

South Georgia Association

Newsletter

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A return to South Georgia

My first trip to South Georgia was in 1975, when I went down to study elephant seals and Antarctic fur seals. I did the standard 2 year tour of duty before returning to Cambridge in 1978 to write up the results. That was followed by four subsequent visits in the 1980s, the last trip being in the 86-87 season, when I was still employed by BAS.

I had often dreamed of returning again but assumed that it would be in my retirement on a cruise ship, reliving my glory days for the benefit of people even older and greyer than I would be. So it came as a bolt out of the blue when Sally Poncet phoned me in summer 2005 and asked if I could go to South Georgia in November to survey fur seals.



Séamus McCann tells Fran Prince all about fur seals.

The opportunity to do the survey arose because the owner of the yacht *Tara V*, Etienne Bourgois, contacted Sally and offered the use of the yacht at no charge for the period 13 November to 10 December. Sally was already embarking on a survey of giant petrels from the *Golden Fleece*. The most appropriate work to do with the *Tara* in the time available was to look at range expansion and population size of the fur seals. The last time the population had been surveyed was in 1990, by Ian Boyd, using the yacht *Damien II*, and the population was known to be increasing still. All the BAS personnel with the relevant experience of working with fur seals were otherwise occupied, so Fran Prince suggested that Sally should contact me. I was able to take unpaid leave from work and flew to Punta Arenas and on to Mount Pleasant, arriving on 12 November 2005. My 18 year old son, Finn, was starting a gap year, and he came along as my assistant. Fran was there to contribute to the giant petrel survey. The final scientific input came from Dr Alun Hubbard, a glaciologist at Edinburgh University, who was to install some remote meteorological stations on or near glaciers on the north side of the island.

The *Tara V* is a huge yacht, 36m long with a 10m beam. She has sailed the world's oceans and was especially designed for sailing in polar regions, having a hull shape

which allows her to be frozen into ice without being crushed. Her crew had sailed her from France to the Falklands, and our trip was preparation for a subsequent charter to South Georgia with some mountaineers. We left Port Stanley in a gale along with the *Golden Fleece* on the five-day voyage to South Georgia.

We made landfall on South Georgia at Elsehul. I had spent two summers at Elsehul in the 70s. Four of us, Scobie Pye, Bruce Pearson, Andrew Stewart and I, had erected the Elsehul hut from sections that Scobie had built at King Edward Point. I knew that the hut had been removed a few seasons ago, so its absence from the scene was no surprise. What was a surprise was the incredible lack of tussock grass and soil from the area around the hut and right down to the beach. The comparison with photographs I took in 1976 is dramatic. The number of fur seals has risen so much that their forays into the tussock have simply worn it away down to the rock and scree. This has revealed the stone and wood foundations of some old sealers' huts which were probably built in the 1800s, but which had gradually been covered with soil and then tussock as the fur seal population was reduced by the uncontrolled exploitation of that era. The three trypots were completely revealed. We had used these for incinerating rubbish, and they had been surrounded by soil up to their necks. They are now shown to be supported on large stones. I must say that the hut environs looked considerably less attractive to me than they had in the 70s, but it is a natural phenomenon, and is presumably returning the area to how it must have looked when the sealers first exploited the seals back in the late 1700s.

From Elsehul we motored down to King Edward Point to make our official entry to the island. Pat Lurcock came aboard and explained the rules to us all. A far cry from my first visit on the RRS *Bransfield* in the free and easy days when South Georgia had very few visitors, but necessary with the increase in boat traffic of all kinds and numbers of visitors ashore. Here again major changes were evident. Shackleton House was gone and for me left a huge void below the slopes of Mt Duse. A number of other buildings had also been removed, for example Coleman's, and there

South Georgia Cruise

The response from our members and others for the proposed Special Members' Cruise was not as supportive as we had hoped, as only 10 people sent deposits within the allotted time. On January 21, therefore, we reluctantly decided to cancel our proposal, and abandon our hopes of visiting South Georgia and Signy Island this year. All deposits have been returned.

Keith Holmes and David Rootes

were new ones in their place housing the BAS scientists and support staff and Pat and Sarah Lurcock. We were invited up to the base to meet the BAS contingent. Women outnumbered men, which brought to mind the advert in 'New Scientist' that I had responded to back in 1974. It asked for replies from 'Single men aged 21 - 35'. I've always felt that the men-only experience was a good one to have had, but one that I wouldn't want to repeat. The personnel on base were really friendly and were keen to chat with an 'old timer'. It was good to see the mid-winter photographs and to identify myself and friends in them.

Across at Grytviken there were more changes. Huge amounts of material had been removed from the whaling station buildings, but I felt that it was still a fascinating place to wander around. The Museum was a delight, as was my meeting with Tim and Pauline Carr, whose passion for the island and everything about it shone through.

Back on the *Tara* we headed south-eastwards along the coast. The fur seals were hauling out in ever increasing numbers and our survey work began in earnest. Our tasks for the fur seal survey were three-fold. We were to look at expansion of breeding range: identifying new breeding beaches and areas where there are still no breeding seals. We were to count adult males, females and pups where we did find them, and finally we were to do repeat counts of some beaches in order to calibrate the timing of haul-out for pupping. We can then use a single count of pups on a beach to estimate the likely total of pups born there in the season.

I had visited all of the beaches around the island back in 1985, when we used the *Damien* for a survey of the elephant

seals of South Georgia. The most impressive beach then had been St Andrew's Bay, where at the height of the season we counted over 6,000 female elephant seals and more than 650 bulls. This time most of the elephant seals had departed for sea, although there were still plenty about, and loads of weaners. What were even more abundant than last time were king penguins. They were everywhere. Vast congregations of chicks and adults, promenading about and enjoying the spectacular scenery. Some of the scenery had changed too. The snout of the Heaney Glacier had reached the sea as a cliff when I first saw it in 1976. In 1985 it was a ramp about 100m from the shore. Alun Hubbard measured its distance from the shore this time and found it to be 2.5km. That's some retreat.

We arrived in Cooper Bay at the south-east end of the island in late November. Cooper Bay had been colonised several decades ago from the original centre of expansion at the north-west end of the island, and had been an isolated population. We were expecting the population there to have extended its range around the 'corner' and up towards Diaz Cove. Examination of the beaches at Trollhul, Ranvik and Diaz Cove itself showed no female fur seals ashore.

We made a rendezvous with Sally and the *Golden Fleece*, skippered by son Dion, at Cooper Bay. They had been taking advantage of an unusually long spell of relatively settled weather on the south coast to survey the GPs and had made wonderful progress.

From Cooper Bay we made our way back along the north coast, making counts at selected beaches, and with me being more and more impressed at the increase in range extension and population size of the fur seals. I had been based at Husvik, in Stromness Bay, for two months in 1986, and we had hiked the entire coast of the bay without seeing a single female fur seal. Nor had there been any in Cumberland West Bay. We were now seeing many thousands of them hauled out, and the expansion of the fur seals along the north coast has been phenomenal. A final stop-over in the Bay of Isles was a wildlife experience on a par with anything in the world. A few metres elevation gained by ascending Start Point gave us extended views of the bay. We were seeing thousands of fur seals along the entire bay. Big pods of elephant seal weaners were trying to ignore the increasingly aggressive territorial bull fur seals and there were countless king penguins. All this was backed by spectacular alpine mountains. Is there anywhere to match it?

The voyage on the *Tara* had been a great success for all. The crew had been able to familiarise themselves with the island and some of its anchorages for future charter work. Alun Hubbard had established his meteorological stations and gathered data on glaciers. Fran had lots of new records of GP nest sites to pass to Sally and the aims of the fur seal survey had been fulfilled. I had returned to the island to work there, rather than simply to visit, and had done so with my son as a workmate. My high expectations for the trip had been exceeded, and I was more than ever grateful to have had South Georgia play so large a part in my life.



Finn McCann meets fur seal bulls.



Finn McCann avoids fur seal bulls.

Séamus McCann

Anyone for toothfish?

You can now check whether you are being served with Patagonian toothfish (aka Chilean sea bass) from South Georgia. It will be a legally-caught fish, guaranteed to be from a well-managed stock that poses little or no danger to albatrosses. Some fishing vessels are participating in a scheme to ensure their catch can be traced from hook to table.

When unloaded in Stanley or South Georgia, each box of fish receives a barcode (showing vessel name, campaign number, date, haul number, net and gross weight of box and number of fish in the box). The fish inside the box are marked with the logo of the Marine Stewardship Council so they can be identified at the fishmonger or restaurant. If they 'smell a fish' they can check the validity of the barcode with the database in Stanley.

Incidentally, during last season's fishing by eight vessels, not a single flying seabird was caught in the South Georgia longline fishery. The only casualty was a gentoo penguin which was snagged and drowned. The Government of South Georgia and its officers are to be congratulated on their success at regulating the fishing industry. If only the simple but effective techniques of keeping albatrosses away from the baited hooks could be applied worldwide! Until they are, South Georgia's albatrosses will not be safe.



Unloading toothfish from the Argos Georgia at Stanley.



A toothfish 'trunk' - topped, tailed and gutted. It weighs 105.5kg and is worth up to £1,100 at the quayside.

The fate of *Resolution*



We all know that Captain Cook visited South Georgia in 1775 aboard HMS *Resolution*, but how did this historic vessel end her days?

Resolution was a bark (not barque) built in 1770 at Whitby. Originally named *Marquis of Granby*, together with the *Marquis of Rockingham*, she was purchased by the Navy and renamed *Drake* (*Marquis of Rockingham* became *Raleigh*). However, Lord Rockford, Secretary of State, thought the names might offend the Spanish. He consulted the King and the Earl of Sandwich (inventor of the convenience food) and the latter suggested *Resolution* and *Adventure*. She was Cook's favourite and he called her 'the ship of my choice, the fittest for service of any I have seen'.

John Barrow in 1792 wrote 'The *Resolution* was the house of our immortal Cook and out of respect for his memory I would have laid her up in a dock until she wasted away plank by plank'. If only he had! In fact, she was converted into an armed transport and sailed for the East Indies in 1781. She was captured by the French and renamed first *Marie Antoinette* and then *La Liberté*. Thereafter her history is rather clouded. It seems she was recaptured by the British and eventually used as a transport, along with the better-known *Endeavour* now *Lord Sandwich*, to North America. In 1778, both vessels were scuttled off Newport, Rhode Island, to protect the town from an attacking French fleet.

According to Dr Katharine Abbass of the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project, the remains of *Resolution* probably lie under a condominium on reclaimed ground on the shore of Newport. It is a sad fate for the ship that John Beaglehole described as 'one of the great, one of the superb, ships of history; of all the ships of the past, could she by magic be recreated and made immortal, one would gaze on her with something like reverence'.

(Thanks to the James Cook Society for providing the above information. www.captaincooksociety.com)

Bob Burton

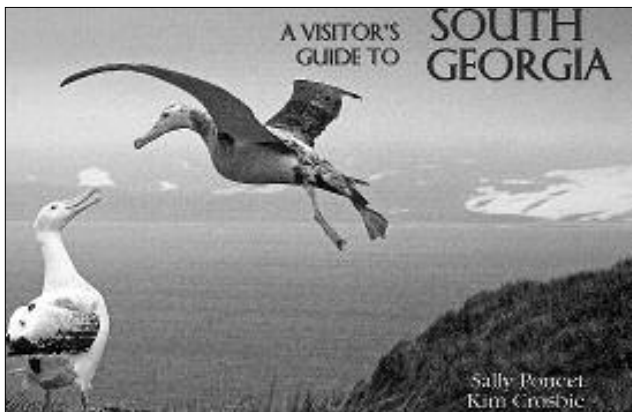
Book reviews

Sailor's Luck: At Sea & Ashore in Peace & War. Rear Admiral Geoffrey Hall 1999. Durham, The Memoir Club. ISBN 1-84104-003-7. 238pp. £22.50 incl P&P from Mr N A D Hall, 16 Windmill Way, Haxby, York YO32 3NL.

'Sailor's Luck' is Admiral Hall's account of a naval career that culminated in the position of Hydrographer of the Navy. He enjoyed six sea-commands, including that of the survey vessel HMS *Owen*. It is this command that gains a place for this book in the South Georgia literary canon.

HMS *Owen* undertook a hydrographical survey of South Georgia waters in 1961. It was not without incident. As well as charting dangerous waters (a cutter hit a steep wave in Bird Sound and sank), they landed Duncan Carse at Ducloz Head for his 'Experiment in Loneliness', which earned them the headline 'Navy Abandons Injured Man On Desert Island'.

A Visitor's Guide to South Georgia. Sally Poncet and Kim Crosbie 2005. Foreword by Keith Shackleton. WildGuides Ltd. ISBN 1-903657-08-3, 180pp, spiral-bound pbk. £17.95.



This excellent book is divided into two parts. The first offers a sequence of accounts by distinguished contributors concerning the natural history, discovery, exploration and occupation history, politics, exploitation, scientific research and the impact of tourism. The second contains a valuable and detailed description of each of the accessible landing sites. The authors have landed at every practicable beach, know every legally-visited island and have even schmoozed their way to visit the remotest fiefdoms of BAS.

South Georgia has to be one of the most spectacular islands on our planet – 'the alps in mid-ocean' – with a necklace of beaches crowded with astonishing numbers of penguins and seals, decorated with a healthy list of hardy plants, to say nothing of surprises like reindeer and pioneering pipits. Where else do you spend a day with the elephants and macaronis and then enjoy the evening drinking in an elegant seagoing bar with a bunch of erudite fish scientists (not so long ago they would have been fearsome Gurkhas or hairy marines)? And how many of the world's specialist museums live cheek by jowl with irritable furries and yet more somnolent ellies? South Georgia is larger than

life and this is a book that does it justice. But I wish we could bring James Cook back for a few days as skipper of, say, *Multanovskiy*, a vessel not much bigger than *Resolution*, so that he could reconsider his unfortunate opinion of 'a land of horrible and savage aspect'. What a pity we cannot land him by way of some boisterous surf among the kings at Gold Harbour on a sunny day. He would appreciate the seamanlike quality of this companion book.

Comprehensive checklists of the fauna and flora, a bird breeding calendar and a useful bibliography complete a work which must surely find a place in every visitor's daybag.

Tony Soper

Just like buses! - Three kayak teams conquer

Over the last 20 years there have been attempts to circumnavigate South Georgia by kayak. The stormy, rugged south coast has always proved too difficult. In 1991 a team from the Royal Anglian Regiment got as far as Drygalski Fjord and in 1996 a trio gave up at King Haakon Bay and slid their kayaks over the Shackleton Gap to return to the north coast. Now there have been three successful attempts in a row!

The victors this year, if it was a race, were three New Zealanders of the Around South Georgia Expedition - Graham Charles, Marcus Waters and Mark Jones – who have previously kayaked in Antarctica. They set off on October 13 supported by the yacht *Northanger*. The early start was cold but it enabled them to camp on beaches without the attentions the fur seals and also beat the next team into the field. The expedition used kayaks strengthened with two layers of Kevlar and modified with lifting attachments so they could be lifted fully-laden.

This circumnavigation took only 18 days but, although it was the first circumnavigation, it was soon not to be the fastest. It was beaten a month later by the Templar Films kayak team - three British men, Peter Bray, Nigel Dennis and Jeff Allen and an Israeli woman Hadaz Feldman, supported by the yacht *Pelagic Australis*. By now it was difficult to find camp sites among the fur seals. Their time was 13 days, including a three day delay due to bad weather.

Finally, Leiv Poncet and American Bob Powell paddled the entire south coast in kayaks as part of the ACAP petrel survey and then completed the circumnavigation.

ACAP Petrel Survey's first season

It is well-known that albatross populations are decreasing alarmingly as a by-catch in longline fisheries but many other seabird species are similarly affected. For instance, South Georgia is the most important breeding place for white-chinned petrels, and this species decreased at Bird Island by 28 per cent between 1981 and 1998. Consequently, the conservation of albatrosses and petrels is a major concern for the Government of South Georgia.

The two-year South Georgia ACAP Petrel Survey of

breeding colonies of northern and southern giant petrels and white-chinned petrels was commissioned and part-funded by the Government of South Georgia and the FCO's Overseas Territories Environment Programme. The survey is being conducted under the auspices of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP). This is a multinational agreement which is seeking to conserve albatrosses and petrels, among the most threatened birds in the world, by understanding and mitigating threats to their survival. A prime aim is to determine the conservation status of species, for which it is necessary to census the breeding populations.

For the first field season the yacht *Golden Fleece* was employed for six weeks of censusing giant petrels and white-chinned petrels. Skipper Dion Poncet and crew Russell Evans and Kilian de Couedic spent 44 days landing the survey team around the island, including the rarely visited south coast, as well as numerous offshore islands.

Sally Poncet, coordinator of the census, and colleagues Andy Black, Bob Powell, Leiv Poncet and Micky Reeves, were joined part-way through the season by Tony Martin and Catrin Thomas from BAS, Ben Sullivan from the RSPB/BirdLife International's Save the Albatross Campaign, and Ellen MacArthur and cameraman Jerome Teignie. Ellen and Jerome are making a film about the survey which will include Ellen's two weeks on Albatross Island in January, when she camped with Sally and censused the island's wandering albatross population. Also taking part in the survey were Fran Prince and Andy Whittaker on board the yacht *Tara V*.



Counting stinkers.

Altogether over 100 sites were visited around the island. In surveying approximately half the island's giant petrel nesting sites, the team walked a total of over 600 km and counted over 5,000 pairs of northern giant petrels and nearly 3,000 pairs of southern. Establishing the size of the white-chinned petrel population is more difficult because they nest in burrows and the team had to develop methods of estimating the numbers of occupied burrows. As well as counting birds, the team kept an eye open for historical artefacts from the sealing era, and any other snippets of useful miscellanea. The boat's crew were always

on the lookout for large, pink buoys, escapees from the fishing fleet; Micky Reeves was always the first to spot banded ducks from Bird Island and Andy Black found two previously unrecorded wandering albatross nest sites. The survey will continue next summer.

Sally Poncet

Pipits return

In Newsletter no 1, Sally Poncet reported on the poisoning of rats on Grass Island, a 30 ha island, in Stromness Bay in 2000. Return visits have failed to reveal any signs of rats and in December 2003 a pipit was seen. Then, in January 2005, a fresh dropping was found. Sally reports a very encouraging two visits to Grass Island last summer.

On 17 December 2005 a pipit was seen several times carrying food in its bill. The bird is thought to have been either carrying food to young in the nest or a male carrying food to its partner (male pipits are known to feed their mates during incubation). A search for the nest in dense tussac was unsuccessful. A bird had been seen in a display flight above precisely the same place on an earlier visit on 9 December. On that earlier visit, two pairs of pipits had been recorded.

The closest traditional pipit breeding sites to Grass Island are the Guides, a small group of rat-free tussac islands lying about 15 km west of Stromness Bay, and to the east, the larger rat-free tussac island at Right Whale Rocks situated at the eastern entrance to Cumberland Bay, about 20 km distant. The occasional non-breeding bird has been seen on the coastline between these two sites. Sally suggests that this shows that the South Georgia pipit can relatively quickly locate and re-colonise suitable rat-free sites - within four to five years for Grass Island.

Rats and mice

The Grass Island pipit story is an excellent boost for the proposed eradication of rats from South Georgia. This is moving towards becoming a reality with the appointment of Darren Christie as Habitat Restoration Officer for South Georgia. He brings to the job the experience of five years spent on eradicating rats from small islands in the Falkland Islands and also in the northern Aegean Sea off Greece.

Darren says that his main objective is to develop a long-term programme for the complete eradication of invasive mammal species from South Georgia, but focussing on rats. The aim is ultimately to allow the wildlife of the island regenerate back to near the original state.

The first stage is produce a methodology and a plan for rat eradication, in order to ascertain an idea of cost for the entire project. At the same time, basic studies will be carried out to improve techniques of eradication. Darren will also visit experts in New Zealand where he will have a chance to

see how rat poison is spread effectively over large, remote areas from the air. If the project is successful, South Georgia will be the biggest island ever to have been cleared of rats.

One complication surfaced last summer when Sally Poncet found a dead house mouse near Cave Cove, Cape Rosa, where *James Caird* landed. The area is rat-free and so expected to be alive with South Georgia pipits. However, in 1986 when Sally and Pete Prince were surveying seabirds for BAS, there was a noticeable and inexplicable absence of pipits.

Previously, mice were not thought to have any impact on birds at South Georgia, but Sally reckons that this discovery suggests it may no longer be the case. The Cape Rosa mouse population's habitat is contiguous with that of the north shore of Shallop Cove where Jerome Poncet saw mice burrows in 1991.

Mice were first recorded at South Georgia in 1976 by a BAS field party camped at Mouse Cove and Holmestrand on the Nuñez Peninsula. This peninsula is separated from the Cape Rosa coastline by the active snout of the Hawkesbury Glacier, which is assumed to form an effective barrier to rodent dispersal. Whether the mice crossed the glacier, were dropped by skuas or swam ashore from a wreck, no one will ever know, but Sally concludes that, if mice are found at one location, they will effectively be present along the entire coastline of contiguous suitable tussock habitat.

Thus, the entire coastline from King Haakon Bay to the Esmark Glacier at Holmestrand is either mouse-infested or potentially at risk from mouse invasions. For South Georgia as a whole, this effectively confines pipits to about 200 km of rodent-free coastline, out of a total of over 1000 km.

Sally emphasises that, with such a small proportion of pristine coastline remaining, visitors need to take special care when travelling between sites, and to make sure they follow the Government's rodent quarantine measures at all times.

New building work

As well as the completion of the new Bird Island base (see Newsletter 9), builders have also been busy at Grytviken. As a sign of the growing importance of Grytviken as a cruise ship destination, the old Tijuca jetty (on the left of the plan as you looked from the sea) has been completely rebuilt to give access to the tenders used by large cruise ships, such as the *Prinsendam* that carries up to 720 passengers. It will also be used as a berth for yachts. A new 'facilities building' next to the museum will house public lavatories, a waste management area, workshops and a display area. The museum itself is being almost completely rebuilt around the exhibits. It will have new foundations, new floors, new windows and new roof, and central heating will be installed.

Meanwhile, over at Carlita, a new hut has been built by Scobie Pye and his 'A team'. Economically made from plywood previously used for concrete shuttering, prefabricated sections were carried out by KEP's launches and the hut was erected in three days.

Husvik Villa restored

For many years the manager's Villa at Husvik has been used as a field station by scientists from BAS and the Sea Mammals Research Unit. Its position close to the open sea and without any large river made it a good location for marine research. BAS used it for research into krill that were kept in floating pens offshore. SMRU conducted epic studies on elephant seals that showed how they travel from South Georgia as far afield as the Falkland Islands and the southern end of the Antarctic Peninsula in search of food.

Like other buildings in the whaling stations (including the Grytviken Villa), the Husvik Villa has been becoming dilapidated. Through the South Georgia Heritage Trust, this has now been remedied thanks to the generosity of the Norwegian county of Vestfold, where the Norwegian whaling industry was centred, the municipality of Sandefjord and local companies.



Husvik Villa: In the early days and after restoration..

A team of nine Norwegian craftsmen were conveyed to Husvik from the Falkland Islands aboard the fishery patrol vessel *Sigma*, their equipment and stores having been shipped from Norway by the cruise ship *Nord Norge* and HMS *Endurance*. The latter's helicopters simplified unloading at Husvik.

Although sometimes hampered by strong winds, the team were able to secure the exterior of the Villa by replacing the cladding of the roof and walls and refurbishing the windows. A coat of paint finished the job. They hope to work on the interior next year. The repairs, and subsequent use of the Villa by scientists and expeditions, is possible because it lies outside the 200m exclusion zone around the whaling station, put in place because of asbestos and other hazards.

Team leader, Torolf Stenersen, was given permission to visit the 'real' Villa in Stromness because he was trained and equipped to cope with asbestos. He reports that the building is in a bad condition but it is not beyond saving. The roof is still sound and he hopes to board up the windows next year..

Dinner with the James Caird Society (and *Curlew*)

The James Caird Society is holding a dinner in Falmouth on Saturday, 9 September, at the National Maritime Museum, Cornwall. They are welcoming members of the SGA, with their guests.

Members will be free to visit the Museum before dinner, when it is closed to the general public, and see the current exhibition 'Endurance and Survival' with the *James Caird* on display. Tim and Pauline Carr's yacht *Curlew* was built in Falmouth over 100 years ago and has now come to rest in the Museum.

Dinner, consisting of three courses and including wine, will cost £40.

If you are interested, please write to the hon. sec. of The James Caird Society:

Pippa Hare

Fig Tree Cottage, High Street, Cranbrook, Kent TN17 3EN

For more about the National Maritime Museum, Cornwall and the Endurance exhibition, which runs until next January, see www.nmmc.co.uk. Phone: 01326 214536.

Whale soup

There have been some amazing whale sightings in South Georgia waters during the past summer. Ian Cumming, dentist at KEP in the 1960s, was on the *Akademik Ioffe* heading for South Georgia in early February. The ship had already passed a fin whale when another blow was spotted on the other side. He was 'greatly surprised to see the long, mottled greyish back and ridiculously small dorsal fin that told him this was his first blue whale'. That was not all. There were more blows. The first was another blue whale, followed by another two. A fin whale then surfaced, followed by a sei whale. Over the next two hours, they saw 12-18 blue whales, six fin whales, at least 10 sei whales, five humpbacks, two southern right whales, one minke whale, one Arnoux's beaked whale and 12 hourglass dolphins. For good measure, four of the hourglass dolphins bow-rode a blue whale and the beaked whale 'spyhopped' to show off its long beak.

This amazing spectacle gave Ian the chance to compare the whales' blows. The stiff breeze meant that conditions were not ideal but he got the impression that fin whale blows



The long, long back and tiny fin of a blue whale. Photo by Ian Cumming.

were narrower and possibly taller than the blue's. Humpbacks were lower and more bushy; right whales were low and broad, while seis had a lower blow than fins and they also had a larger and more upright dorsal fin.

The cruise ship *Bremen* had a similar experience in the same area near Shag Rocks. During a one and a half hour period they saw an amazing 150 fin whales, seven sei whales, six humpbacks, eight southern right whales, two sightings of southern bottle-nosed whales (one of a cow with calf), 25 to 30 killer whales, and pods of hourglass dolphins.

Other sightings from cruise ships include a blue whale and her calf and, on another occasion, 8 to 10 blue whales near Shag Rocks. It would be nice to think that these sightings are evidence of recovery by the devastated whale populations. There is, apparently, other evidence for this, so we must look forward to further mass sightings next year. It is, however, worrying that the krill on which they and other Antarctic species feed has been decreasing.

Boardwalk proposed for Prion Island

Prion Island, in the Bay of Isles, is the only wandering albatross breeding site on South Georgia where tourists are permitted to view these magnificent birds. It is also the best place for observing the South Georgia pipit. The increasing numbers of visitors from cruise ships, which are set to rise still further, have been causing an impact on the terrain and perhaps on the birds. At the landing beach visitors have to negotiate a throng of fur seals, then they follow a route up a rocky stream bed and through tussac-dominated vegetation to the albatrosses. This route is experiencing erosion and is also hazardous for the more elderly and infirm tourists. Despite a strict code of conduct for visits, it is not always easy to keep control of visitors excited by the sight of the wanderers' spectacular displays.

Although the simplest options would be to close the island or restrict access, the Government of South Georgia (GSG) has decided that people should continue to visit the island because they will become 'ambassadors' for this threatened species.

A scheme has been proposed to erect a landing jetty, a boardwalk over the fur seals on the beach and running up to the top of the island. The boardwalk will be about 300 m long and will end at two viewing platforms close to the nesting wanderers. However, there has been concern that this scheme has proceeded without proper consultation with relevant conservation groups, IAATO (representing the cruise industry and hence the users) or biologists and environmental scientists in the South Georgia Association.

The SGA has registered its concerns with GSG about the design and installation of the proposed boardwalk which has already been prefabricated at Grytviken, using untreated imported timber, for transfer and erection on site in late summer 2006-07. An Initial Environmental Evaluation is only now being conducted by an outside consultant and the SGA hopes to have the chance to respond to a draft. The situation is still under discussion, but it seems likely that the

IEE will conclude that the boardwalk will cause minimal impact to the Prion Island environment, even though it will be installed by a team camping and working on the island for a period of several weeks. Hopefully, an effective programme will be established to monitor the effect of visits on the birds and vegetation. The design of the boardwalk is such that it can be easily removed if there are adverse effects.

Ron Lewis-Smith

John Croxall Symposium

A symposium was held at BAS HQ in Cambridge on 6-7 April to celebrate the career of Professor John Croxall CBE FRS, known among his friends as 'Crox'. John joined BAS 30 years ago as Head of Birds and Seals and established Bird Island as a centre of excellence. The theme of the symposium was Marine Conservation Biology, but the overall aim was to bring together John's colleagues and friends.

The symposium was followed by a Bird Island reunion, which was doubly appropriate because 2006 is the 50th anniversary of Nigel Bonner's first visit to Bird Island to investigate fur seals. A live webcam link with the Bird Island winterers was a sign of changed times! Both symposium and reunion will be fully reported in the next newsletter.

John Heap, CMG

With John Heap's death on 8 March at the age of 74, the SGA Committee lost a most valuable member who brought a lifetime's knowledge and skill as a polar diplomat to our deliberations. He attended the meeting that established the SGA and became a founding member of the Committee.

John's experience of Antarctica started when he accompanied the Trans-Antarctic Expedition as a sea-ice observer in the summer seasons of 1955-6 and 1956-7. He completed a Ph.D. on sea ice at the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI). In 1964 he joined the Polar Regions Section of the Foreign Office and became its Head in 1975. In negotiations under the Antarctic Treaty, his practical Antarctic experience proved to be a great advantage when debating with career diplomats from other nations who knew little about the polar regions and the restraints of operating there. Continuity of office was also important in the shifting world of diplomats. At one meeting someone had the temerity to doubt the significance of the UK's contribution to Antarctic science. John's riposte was to send him the 38-volume set of Discovery Investigations Reports which fill a yard or more of shelving.



Of relevance to South Georgia, John played an important part in discussions that led to the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) which came into force in 1982. This was the first ecosystem-based fisheries management system in the world. It is concerned not only with the management and conservation of the target species but also their food and their predators, such as seals and penguins. This was most clearly evident in the provision of data from the fisheries and outlines of future fishing intentions. Although part of the Antarctic Treaty System, the CCAMLR area extends northwards beyond 60 degrees South to largely coincide with the Antarctic Convergence and to encompass the area of the main fishery resources - which includes South Georgia. John's mantra: 'No data, No fishery!' encapsulated the British position when the transshipment regime was introduced to gather data for the regulation of fishing around South Georgia. John was also associated with the South Georgia sections of the Shackleton Report and the handover of King Edward Point to BAS in 1969.

In 1992, John retired from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and became Director of SPRI. One of his achievements there was raising the money for the new west wing which houses the Shackleton Memorial Library. On retiring once more in 1998, he continued his interest in polar affairs as Chairman of the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust.

David Tatham

20 May 5th Annual General Meeting

To be held at the Royal Over-Seas League, London at 7.00pm. It will be preceded by a reception at 6.00pm and followed by a lecture by Sally Poncet on "Duncan Carse and his South Georgia Legacy". See enclosed flyer for details.

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