



Snow Petrel (János Oláh).

ANTARCTICA, THE FALKLANDS & SOUTH GEORGIA

29 NOVEMBER – 17 DECEMBER 2016

LEADER: JÁNOS OLÁH

All reports describe the amazing experience to be had on this tour! However, even with expectations so high it never dissapoints. It is an outstanding and uplifting feeling to witness the wildlife spectacle of this largely unspoilt part of the World. It is easy to fall in love with the area and by the end of the tour most people just do not want to leave the boat and there is an unspoken sadness on the final day! Seeing the magical Falklands with its special birds, tens of thousands of King Penguins on South Georgia or setting foot on the 'white continent' are things never to be forgotten! This year we had no offical pre-tour extension but most participants did arrive to Ushuaia earlier and got to see some great birds around town like Ashy-headed Goose, Magellanic Woodpecker, Magellanic Tapaculo and White-throated Treerunner just to name but a few. The cruise itself visited the Falklands, South Georgia, the South Orkneys, the Antarctic Peninsula, a little bit of the Weddell Sea and the South Shetlands before setting sail across the Drake Passage back to Ushuaia. Our ship was the cosy and well equipped Plancius and we soon got accustomed with this fine boat. This year there were very few birders on board and only a two more in addition to the Birdquest group! However there were no lack of enthusiasm and our little team maintained an almost constant watch during our days at sea, enabling us to achieve some impressive sightings of seabirds and marine mammals.



A cute Weddell Seal near Brown Bluff (János Oláh).

A modest total of 77 bird species and 17 mammals on the cruise itself focused on quality rather than quantity. But I can tell you nobody was into just the number of species on this tour though seeing Kerguelen, Atlantic and Westland Petrels was much appreciated as it is often the case with scarce and hard-to-see birds! It is difficult to summarise all the highlights of this tour but a few experiences certainly made it into the most precious storage box in our minds: being greeted by Commerson's Dolphins on the arrival to the Falklands; exploring Carcass Island on foot surrounded by breeding Falkland Streamer Ducks, Ruddy-headed Goose and Cobb's Wrens – followed by a superb selection of cakes on a private farm; wandering amongst hundreds of Black-browed Albatrosses and Southern Rockhopper Penguins on their nests; tracking down Two-banded Plover and Rufous-chested Dotterel near Port Stanley; walking from Fortuna Bay to Stromness on South Georgia; visiting Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton's graveyard at Grytviken; seeing the the once very rare South Georgia Pipit on almost all of our landings as a result of the rat eradication project; exploring the biggest King Penguin colony in the World with about 250,000 birds at St Andrews Bay; a special landing on the South Orkneys at Orcadas base with hundreds of Cape Petrels; our first landing on Antarctica at Brown Bluff followed by a cruise into the Weddell Sea; early morning with over 25 humpbacks and a Leopard Seal near S'Hainaut Island; getting close-up with baby elephant seals and angry male fur seals; albatrosses and petrels almost constantly around the ship whilst at sea; many great cetacean sightings including several Southern Bottlenose Whale and many Humpback Whales; Chinstrap and Adelie Penguin colonies; the incomparable and spectacular scenery throughout; mighty icebergs, variable light conditions... the list is almost endless. Every trip is different to this corner of the earth but certainly the 2017 tour was yet another great cruise! We experienced all sorts of weather conditions with sometimes up to 55 knot wind (and closed decks) around the Falklands and when cruising towards the South Orkneys, but nothing hampered our birding! It was a bit rough at times indeed but we were lucky in the dreaded Drake Passage on our way home! Special thanks should go to captain Evgeny Levakov and expedition leader Andrew Bishop and all the fantastic crew who made this tour a great experience.



Spectacular scenery on this tour! South Georgia (top) and the mighty Weddell Sea with ice all around (János Oláh).

We began our adventures in Ushuaia where we met at the port by the MV Plancius and the boarding procedure started. There was plenty of time to settle in to our comfortable accommodation, watch the Rock

and Imperial Shags in the harbour and to attend the obligatory safety briefings. It was late afternoon by the time we set sail, and we could admire the amazing sunset along the Beagle Channel while our pilot boat led us to the open sea. A few birds were seen in the fast disappearing light like our first Magellanic Penguins, Black-browed Albatrosses, Southern Giant Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters and a few Chilean Skuas.



Sunset in the Beagle Channel (top) and Chilean Skua (János Oláh).

We awoke in the morning to bright sunny weather and this was a full day at sea towards the Falklands. It was rather windy (30 knots) in the morning but the ship was surrounded by birds constantly and we spent most of the day on deck. Early morning we had two Magellanic Diving Petrel quite close to the ship, which was a good find! There were many Southern Giant Petrels, good number of Black-browed Albatrosses and White-chinned Petrels. A few Northern Giant Petrels were also identified. Wilson's Storm-petrels were frequently seen pattering across the wave troughs, and towards the end of the day Southern Royal Albatrosses were constantly visible around the ship. A single Manx Shearwater was spotted, which may have come from Wales or Scotland but it was certainly the only one on the tour. In the late afternoon more and more Common Diving Petrels were showing and Slander-billed Prions were also numerous. Mammals included at least three Fin Whales and both Hourglass and Peale's Dolphins.



Magellanic Diving Petrel (top) and Wilson's Storm Petrel (János Oláh).



Commerson's Dolphin as we were approaching the Falklands (János Oláh).

After a full day at sea, we arrived in West Falkland by early next morning. Those were up on the deck with first light could see a pod of Commerson's Dolphins as they were following the ship and jumping out of the water. Magical! Our first landing of the trip was on remote, but rat-free, Carcass Island, at the extreme western end of the Falklands. This small picturesque island looked very inviting in the bright morning sunshine, with its hilly terrain, stunning coastline, clumps of yellow bushes and even a few trees.



Carcass Island, Falklands (János Oláh).



Falkland Steamer Ducks (top), Blackish Cinclodes (left) and Cobb's Wren on Carcass Island (János Oláh).

Our first landing of the trip was on remote, but rat-free, Carcass Island, at the extreme western end of the Falklands. This small picturesque island looked very inviting in the superb morning sunshine, with its hilly terrain, stunning coastline, clumps of yellow bushes and even a few trees. The cluster of buildings on the shore were home to the island's population of four people and they gave us an amazing selection of sweets and tea after our birding experience. We were greeted on arrival by a very obliging Blackish Cinclodes and a family party of Falkland Steamer Ducks. It took a few more minutes to find the endemic Cobb's Wrens but they finally performed very well. Other goodies included superb looks of both Blackish and Magellanic Oystercatchers, many Kelp and Upland Geese and our only Ruddy-headed Goose family of the tour. This species is certainly declining in its South American range although Birdlife still do not recognize this. Passerines are not abundant in this part of the world, but we managed to find the rather underwhelming

Austral Thrush, the tiny Black-chinned Siskin and also got great looks of the nominate White-bridled Finch. It was an excellent and action packed few hours! Back on board, the ship relocated to another island while we had lunch and we were soon landing on Saunders Island. The first inquisitive Striated Caracaras came to greet us on the ship and throughout the afternoon we had many excellent looks of this rare raptor! Saunders Island was very different from Carcass – much more open and with bigger beaches and towering cliffs. In no time at all we were getting to know the penguins on the beach. These were mainly Gentoos, but there were also some Magellanic and slightly further inland a few magnificent King Penguins too. We had to climb up the steep grassy slopes to get to the huge Southern Rockhopper colony, taking the same well-worn paths as the penguins themselves. Much time was spent with these extraordinary birds as we observed their comings and goings. It was amazing!



Ruddy-headed Geese (top) and Blackish Oystercatcher on Carcass Island (János Oláh).



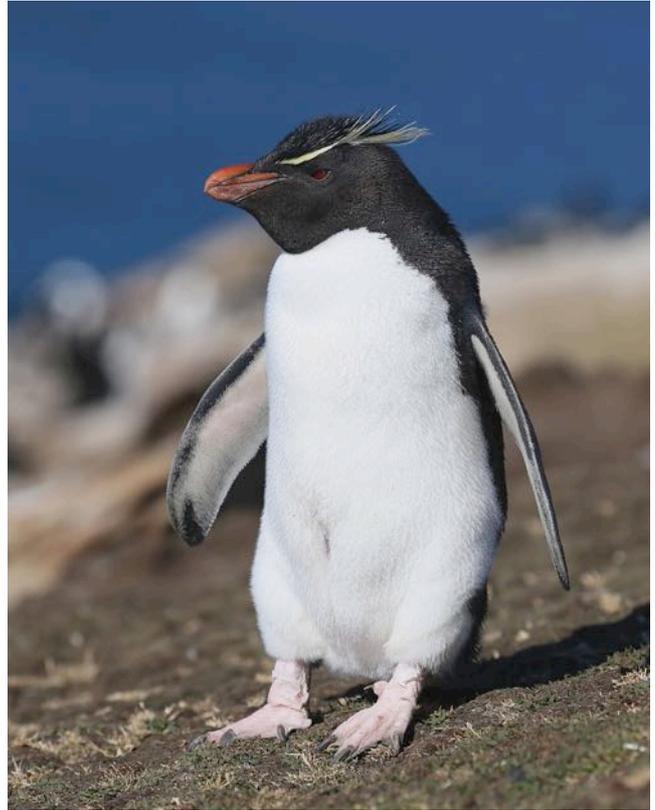
Magellanic Oystercatcher on Carcass Island – yellow orbital ring unlike Blackish Oystercatcher (János Oláh).

A number of Brown Skuas were hanging around menacingly, looking for weak or young birds to prey on. From time to time they pick up penguin chicks and we witnessed one of these events. Also the near-

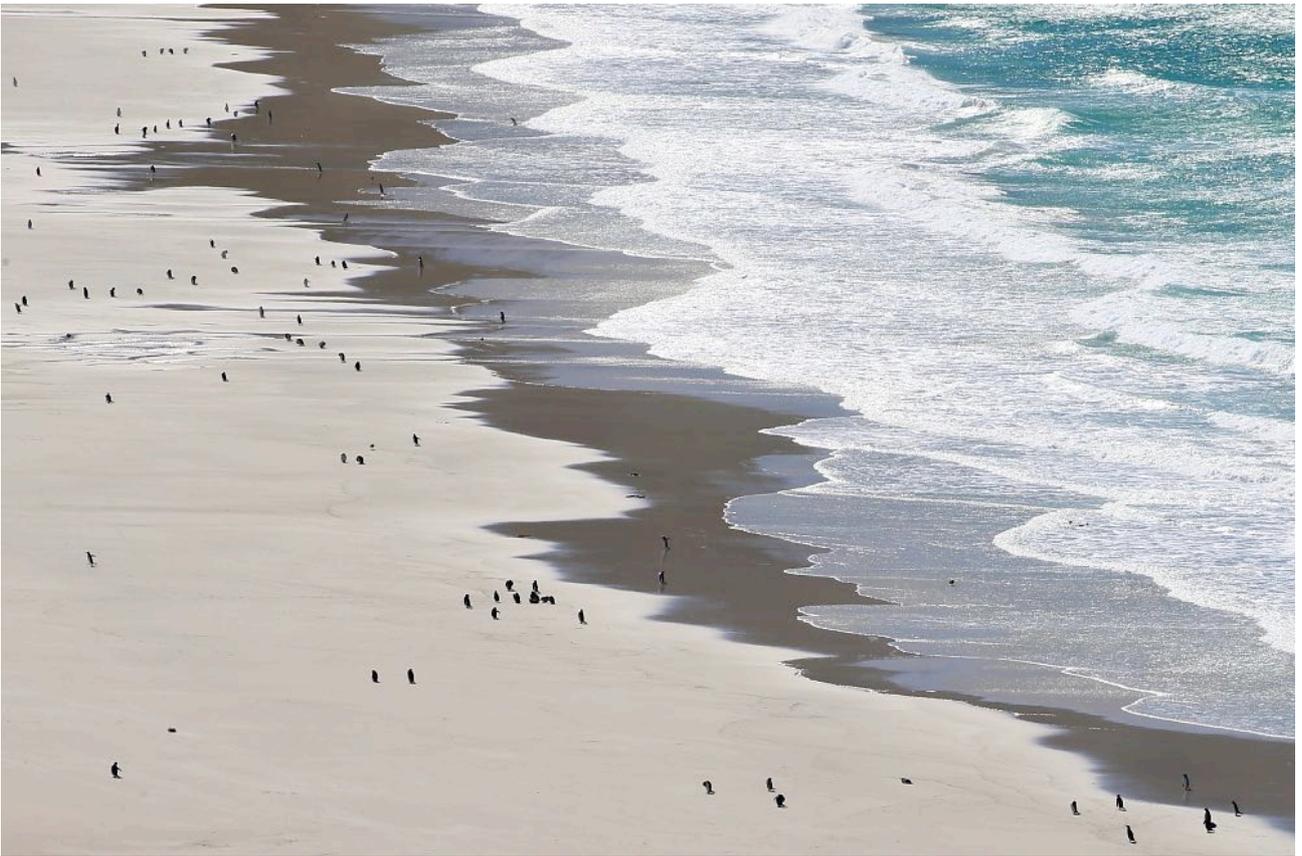
threatened Striated Caracaras often manage to get penguin chicks and although it is a sad moment when we witness such an event, this is life on the Falklands. With careful observation, we managed to pick out a single Macaroni Penguin amongst the thousands of Rockhoppers. The two species are reasonably similar, and no doubt the Macaronis felt quite at home amongst their cousins. Further along the clifftop, we reached the Black-browed Albatross colony. They were all sitting on their mud nests, alone or displaying with their partners. All around us, albatrosses were swooping in and out of the colony, giving us a truly magnificent show. We also got to see our first Snowy Sheathbills and there were many more Magellanic Oystercatchers. The scenery was also fantastic and in a few hours we all managed to fill up several memory cards. It was not easy for the crew to drag all of us away but eventually we had to leave this wonderful place and all the rockhoppers...



Striated Caracaras were common on Saunders Island – fighting for a Southern Rockhopper Penguin chick (below) (János Oláh).



Southern Rockhopper Penguins – with their punk hairstyle - were the undoubted stars of the Falklands (János Oláh)!



Beach with penguins and a displaying Black-browed Albatross at their nest on Carcass Island, Falklands (János Oláh).

During the night, the ship relocated to East Falkland as next morning we were due to visit Port Stanley, the capital of the Falklands. However as we could feel at night the wind was picking up and in the morning we were facing a 55 knot wind, so there was no way into the harbour. We made a few circles around and were hoping for the wind to calm down. About noon the captain announced that we try to get into the harbour and with a bit of tricky navigation we finally got to there safely and soon to the shore. A short minibus ride took us to Surf Bay, where we wasted no time in searching for two amazing plovers. It did not take long to find a few Two-banded Plovers on the beach itself and a bit further inland that we located Rufous-chested Plovers and a very tame South American Snipe too, the endemic *magellanica* race here. It was a very pleasant excursion and we also found Grass Wren, Correndera Pipit, Long-tailed Meadowlark and White-bridled Finch.



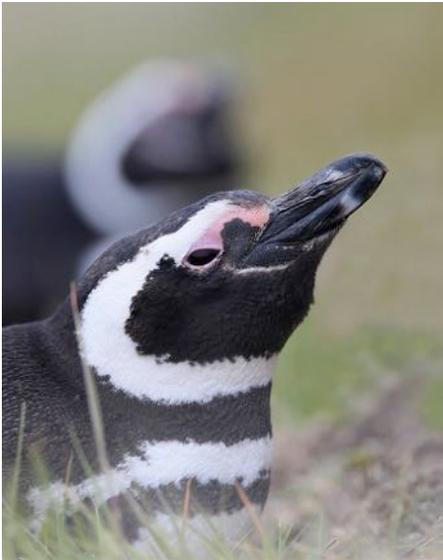
Two-banded and Rufous-chested Plovers near Port Stanley, Falklands (János Oláh).



Long-tailed Meadowlark (top) and White-bridled Finch near Port Stanley, Falklands (János Oláh).

Heading back into Stanley, there was time to do a little sightseeing, shopping around the town and even a pint in a very English-style pub for some. It was late afternoon when we got back to the ship. The weather

was slightly improving and it was less windy so we had a very pleasant cruise out of the harbour – seeing many Magellanic Penguins along the white sandy shoreline – and leaving the Falklands behind. Still close to the Falklands there were amazing numbers of Sooty Shearwaters. They were just everywhere in huge quantities and we estimated about 10,000 birds in a mere 20 minutes timeframe. It was time to embark on our long journey to South Georgia.



Magellanic Penguins (top) and Flying Steamer Duck, Falklands (János Oláh).

The following two days were spent at sea. The first full day was still north of the Antarctic Convergence but the early morning of the second day we got south of this 'magical' line where the cold Antarctic water meets the warmer waters of the subantarctic are particularly good for marine plankton with all the mixing and upwelling of the cold sea water. Needless to say this is also very good for the consumers higher on the food-chain like seabirds and marine mammals. On our first full day at sea we got our first Wandering, Northern Royal, Light-mantled and Grey-headed Albatrosses as well as Antarctic Prions and our somewhat distant but only Atlantic Petrel. As we crossed the wide convergence zone, the seabirds became more numerous, and the diversity increased too. We saw the first Southern Fulmar and we were practicing identifying prions. As we progressed from the Falklands to South Georgia especially after the convergence Antarctic Prions took over. By the end of the third day we arrived at the shores of South Georgia and now the gorgeous Blue Petrel started to become a familiar sight and we had a few Snow Petrels too! There was also a leader-only Kerguelen Petrel on the third day – fortunately we saw several a few days later on the way to the South

Orkneys. Around South Georgia we also spent a lot of time photographing Common and South Georgia Diving Petrels as they whizzed past looking somewhat like Little Auks. The South Georgia Diving Petrel is virtually unseparable on field marks so it is not an easy call but we did see several birds which featured all the usual field marks available in the books – but no, we did not manage to measure the bill size which would be the only 100% identification mark. On the way to South Georgia we also had many Fin Whales, our first Southern Bottlenose Whale, Dusky Dolphins and our only Dwarf Minke Whale. The latter gave us absolutely amazing looks as it swam right below the bow of the ship. It was incredible.



Antarctic Prions became regular south of the AC line (János Oláh).



Wandering Albatross (top), Cape or Pintado Petrel (left) and Southern Royal Albatross on the way to South Georgia (János Oláh).



Southern Bottlenose Whale (top) and South Georgia (János Oláh).

On the afternoon of the third day, we finally reached South Georgia. As we sailed past the jagged rocks of the outlying islets we noticed the number of Wandering Albatrosses increased and by now we were cruising

along Albatross Island, which is a main breeding place for the wanderers. The nearby Prion Island has many albatrosses too plus it was the only reliable site for the South Georgia Pipit in the past. The status of the endemic South Georgia Pipit has changed nowadays with the 3 years long rat-eradication project being a huge success! This special endemic - the only passerine on South Georgia - has not been seen on the mainland of South Georgia for years but in the last two years they have quickly bounced back and we saw them on almost every landing we had! What a result and achievement for those dedicated people. Later we heard a lecture about this project and many people on board our ship made very generous donations to continue with this vital programme until every last rat is removed from these islands. This will probably increase breeding seabirds by millions! It was late afternoon when we arrived to Rosita Harbour where we had a zodiac cruise. This was the only place we could attempt anything in the windy conditions we still had. It was a great introduction with several Yellow-billed (South Georgia) Pintails along the shore and even a South Georgia Pipit was seen on the rocks! Later in the evening we sailed past Salisbury Plains, where the island's second largest King Penguin colony is located and we could see thousands of penguins on the shore. So our hopes for visiting such a colony were even higher now!



Yellow-billed (South Georgia) Pintails at Rosita Harbour (János Oláh).

Early next morning we were moored in Fortuna Bay. It was bright sunshine and after breakfast we dropped off those who were ready for the walk to Stromness through Shackleton's Valley. This hike is rarely doable owing to weather conditions but this day was perfect! The rest of the folks slowly cruised to Stromness around Cape Saunders where they met those made the walk. It was a superb morning on the ship, many South Georgia Shags flew by and our first Humpback Whale put in an appearance. The landing at Stromness was exciting. This was the first time we had to fight our way through the Antarctic Fur Seals. There were several Yellow-billed (South Georgia) Pintails, Gentoo Penguins and we found as many as four South Georgia Pipits while Antarctic Terns were fishing on small ponds. After lunch we continued to Grytviken, where we had yet another landing. This was action-packed again and started with toasting Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton's grave and then a few hours with the Southern Elephant Seals and the Antarctic Terns nesting on the decaying hulls of old whaling ships. There was also a museum and the nearby souvenir shop visit after which, we were back on board for a banquet and party with some of the local researchers.



South Georgia near Stromness (top) and South Georgia Pipit (János Oláh).



South Georgia Shag in flight (top) and Antarctic Fur Seal (János Oláh).

The following morning we woke at Godthul and the weather was still sunny though the wind was picking up again. A fantastic landing took us to a viewpoint high up on the coastal cliffs, allowing superb views of the rugged South Georgia coastline. On this landing we had about ten South Georgia Pipits and small colony of Gentoo Penguins with chicks. As usual the walk through the long grass with the territorial Antarctic Fur Seal was time consuming.

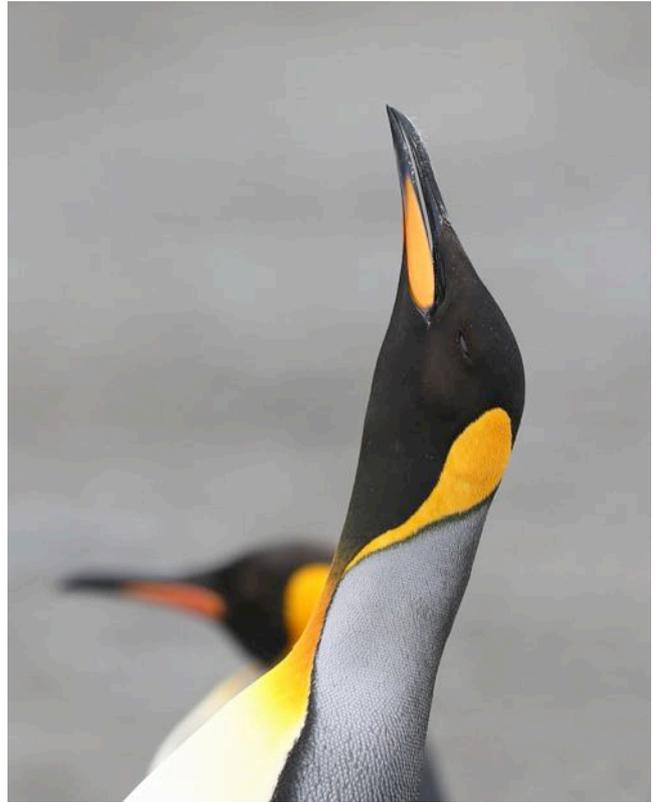
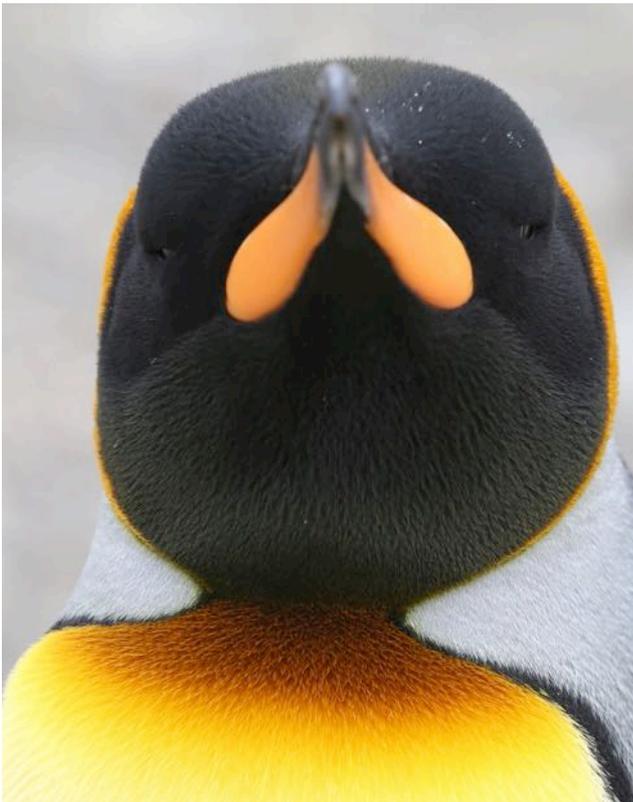


The Plancius (top) from a viewpoint, the South Georgia coast (middle) and the Gentoo Penguin colony at Godthul (János Oláh).

Following the scenic Godthul landing we sailed to St Andrews Bay and although the weather was changing the expedition leader announced we still going to land! So after a quick operation with the zodiacs we were soon on land by the largest King Penguin colony in South Georgia and the World! We spent three hours at this magical location but it was gone in a blink of an eye! It was an afternoon long to be remembered and perhaps *THE* penguin experience for most people. There are no words to describe when you standing by a colony of 250,000 King Penguins! We all know why South Georgia is so special but experiencing it is a different matter!



King Penguin colony at St Andrews Bay (top) and King Penguins showing all their profiles (János Oláh).



King Penguin colony at St Andrews Bay (top) and King Penguin close up (left) and singing (János Oláh).

St Andrews Bay also gave us the opportunity to study hundreds of Southern Elephant Seals and we could see all ages and all sorts of behaviour. It was remarkable to see these creatures playing, growling and fighting along the beach. Back on the Plancius everybody was still under the impressions of the this most

amazing landing and there was plenty to talk about over dinner. Meanwhile we changed position and we were in Gold Harbour early next morning. Some could experience a great sunrise (if you were really eager to get on the deck in a rather unsuitable hour of the day) and most of us only opted for the pre-breakfast landing. We got to see a few Yellow-billed (South Georgia) Pintails, Snowy Sheathbills and even more King Penguins!



The 'sea' of roosting Southern Elephant Seals (top) at St Andrews Bay and a young male calling (János Oláh).



Southern Elephant Seals playing, fighting at St Andrews Bay (János Oláh).

We returned to the ship for breakfast and later relocated to Cooper Bay in the far south-east of the island. Weather was deteriorating and it started to rain/sleet with an increasing wind. We took a zodiac cruise along the shore but it was wet! Nevertheless the Chinstrap and Macaroni Penguin colonies were great to see and we circled a fine blue iceberg a few times allowing great photography opportunities. Several pairs of Light-mantled Albatrosses were nesting on the towering cliffs above us, but in the rain the photography was challenging. In the afternoon, we cruised down the scenic Drygalski Fjord which was just a superb finish to our action-packed stay around South Georgia. It was really amazing scenery and we had about 60 Snow Petrels.



Snow Petrels were numerous in the Drygalski Fjord (János Oláh).

It was late afternoon when we bid farewell to South Georgia and began the long journey south to the Antarctic peninsula. We spent the next few hours on deck as we slowly left the magical islands behind us. Seabird activity was excellent and we had our last Wandering Albatross (for some time), many Black-bellied and Wilson's Storm Petrels, a Grey-headed Albatross and several Blue and White-chinned Petrels. We also had fun with diving petrels and tried to take as many pictures as we could for possible future use and identification.



Light-mantled Albatross (top left), breeding Macaroni Penguins and a Wilson's Storm Petrel at Cooper's Bay (János Oláh).

We were at sea all next day on our way to the Antarctic Peninsula. We were planning a stop at the South Orkneys at the Orcadas base but our chances were slim as usually 1 out of 4 cruises can do a landing at this location. For much of the journey the sea was quite rough, with wind speeds of 30–40 knots, but our

dedicated group spent most time seawatching from the bridge – as the deck was closed. It was bumpy but we knew today was the day to find the rather scarce Kerguelen Petrel so we kept a constant watch on the bridge! Needless to say we were not dissatisfied as we saw a total of 21 Kerguelen Petrels on this fantastic day at sea plus our second Antarctic Fulmar and lots of Blue and Snowy Petrels as well!



Cape Petrel in front of blue iceberg and Snowy Sheathbill at Cooper's Bay (János Oláh).



On our way to the South Orkneys we had rough sea, rain, sleet, snow, everything! Light-mantled Albatross (top) with sea conditions, Blue Petrel (left) and Snowy Petrel in snow. Finally an odd one out of the line - our very first Antarctic Petrel (bottom; János Oláh).

Our next morning before getting to the South Orkneys started with excitement as our first (of only two) Antarctic Petrels showed up and entertained us for several minutes circling the boat! It is a bird everybody

expects to see (so did we) but it does not happen on every trip and they are certainly rather uncommon on this tour. So it was a great bird and everybody enjoyed it very much! We also had about 12 Fin Whales closer to the Orkneys.



Antarctic Petrel as we were getting close to the South Orkneys (János Oláh).

We arrived to the South Orkneys by late morning and despite the rather windy conditions our captain decided we are going to try and land at the Argentinian Orcadas Base. It was very surprising and promising so we quickly disappeared in the cabins to prepare for landing. This base was established by the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition in 1903 and transferred to the Argentinians in 1904. It is located on the Laurie Island. This base is permanently populated ever since and it was the first of such stations in Antarctica! We were excited!



Orcadas Base at the South Orkney Islands – Laurie Island (János Oláh).

Wind was picking up but the crew got everybody on shore – though it was a rather wet transfer and landing. As we got on shore an amazing spectacle greeted us with hundreds of Cape or Pintado Petrels feeding along the shore (we estimated 850)! There was also a small party of about ten Adelie Penguins which was of course our first for the cruise of this truly Antarctic species. It was such a short stay at this rarely visited location but the Argentinians were very welcoming at the base and we were invited for tea and cakes while they showed us around and told us the story of the base. All too soon we were back on board and set sail towards the Antarctic Peninsula. We had superb light conditions in the afternoon with great looks at Chinstrap Penguins on iceberg, several Snow Petrels, still good numbers of Blue Petrels and suddenly Southern Fulmars became common. It was strange as we had only seen two individuals until the South Orkney Islands. Nevertheless we enjoyed seeing hundreds of these fantastic looking tubenoses as they circled Plancius. While at dinner our birder group discussed how close we were to the 'White Continent' and if all goes well and the wind direction and strength does not change we should have only one full day at sea.



There were hundreds of Cape or Pintado Petrels at Orcadas Base (top) and Southern Fulmar near the South Orkneys (János Oláh).

Our next day was spent at sea as we cruised nearer to Clarence Island. It was a windless day at sea and a perfect one for cetaceans. We saw several pods of beaked whales and our final conclusion was Southern Bottlenose Whales on all – a total of 25 were counted and we got repeated great looks. A few Fin Whales were also located and although we had no new birds there were hundreds of Chinstrap Penguins and Southern Fulmars constantly in view and the light conditions were also amazing – such a superb and relaxed day!



A calm day at sea near Clarence island (top) and Chinstrap Penguins on iceberg (János Oláh).



Southern Fulmar (János Oláh).

Our expedition leader told us in the evening that early morning we would be cruising in the Antarctic Sound and after an early breakfast we planned to land on the Antarctic Continent at Brown Bluff. So we were all very excited and needless to say we were up very early on deck next morning to admire the amazing scenery! It was still windless. Wow this was truly Antarctica now with magical icy landscape and Adelie Penguins everywhere. We enjoyed watching these iceberg specialists diving into the water from their frozen retreats as our ship ploughed through the sheets of ice making the most alarming sounds. It was hard to

drag people away from deck for a short breakfast while the Plancius got close to Brown Bluff. Everybody was eager to set foot on the 'Continent' and we spent a superb 4 hours in the best possible sunny and windless weather on shore.



Adélie Penguins getting (top) near Brown Bluff (below) which was our first landing on the Antarctic Continent (János Oláh).

On the way back to the ship we made a little detour with the zodiacs to admire and photograph a young Weddell Seal as it was roosting on a small ice floe surrounded by Adelie Penguins. A classic sight and a really memorable one! Back on the Plancius our expedition leader announced that with such superb weather conditions we will cruise into the Weddell Sea to enjoy and soak in the real Antarctic landscape. We birders naturally and immediately were thinking of Emperor Penguin possibility! Most of the afternoon was spent amongst the ice and we made a 50 nautical miles loop into the Weddell Sea. Although we were alert for the entire afternoon and we even used scopes from the monkey deck we could not locate any Emperor Penguins but it was a thrill even to look for this species as we were not that far from the closest breeding colony at Snow Hill Island.



Weddell Seal (top) and Weddell Seal with Adelie Penguins near Brown Bluff (János Oláh).



Adelie Penguin (top) and Weddell Sea landscape with Crabeater Seal (János Oláh).



Ice, ice, ice... blue icebergs are amazing, and we saw several on the Weddel Sea cruise (János Oláh).

In the Weddell Sea we saw many Crabeater Seals on ice and a few Antarctic Mink and Humpback Whales and by late afternoon we were back to the Antarctic Sound on our way further south. It was a fantastic and most memorable day with simply spectacular scenery and wildlife experience! In the late afternoon we had many huge icebergs in ever changing light and a fine sunset – a great way to finish a great day!



Icebergs were amazing, especially the huge tabular icebergs (bottom) (János Oláh).

Yet again we were up very early on deck still in superb sunny and more or less windless conditions as we were cruising into Mikkelson Harbour on the south side of Trinity Island and were about to do a landing on D'Hainaut Island. Before breakfast on deck was amazing with Humpback Whales everywhere – we estimated minimum 28 – and our first South Polar Skua as well as for some lucky few a Leopard Seal on an ice floe. Unfortunately for some unknown reason we did not turn back to see it properly, and I hope it was only because the news got up to the bridge too late. Cruising along the Antarctic Peninsula the landscape was also superb with the ice cap of the peninsula in the background and dramatic ice sculptures everywhere.



Antarctic Peninsula with Humpback Whale in the foreground (top) and Antarctic landscape (János Oláh).



Leopard Seal on ice floe (top), Brown Skuas (middle) and Weddel Seal at D'Hainaut Island (János Oláh).



Southern Giant Petrel (top) and Gentoo Penguin on the 'penguin highway' at D'Hainaut Island (János Oláh).

Our landing at D'Hainaut Island was in superb sunny weather and we could enjoy Gentoo Penguins colonies, several Weddell Seals, Antarctic Shags, many Brown Skuas, Southern Giant Petrels. Photographic opportunities were absolutely brilliant and our stay was just too short as usual. It was interesting to see how the Gentoo Penguins were using their 'highways' in the snow and how they managed to pass each other when the ascending and descending traffic met. It was just fun to watch!



Gentoo Penguin on the 'penguin highway' (top) and Gentoo Penguin portrait at D'Hainaut Island (János Oláh)

In the afternoon we were still in the South Shetland archipelago and cruised towards Deception Island. We were all on deck to witness the ship's dramatic entrance through Neptune's Bellows, the narrow gap into the flooded caldera of this long-extinct volcano. We moored in Whaler's Bay and had a nice landing at Port Foster, which comprises just a few decaying structures from the Hector whaling station and various disused buildings from the British station established here, in the Second World War. The most interesting observation was a fine South Polar Skua and a Wilson's Storm Petrel which was breeding under some material from a collapsed building. Before heading back to the ship, in true Oceanwide Expeditions tradition, a few hardy passengers (including one member of the Birdquest group) decided to take a short swim in the cold Antarctic waters – under the watchful eye of the ship's doctor. We were certainly proud of all who did this – it did look cold though!



Before dipping into the arctic water Tom Johnson (Field Guides), Matt Eade and the Birdquester tough guy Simon Tonge (from L to R) and a South Polar Skua at Deception Island (János Oláh)

Our last full day in Antarctica was an action-packed one again with two different landings! We arrived at Half Moon Island early and after a quick breakfast we had a nice landing with a superb Chinstrap Penguin colony being the major attraction! The crew had laid a trail of flags to mark the route to the colony and on the way there were many Snowy Sheathbills and Antarctic Shags. At the point where our trail crossed the penguins' somewhat steeper trail, we enjoyed watching the Chinstraps marching up the steep snowy slope, each with a pebble in its bill for nest-building, and then tobogganing down back to the beach. It was snowing a little bit – the weather was changing - but this didn't dampen the penguins' spirits or ours. At the main colony, there was a considerable amount of displaying and calling, territorial disputes, providing some of the best photographic opportunities of this species on the entire trip, despite the rather monochrome conditions. We left before lunch and were cruising towards Robert Island – still in the South Shetland group north of Livingston Island.



Chinstrap Penguin portrait (top) and colony at Half Moon Island (János Oláh)



Chinstrap Penguin emerging from water at Robert Point (János Oláh)

Our last landing of the tour was at Robert Point, which is located at the end of a peninsula on the south side of Robert Island projecting into the Bransfield Strait. This was another great landing with lots of wildlife around. We had about 100 Southern Elephant Seals and many Gentoo Penguins plus a few Chinstrap Penguins and Antarctic Shags. All too soon it was time to leave this magnificent continent, and once back on the ship we headed north from the Bransfield Strait, into the infamous Drake Passage. Late afternoon we had our second Antarctic Petrel of the tour about 50 km north of South Shetland Islands.



Southern Elephant Seal puppy at Robert Point (János Oláh)



Antarctic Shag at Robert Point (János Oláh)

The next two days were spent at sea in the Drake Passage. Sea conditions were not very hard and nothing like the day when we were cruising towards the South Orkneys from South Georgia. It was good birding and we had old friends from the albatross and petrel families. We saw many Black-browed, a few Southern and Northern Royal Albatrosses, both Southern and Northern Giant Petrels, Blue Petrels, Antarctic and Slender-billed Prions and Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels. The sea conditions were so good that we arrived at the South American continent early and made a scenic detour to see Cape Horn – I believe we actually drifted into Chilean waters. There were many Sooty Shearwaters here and we had good numbers of White-chinned Petrels and best of all we got a Westland Petrel, which was a write-in for this Birdquest tour! Other goodies included two more Magellanic Diving Petrels, our second Manx Shearwater and a Great Shearwater which was yet another new trip bird. Mammals included Humpback and Antarctic Mink Whales and closer to the continent Peale's and Dusky Dolphins plus many South American Sea Lions close to Cape Horn.



Black-bellied Storm Petrel (top) and Southern Royal Albatross in the Drake passage (János Oláh)

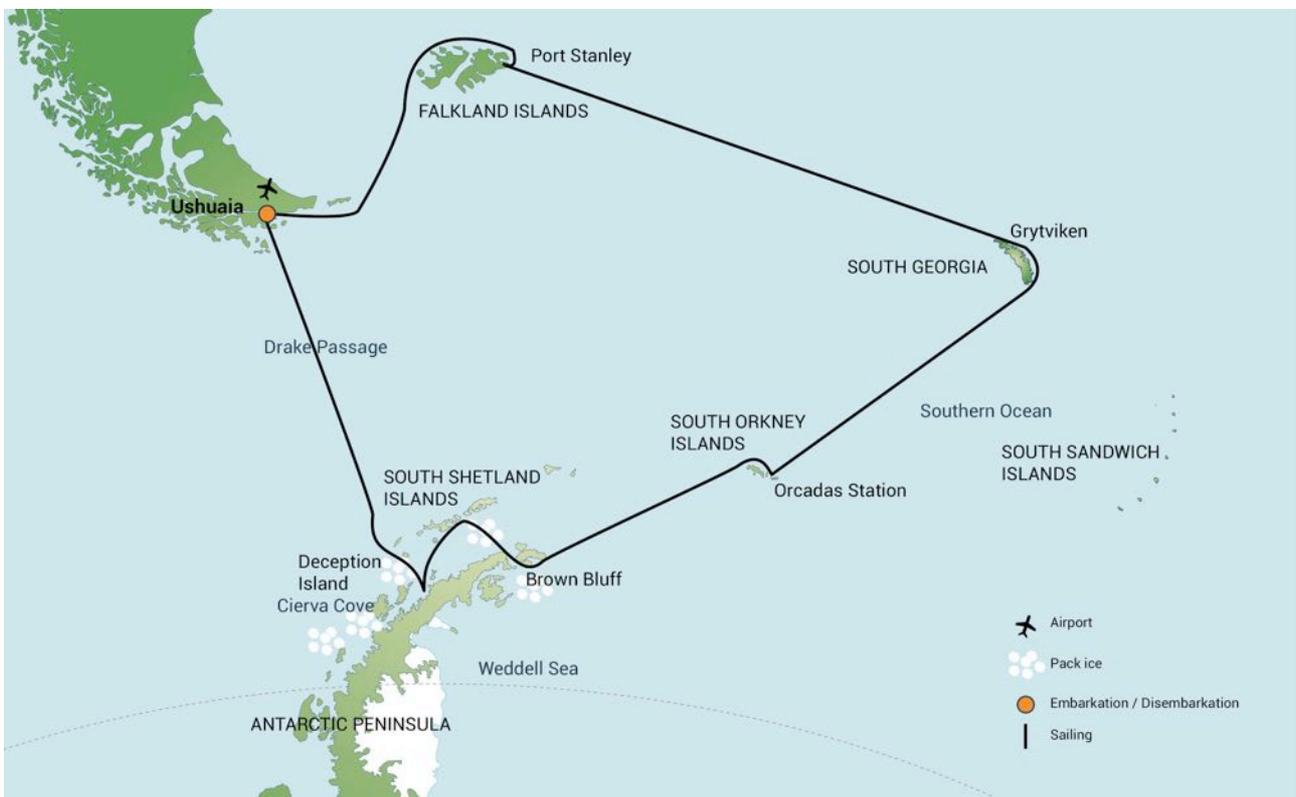


The endangered Northern Royal Albatross (top) and Northern Giant Petrel (János Oláh)



Peale's Dolphin in the Drake Passage (János Oláh)

We reached the entrance of the Beagle Channel in the evening, and cruised very slowly along it during the night in order to arrive in Ushuaia at breakfast time the following morning. There were various formalities and packing to be done before we disembarked and parted company from the trusty *Plancius* and our fellow passengers and crew. We had sailed over 6,500 km in the Southern Ocean, and had witnessed some of the most incredible scenery and wildlife. This tour was definitely something to remember for a long time. Hopefully reading this report will bring back some great memories for the participants of this epic journey to some of the remote islands of the Southern Hemisphere.



The route of our tour to the Falklands, South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula



Adelie Penguins near Brown Bluff, Antarctica (János Oláh).

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

CR = Critically Endangered, **E** = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened

For polytypic species, the subspecies seen on the tour, where known, is placed in parentheses at the end of the species comment. Generally, species listed with trinomials are not currently split by the IOC.

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). 2017. IOC World Bird List (v 7.3). This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>. Please note, this was the current version when the report checklist was created. Some alternative names are given in parentheses.

All of our checklists are powered by our partner iGoTerra (www.igoterra.com) who provide web and mobile applications for bird and wildlife enthusiasts and businesses. Their suite of services cover observations, rankings, lists, photos and trip management tools.

Flying Steamer Duck ◇ *Tachyeres patachonicus* Just two were seen from the ship in Ushuaia.

Falkland Steamer Duck ◇ *Tachyeres brachypterus* Several excellent encounters around the coast in the Falklands.

Upland Goose ◇ *Chloephaga picta* It was common on the Falklands [*leucoptera*].

Kelp Goose ◇ *Chloephaga hybrid* Common on the Falklands [*malvinarum*], a few in the Beagle Channel [*nominata*].

Ruddy-headed Goose ◇ *Chloephaga rubidiceps* Amazing looks at a family party on the Falklands.

Crested Duck *Lophonetta specularioides* Several around the coast on the Falklands, and in Ushuaia.

Yellow-billed Pintail ◇ *Anas georgica* Small numbers frequently seen on South Georgia. See note.

King Penguin ◇ *Aptenodytes patagonicus* About 20 on the Falklands, but tens of thousands on South Georgia.



King Penguin at South Georgia (János Oláh).

Gentoo Penguin ◇ *Pygoscelis papua* Commonly encountered throughout the tour, especially on the Falklands.

Adelie Penguin ◇ *Pygoscelis adeliae* First seen on the South Orkneys at Orcadas. Later thousands on Antarctica.

Chinstrap Penguin ◇ *Pygoscelis antarcticus* Several colonies visited on South Georgia and South Shetlands.

Southern Rockhopper Penguin ◇ *Eudyptes chrysocome* We had excellent looks at a large colony on the Falklands.

Macaroni Penguin ◇ *Eudyptes chrysolophus* A singleton on the Falklands and a large colony on South Georgia. **VU**

Magellanic Penguin ◇ *Spheniscus magellanicus* Small numbers in the Falklands and a few more at sea.

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* Commonly seen throughout the tour.

Black-bellied Storm Petrel ◇ *Fregetta tropica* Frequent sightings on most sea days especially south of South Georgia.

Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* Good numbers around South Georgia plus a few others. **VU**

Southern Royal Albatross ◇ *Diomedea epomophora* Frequently seen, about 42 recorded on the tour. **VU**

Northern Royal Albatross ◇ *Diomedea sanfordi* Just two were identified. Tricky bird, you got to have good views! **EN**

Light-mantled Albatross ◇ (L-m Sooty A) *Phoebetria palpebrata* Frequently seen on and around South Georgia. **NT**

Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* Common seen throughout; one large colony on the Falklands.

Grey-headed Albatross ◇ *Thalassarche chrysostoma* A total of 16 were seen, especially around South Georgia. **EN**

Southern Giant Petrel (Common G P) *Macronectes giganteus* Commonly seen throughout the tour.

Northern Giant Petrel (Hall's G P) *Macronectes halli* Small numbers seen, mainly Falklands to South Georgia.

Southern Fulmar ◇ *Fulmarus glacialisoides* It was most common around the South Orkneys.

Antarctic Petrel ◇ *Thalassoica antarctica* Singletons were seen in the South Orkneys and near the South Shetlands.

Cape Petrel (Pintado P) *Daption capense* A constant companion around the ship. Up to 800 around Base Orcadas.

Snow Petrel ♦ *Pagodroma nivea* About 130 seen and mostly around South Georgia and Antarctica. See note.

Blue Petrel ♦ *Halobaena caerulea* Regular sightings near South Georgia and biggest number in the Drake Passage.

Antarctic Prion ♦ (Dove P) *Pachyptila desolata* Common at sea, especially around South Georgia.

Slender-billed Prion ♦ (Thin-billed P) *Pachyptila belcheri* It was seen around the Falklands.

Kerguelen Petrel ♦ *Aphrodroma brevirostris* A total of 21 individuals was seen on a single day towards Orcadas.

Atlantic Petrel ♦ (Schlegel's P) *Pterodroma incerta* One was seen distantly between the Falklands and S Georgia.

White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis* Commonly seen at sea throughout the tour. **VU**

Westland Petrel ♦ *Procellaria westlandica* One was seen near Cape Horn. A rarity in these waters!

Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus* A spectacle of c.10 000 as leaving the Falklands, few elsewhere. **NT**

Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis* One was seen near Cape Horn on our last day.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* One was seen en route to the Falklands and another at Cape Horn.

Magellanic Diving Petrel ♦ *Pelecanoides magellani* Two on our first day and two on our last day – close to Beagle.

South Georgia Diving Petrel ♦ *Pelecanoides georgicus* We believe we saw a few around South Georgia. See note.

Common Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides urinatrix* Seen around the Falklands [*berard*] and around S Georgia [*exsul*].

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* Two were seen in the Beagle Channel and one in the Falklands.

Neotropic Cormorant (Olivaceous C) *Phalacrocorax brasilianus* One seen in Ushuaia.

Rock Shag ♦ *Phalacrocorax magellanicus* Small numbers in the Falklands; also in Ushuaia.

Imperial Shag ♦ *Leucocarbo atriceps* Common on the Falklands and in the Beagle Channel. See note.

South Georgia Shag ♦ *Leucocarbo georgianus* Frequently encountered in South Georgia.

Antarctic Shag ♦ *Leucocarbo bransfieldensis* Several sightings on the Antarctic Peninsula and South Shetlands.

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* A few seen on the Falklands.

Snowy Sheathbill ♦ (Pale-faced S) *Chionis albus* It was seen on the Falklands, South Georgia and the Antarctic.

Magellanic Oystercatcher ♦ *Haematopus leucopodus* Common on the Falklands.

Blackish Oystercatcher *Haematopus ater* A pair on Carcass Island, Falklands and another at Stanley.

Two-banded Plover ♦ *Charadrius falklandicus* A total of six were seen at Surf Bay, near Stanley in the Falklands.

Rufous-chested Plover ♦ (R-c Dotterel) *Charadrius modestus* Four were seen well near the airport at Stanley.

South American Snipe *Gallinago paraguaiae* An excellent close encounter with one on the Falklands [*magellanica*].



South American Snipe *magellanica* race on the Falklands (János Oláh).

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* One was seen near Port Stanley on the Falklands.
Brown-hooded Gull ◊ *Chroicocephalus maculipennis* A few seen on the Falklands.
Dolphin Gull ◊ *Leucophaeus scoresbii* Common at Ushuaia, Beagle and Falklands.



Dolphin Gull in Ushuaia (János Oláh).

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* Common throughout, except for some of the sea days.
South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea* Common on the Falklands and around Ushuaia.
Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* Several sightings of first-winter or adult winter birds at sea.
Antarctic Tern ◊ *Sterna vittata* Common in South Georgia and the Antarctic.
Chilean Skua ◊ *Stercorarius chilensis* Several in the Beagle Channel and Cape Horn.
South Polar Skua ◊ *Stercorarius maccormicki* Several dark-morph birds in the Antarctic.
Brown Skua ◊ (Antarctic S) *Stercorarius antarcticus* Commonly seen throughout the tour. See note.
Striated Caracara ◊ *Phalacrocorax australis* Very common on Carcass and Saunders Islands, Falklands.
Southern Crested Caracara *Caracara plancus* Two were seen on Carcass Island, Falklands.
Chimango Caracara *Milvago chimango* One was seen in Ushuaia harbour.
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* One was seen on Saunders Island, Falklands [*cassini*].
Blackish Cinclodes ◊ *Cinclodes antarcticus* Very common on Carcass Island; also a pair on Saunders Island.
Dark-faced Ground Tyrant *Muscisaxicola maclovianus* Two sightings on the Falklands [*nominata*].
Sedge Wren (Grass W) *Cistothorus platensis* A singleton was seen on the Falklands [*falklandicus*].
Cobb's Wren ◊ *Troglodytes cobbi* At least 6 birds seen exceptionally well on Carcass Island, Falklands.
Austral Thrush ◊ *Turdus falcklandii* Just two seen on the Falklands [*nominata*].
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* It was seen in Port Stanley, Falklands.
Correndera Pipit *Anthus correndera* About six birds were seen near Port Stanley in the Falklands [*grayi*].
South Georgia Pipit ◊ *Anthus antarcticus* A total of 17 were seen at most landings on South Georgia. **NT**
Black-chinned Siskin ◊ *Spinus barbatus* Small numbers were seen on the Falklands.
Long-tailed Meadowlark ◊ *Sturnella loyca* Several sightings on the Falklands [*falklandica*].
White-bridled Finch ◊ (Black-throated F) *Melanodera melanodera* Eight were seen on the Falklands [*nominata*].

MAMMALS

- South American Fur Seal** *Arctocephalus australis* One was seen at sea around the Falklands.
- Antarctic Fur Seal** ◊ *Arctocephalus gazella* Very common on South Georgia and in the seas around it.
- South American Sealion** *Otaria flavescens* About 51 were seen near Cape Horn.
- Southern Elephant Seal** ◊ *Mirounga leonina* Common on South Georgia, many seen at Robert Point too.
- Crabeater Seal** *Lobodon carcinophagus* We saw several on our cruise into the Weddel Sea.
- Leopard Seal** ◊ *Hydrurga leptonyx* One sightings from the ship in the Bransfield Strait, Antarctica.
- Weddell Seal** *Leptonychotes weddelli* Several great sightings in the Antarctic Peninsula and South Shetlands.
- Antarctic Minke Whale** *Balaenoptera bonaerensis* Four individuals were seen on the Weddell Sea cruise.
- Common (Dwarf) Mink Whale** ◊ *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* One was seen cruising towards S. Georgia. See note.
- Fin Whale** *Balaenoptera physalis* About 50 seen in total.
- Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaengliae* Several sightings (cc 45 individuals), but seen best near South Shetlands.
- Southern Bottlenose Whale** ◊ *Hyperoodon planifrons* One was seen towards South Georgia and 25 near Orcadas.
- Peale's Dolphin** ◊ *Lagenorhynchus australis* It was seen towards the Falklands and at Cape Horn.
- Hourglass Dolphin** ◊ *Lagenorhynchus cruciger* Just four were seen towards the Falklands.
- Dusky Dolphin** *Lagenorhynchus obscurus* It was seen around the Falklands and Cape Horn.
- Commerson's Dolphin** ◊ *Cephalorhynchus commersonii* Just four were seen as arriving to the Falklands.



Southern Bottlenose Whales near Clarence Island (János Oláh).

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

The most up to date referenced taxonomic list referred to in the Tour Report is that of the IOC World Bird List (v7.3). Available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org/ioc-lists/master-list/>

Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*

The nominate form, confined to South Georgia, is sometimes considered to be a separate species, South Georgia Pintail *A. georgica*. The mainland and Falkland form is then renamed Yellow-billed Pintail *A. spinicauda*.

Snow Petrel *Pagodroma nivea*

All the birds we saw were of the nominate race that is sometimes called Lesser Snow Petrel, if the larger, thick-billed form is split off as a separate species (Greater Snow Petrel *P. confusa*). The latter is a scarce non-breeding visitor to the Antarctic peninsula.

South Georgia Diving Petrel *Pelecanoides georgicus*

Identification of this species is very difficult. In fact the only reliable way to separate it from Common Diving Petrel *P. urinatrix* is bill measurements and the posterior black line down the tarsi. In the hand Common Diving Petrel has a longer bill (South Georgia 5.0 - 5.7mm, Common 6.0 - 7.3mm). We took many photography of diving petrels around South Georgia and some showed those plumage features which are often a good clue to ID like white (not grey) underwing or white tips to the secondaries. So the combination of features can allude to one species or the other, but on current knowledge the specific identification of most, if not all, at sea would seem impossible.

Imperial Shag *Leucocarbo atriceps*

This species comprises two forms which are sometimes treated as separate species: Blue-eyed Shag *P. atriceps* and King Shag *P. albiventer*. We saw the white-cheeked form *atriceps* in the Beagle Channel. The dark-cheeked form *albiventer* was common on the Falklands.

Brown Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*

Two forms of Brown Skua were seen on the tour. We saw nominate *antarcticus* in the Falklands (this form also occurs in southern Argentina). The form *lonnbergi* was common in South Georgia and the Antarctic. These two forms are sometimes considered to be separate species: Falkland or Southern Skua *S. antarcticus*, and Subantarctic or Brown Skua *S. lonnbergi*.

Common (Dwarf) Mink Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*

The taxonomic review in 1998 concluded that the population of larger bodied *B. acutorostrata* in the high latitude regions of the Southern Ocean should be separated based on genetic and morphological grounds and assigned to a different species Antarctic Mink Whale *B. bonaerensis*. This species is distinctly larger than *B. acutorostrata* and generally sympatric with an unnamed form in the Southern Hemisphere, generally called the Dwarf Mink Whale (HMW 4.). The individual we saw had its distinct white band on the flippers and belonged to this unnamed form.



Southern Fulmar is a 'tubenose' which is a collective name for seabird with tubular nostrils on their bills (János Oláh).



Our trusty ship the Plancius anchored at Carcass Island on the Falklands (top) and at St Andrews Bay in South Georgia (János Oláh).