

QUACK

Newsletter of E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and www.EJPhoto.com
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Falkland Island Special Edition - 2009
(Vol 7, Issue 2)

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King Penguin Colony, Volunteer Beach (D300, 18-200mm)

Falkland Islands Trip Report

The Falkland Islands is an island archipelago approximately 200 miles east of the southern tip of South America at approximately 52 degrees south latitude. They span an area approximately 4700 square miles of land and are strewn over an area that is 200 miles wide by 100 miles tall. The islands consists of two very large Islands, East Falkland and West Falkland, and about 750

smaller islands. The Falklands are considered the northernmost islands in the sub-Antarctic climatic region. They were left behind in this section of the south Atlantic as part of the tectonic shift that occurred after South America and Africa split off of Pangaea, the single large continent that our current continents evolved from over time through the power of continental drift. As the two continents drifted apart, along the way, the Falkland Islands were left behind in the ocean just like a cookie leaves behind crumbs when dragged along a surface. They were first discovered in 1592 but no human set foot on the islands until 1690.

With the exception of a 75 day period in 1982, they were ruled over by the British Empire for their entire human history. There was a short war fought in 1982 when Argentina invaded and occupied the islands but they were driven back after reinforcements from the Royal Armed Services arrived. Today this set of islands has a population of about 2500 people. The vast majority, 2100 people, live in the capital city of Stanley on the eastern edge of East Falkland Island. Population on other islands is very sparse and many are completely uninhabited by humans.

The Falkland Islands have become one of the premiere places on earth for birders and bird photographers wishing to see and photograph several species of Penguins, Waterfowl, Seabirds and many other types of avian life. Additionally, Elephant Seals and Sea Lions are abundant. But it is the Penguins that attract the few thousand land visitors and the tens of thousands of cruise ship visitors each year. The Penguins are also what made it a highly desired destination for me. In January 2009, I was finally able to visit.

Flights into the military air base at Mount Pleasant on East Falkland occur only once a week on Saturday so land trips are scheduled in one week increments, arriving and departing on Saturday. Unless you are arriving via military transport, which can be arranged with the Royal Air Force, one must first fly to Santiago Chile. Visitors from North America must spend a night there on both ends of the trip. All flights to and



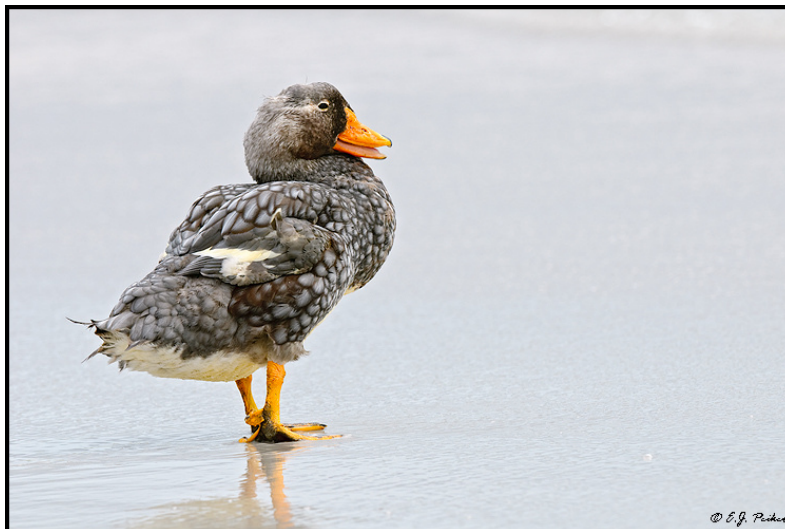
from Santiago from the US or Canada are overnight flights so in order to make the Saturday LAN Airlines flight from Santiago to Mount Pleasant, with a stop in Punta Arenas, Chile, one must leave the USA no later than Thursday and arrive in the Falklands on Saturday. Similarly on the return, one must leave the Falklands on a Saturday, spend Saturday night in Santiago and then leave on an overnight flight from Santiago back to the US on Sunday night, which then



South American Tern (D300, 18-200mm)

gets you home sometime on Monday. In theory one could make the last flight to the US out of Santiago on the same night but even the slightest delay along the route would result in missing the flight. Basically there are three travel days to and from the Falklands. As much as I would have liked to stay for two weeks visiting 4 or 5 islands, this simply was not possible due to work commitments when you add essentially 6 travel days to get there. I visited two islands on a one-week trip. Flights between the Islands are scheduled daily based on demand and are done in Britten-Norman Islander piston twin engine aircraft operated by Falkland Islands Government Air Service or FIGAS. The weight restrictions for all baggage, including the traditional carry-on for these flights is 25Kg (55lb) and there is an extra fee for anyone carrying more than 20Kg (44lb). One must pack carefully and efficiently in the lightest weight luggage possible for the FIGAS flights. Fortunately, one can leave heavier items not needed on the other islands in Stanley. Note that everything, including you is weighed and there are no ways around the restrictions nor would it be prudent due to the type of aircraft used to make these flights.

After arriving on Saturday, January 15, 2005 and being shuttled from Mount Pleasant to Stanley, I got checked into the Malvina House Hotel, the Bed and Breakfast Lodge for the stay



Falkland Steamer Duck (D3x, 200-400mm)

on East Falkland. A subsequent walk of the waterfront provided photographic opportunity of Falkland Steamer Ducks, Upland Geese, Dolphin Gull, Blackish Oystercatcher, and South American Tern. In addition, I photographed the Governor's Mansion, several memorials and some modern art along the waterfront. There are a number of shops including a grocery store, gift shops, visitor center, and a



Gentoo Penguin w/ Magellanic Oystercatcher (D300, 200-400mm)

park for picnicking along the main waterfront area.

The next day, Sunday, was my first ever encounter with non-captive Penguins. A guide took us to Volunteer Point which is only about 15 air miles north of Stanley but due to the coastline is quite a journey of more than 60 miles. The first hour is on rocky roads but the second half is

through deep peat bogs. The Falkland's

surface primarily consists of a very thick overcoat of peat from eons of vegetation growing and dying and more growing on top of it. As we were transitioning from gravel road to peat in our oversized tire Land Rover, we were waved down by a sheep farmer on an ATV (the easiest way to traverse the peat) to let us know that we had a flat tire. So we changed the tire and went onward to Volunteer Point. As we got close to our destination, I saw my first Penguin, a Magellanic Penguin. A bit further and a group of Gentoo Penguins became visible and finally the colorful and majestic King Penguin colony. This is the largest King Penguin colony in the Falklands. Four hours of photography of all three Penguin types plus numerous shorebirds and even some songbirds on the beach went by quickly. A highlight was a couple of King Penguins that were hiding recently hatched babies under their skirt and they would occasionally poke their head out and get fed by their parent. After another rough 2.5 hour drive back to Stanley completed a full 9 hours day of travel and photography.

Monday was a travel day from Stanley to Sea Lion Island, one of the southernmost islands in the archipelago. After packing just the bare essentials to keep the weight down for the FIGAS flight, the passengers going to Sea Lion were on their way. We arrived right at noon. Sea Lion Island is about 5 miles long and 1.5 miles wide. The only buildings on the island are the Sea Lion lodge and the only inhabitants are the 5 people that run the lodge. After a



Rockhopper Penguin (D300, 200-400mm)



Gentoo Chick (D3x, 18-200mm)

delicious lunch we were driven around the island to get oriented as we would have complete run of the island and go wherever we wanted for the time here. Since I had never seen Rockhopper Penguins in the wild before and it was a beautiful day, when we got to the Rockhopper colony, the obvious choice was to depart the vehicle and remain behind knowing there would be a 2.5 mile hike back to the lodge with all of the photo gear. The Rockhoppers were quite friendly and at times came within arms reach. Additionally I photographed Rock Cormorants and King Cormorants, Dolphin Gulls, and Giant Southern Petrel in flight. Many of the King Cormorants were on nests that are carefully spaced on top of cliff ledge. The ever present and ultra tame Tussacbird (Blackish Cinclones) was also always near. The hike back was long and tiring after so much travel and the beginnings of a cold but it was very much worth it to spend the afternoon amongst the Rockhoppers.

After dinner, a visit to the Gentoo colony right outside the lodge was warranted for some late light photography of these entertaining birds. In the end, what was planned to be a travel day with just a little photography, ended up being an incredibly productive day

with tons of photography.

I woke up on Tuesday and it was now confirmed, I was getting a cold as my nose was running, chest was congested, and throat hurt. But not to be deterred I went out early with just a camera body and an 18-200mm zoom to see what I could find on a beach just south of the lodge. Wow, was I surprised. I photographed Elephant Seal, Striated Caracara, Falkland Flightless and Flying Steamer Ducks, Kelp Goose, Magellanic Penguins, Magellanic Oystercatchers and much more, including a stray pair of King Penguins, and all of it at point blank range and easily reachable with just an 18-200mm lens, not my primary 200-400mm zoom lens. I went back up to the lodge for breakfast and then on to the north beach to watch and photograph the Gentoos coming in off of the ocean. A walk up the beach also led to a nesting colony of Petrels however we were warned that this is the only place on the island to not approach the birds so I kept a good distance. The weather rolled in late morning and the walk back was in a driving rainstorm.

The strong wind and rain continued after lunch. This provided an opportunity to do some photo editing. Around 2:30PM, it cleared up so I went back to the southern beach near the lodge but this time with the larger 200-400mm lens. This was another productive session with the same cast of characters as in the morning but with the highlight of a young Magellanic Oystercatcher chick.

After dinner, again I photographed the Gentoo colony in nice evening light but this time with a wide angle lens by laying on the ground and letting the birds approach me with their curious nature. This provided some interesting perspective shots.

Wednesday was set aside in the pursuit of two goals. I badly wanted to add Silver Teal to my waterfowl collection and I wanted some



Silver Teal (D3X, 200-400mm)

time working the Blackish Oystercatchers. In the center of the island there is a large pond called Long Pond. It is here where I found and photographed the Silver Teal including some flight shots but also got close shots of Silvery Grebe including babies. There were also many Crested Ducks and Speckled Teal including many juveniles. Of course the Upland and Ruddy Headed Geese were ever present. After photographing all of this and short walk to a rocky beach on the south shore, Blackish Oystercatchers immediately revealed themselves including one pair with a baby not more than 2 or 3 days old. I took hundreds of photos in this area of many species including Crested Duck on Lichen, Kelp Geese, a Striated Caracara nest on a cliff, Sea Lion, and much more. I almost didn't see the Sea Lion until he made a snort – this was quite startling as this is the one animal to be very careful around. Fortunately I did nothing more than wake him and he subsequently posed for the camera as I retreated to a farther distance. The day was brought to a close with another walk by Long Pond and more photos of Silver Teal, Silvery Grebe and Chiloe Wigeon. Additionally, I finally got some shots of Rufous-chested Dotterel and Black-faced Ground Tyrants.

When I got back, I realized that I had gotten a fairly serious sun burn despite the SPF30 sun block I put on but unfortunately it didn't last the entire day. This plus a heavy escalation of my cold made it a rough night. I contemplated not going out for a before breakfast photo shoot on Thursday morning to give my body a bit of recovery time as I was starting to get pretty sick. The howling 50MPH winds and heavy cloud deck made it an easy decision. The winds stayed way too strong for photography on sandy beaches and cliffs through the lunch hour but around 2:00PM, the wind eased and the sun broke out. A final



Elephant Seal Pup (D300, 200-400mm)

walk around the area just west of the lodge revealed a small marshy area that produced Lesser Yellowlegs, Magellanic Snipe, and Black-throated finch photos. Then it was back to the lodge to catch a FIGAS flight back to Stanley. The flight was early so I was quite rushed in getting my things together but I made it just in time. The flight to Stanley was quite a circuitous route going first northwest to Fox Bay on West Falkland to pick up one passenger and then north to Carcass Island on the northwestern edge of the archipelago to pick up two more. After that, a 120 mile flight east back to Stanley and a shuttle ride back to the Malvinas House lodge to end the day.

After a good night's sleep and medicine, I was feeling better Friday morning and took another long four wheel ride over the peat to Volunteer Beach, home of the large King Penguin colony. Unfortunately it was inundated with people from a cruise ship excursion which made the first one and a half hours a bit tough for photography. While waiting for things to clear and photographing opportunistically, it was incredible some of the behaviors that I observed towards these beautiful wild animals by the a few of the cruise ship excursionists. Once the beach cleared of over a hundred people leaving just a handful of

photographers, things got back to normal, the Penguins relaxed and many good photographs were taken. Another two hour rough drive back to Stanley brought the 2009 Falkland Islands trip to a photographic close with only travel home Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

On the trip, my primary photo gear was a Nikon D3X and D300 with the Nikon 200-400 f/4VR



King Penguin with Chick and Egg Shell (D300, 200-400mm)



Southern Giant Petrel (D300, 200-400mm, 1.7x)

lens and the Nikon 18-200VR lens for a walking around lens. Easily 90% of the photos I took could have been taken with a single 70-300mm lens. Only some of the headshots, a few small birds and some of the landscapes dictated more focal length. However if I were to return, I would likely take a 24-70mm, a 70-300 and the 200-400mm lens. For support I used a Gitzo 3530 tripod with a 4th Generation Design Mongoose M3.5A head. I prefer the Wimberley but the

Mongoose much lighter weight made it ideal for this trip due to the weight restrictions. I used a Nikon SB900 flash mounted on the Mongoose flash arm. Beware that at the Volunteer Beach King Penguin colony there is some controversy about the use of flash. The written and posted rules say that flash is only forbidden when shooting into Magellanic Penguin burrows, however a no flash policy is inconsistently and selectively enforced around the King Penguin policy – it all depends on who is doing the wardening. All of the equipment performed flawlessly. As I have come to expect with Nikon's CAM 3500 autofocus system, there was not a single out of focus shot other than a handful caused by human error. I have now done several major photo shoots exclusively with Nikon gear including Namibia and the Falkland Islands and my only real complaint is that I find it difficult to change the autofocus sensor when the camera is in vertical mode due to an unnatural reach that is required on the D3x. I will be working on ways to make this easier for my hand before my next major outing.

The Falkland Islands are clearly one of the world's premiere wildlife destinations, especially for those with a love of birds and bird photography, and especially for those who love the antics of several of the world's Penguin species. In total I observed 42 species of birds, photographed 38 species of birds including four penguin species, Elephant Seal, and Southern Sea Lion.



Magellanic Oystercatcher Chick (D300, 200-400, 1.7x)

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