000, 2 days with 10-100.000, and 2 days with more than 100.000!

Southern Giant Petrel: Daily. Highest numbers (near 1.000) Dec 11 (Steeple Jason).

Northern Giant Petrel: 2 Dec 5 (Sea Lion Island) (Morten).

Thin-billed Prion: 100+ Dec 7 (New Island), a few at sea Dec 8 & 10.

White-chinned Petrel: Seen on 4 days, most 10+ Dec 16 (off Kidney Island).

Great Shearwater: 2 Dec 13 (Jasons) (Malcolm) & 3 Dec 16 (off Kidney Island).

Sooty Shearwater: Seen on 8 days, near 100-1.000 on Dec 16 (off Kidney Island).

Wilson's Storm-petrel: Seen on 6 days, with 10-100 on Dec 10 & 13.

Black-bellied Storm-petrel: 1 photographed Dec 13 (Jasons) (Malcolm).

Magellanic Diving-petrel: At least 2 identified on Dec 6.

Common Diving-petrel: Seen on 4 days, most 10's on Dec 8 & 13.

Rock Shag: Daily, up to 100's.

Imperial Shag: Daily, up to 100's, but perhaps 1.000+ Dec 4 & 15.

Black-crowned Night Heron: Individuals seen on 5 days, a colony of 50+? Dec 6 (Bird Island).

Ruddy-headed Goose: Seen on 7 days, most 100's Dec 8-10.

Upland Goose: Daily, 100's, Dec 8 & 9 perhaps 1.000+.

Kelp Goose: Daily, 10's, perhaps 100+ Dec 9 & 10.

Patagonian Crested Duck: Daily, often 10's.



Falkland Flightless Steamer Duck: Daily, often 10's, Dec 5 100+ (Sea Lion Island) and Dec 15 200+ (channel cruise).

Speckled Teal: Seen on 9 days, usually small numbers, but near 100 on Dec 10 (Carcass Island) and more than 250 Dec 15 on the "channel cruise".

Chiloe Wigeon: 1 male Dec 5 (Sea Lion Island).

Yellow-billed Pintail: Seen on 5 days, never more than a few except 50+ Dec 15 (channel cruise).

Turkey Vulture: Daily a few to 10's, except Dec 12 none (Grand Jason).

Red-backed Hawk: 1 Dec 5 (Sea Lion Island), 3 Dec 10 (Carcass Island), 2 Dec 11 (Steeple Jason) and 4 Dec 15 (Pebble island).

Striated Caracara: 10's daily Dec 5-14, but 100+ Dec 6 (Bird Island) & Dec 11-13 (Jasons).

Southern Crested Caracara: A total of about 10 birds seen on 5 days.

Peregrine Falcon: 1 Dec 6 (Horse Block) & 2 Dec 11 (Steeple Jason) (Malcolm).

Blackish Oystercatcher: Seen up to 10's on 10 days.

Magellanic Oystercatcher: Daily up to 10's, Dec 10 perhaps 100+ (Carcass Island).

Two-banded Plover: Seen in 10's on 6 days.

Rufous-chested Dotterel: 2 Dec 7 (New Island) (Morten), 7 Dec 15 (Pebble Island) & 1 Dec 16 (Volunteer Lagoon) (Malcolm).

Magellanic Snipe: Seen on 5 days singly or up to 10+.

Sanderling: 1 Dec 16 (Volunteer Lagoon).

White-rumped Sandpiper: Seen on 4 days, most 100's Dec 10 (Carcass Island).

Snowy Sheathbill: Up to 10's seen on 9 days.

Falkland Skua: 10's daily, but 100+ Dec 11 (Steeple Jason).

Dolphin Gull: 10's daily, but breeding colonies with 100+ Dec 5 (Bird Island), Dec 10 (Carcass Island) and Dec 12 (Grand Jason).

Kelp Gull: 10's - 100's daily.

Brown-hooded Gull: Seen only Dec 14 at the Neck, Saunders Island (31 individuals).

South American Tern: 10's to 100's daily.

Blackish Cinclodes (Tussock Bird): Seen Dec 5-13, in the 100's on Sea Lion Island, Bird Island, Carcass Island and the Jasons).

Dark-faced Ground-tyrant: Low numbers daily except Dec 16.

Correndera Pipit: Low numbers seen on 7 days.

Grass Wren: Low numbers seen on 4 days.

Cobb's Wren: Low numbers seen on 6 days.

Austral Thrush: Seen daily except Dec 16, 10's but Sea Lion Island and Carcass Island perhaps 100+.

House Sparrow: Seen in Port Stanley.

Black-chinned Siskin: Seen on 8 days.

Black-throated Finch: Seen on 8 days, 100+ on Sea Lion Island. *The birds on Grand Jason were noted by several to be remarkably more yellow than those we saw on the other islands.

Long-tailed Meadowlark: Seen on 6 days.



Mammals

South American Fur Seal: Seen on 6 days, highest concentrations were near 1000 on Bird Island and many 100's in and around the Jasons.

South American Sea Lion: Seen daily (also in Stanley). Easily in the 10's many places, on Grand Jason more than 100.

Southern Elephant Seal: Seen on 6 days, with numbers surpassing 100 on Sea Lion Island and on Carcass Island.

Leopard Seal: 1 hauled out on New Island Dec 7.

Sei Whale: Unidentified spouts seen on two occasions were probably this species.

Orca: 1 recently dead male on Sea Lion Island Dec 5, and a pod of 7 individuals on Dec 16 near Kidney Island.

Peale's Dolphin: Seen on 7 days, low numbers but into the low 10's on 2 days (Dec 8 & 10).

Commerson's Dolphin: Seen on 3 days, an unusually low count. First pod of 9 at Grave Cove Dec 9, one seen the next day at Carcass Island, and finally about 15 giving a show at Saunders Island Dec 14.

Cottontail Rabbit (introduced): Seen on three days.



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