

Editorial

South Georgia – a very Important Bird Area

It is estimated that over 100 million individual seabirds are based on South Georgia, a UK Overseas Territory in the Southern Ocean. That sounds to me like a pretty important Important Bird Area. Yet that staggering total, while enough to get any decent birder or ornithologist salivating wildly, is probably substantially below the numbers that would have existed before man intervened.



‘Civilisation’ appears to have thrown the book at South Georgia. Brown Rats *Rattus norvegicus* arrived with the sealers in the latter half of the 1700s and spread across much of the island, with substantial effect on the populations of the endemic South Georgia Pipits *Anthus antarcticus*, the small burrowing White-chinned Petrels *Procellaria aequinoctialis* and the South Georgia Pintails *Anas georgica*. The House Mouse *Mus domesticus* has also had a go, with drastic effects. And Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus*, brought in by the whalers as a source of food, haven’t helped, altering the vegetation with their grazing and also causing trampling.

Nature, not man, brings the Antarctic Fur Seals *Arctocephalus gazella* to breed on South Georgia and erode the typical tussac grassland. Beyond the now controlled waters of the extensive feeding areas around the island, fishing and more recently longlining have also significantly affected albatross and petrel species.

So, the 100-million-seabirds figure is a bit of a miracle and it is a real challenge to see what the number might be if some of the human impacts were reversed.

The South Georgia Heritage Trust has set itself the task of doing just that. The Trust’s work covers the historical heritage of the island as well as the natural one, with the heroic story of Shackleton’s superhuman

endeavours a centrepiece of the history of the island. But the Trust, of which I am privileged and excited to be a President, has something pretty heroic and superhuman planned for the natural heritage. For the last five years, the Trust has been preparing and fundraising for the biggest rat and mouse eradication programme ever delivered, in order to restore the island’s bird populations to their

original glory. The scale of ambition in the programme is almost of crazed proportions. The area covered is ten times bigger than that of any previous eradication programme. We are all probably certifiable! But the impressive and painstaking research, the immensely careful and detailed planning, the extensive effort to demonstrate and communicate the doability of the project and the charm with which key figures have conjured up support and resources worldwide is real. (One of the areas involved is named Thatcher Peninsula – for obvious reasons – and it was a delight to see how some donors warmed to the prospect of carpet-bombing something called Thatcher with rat poison!)

Phase 1 of the eradication programme took place in 2011 and was run like a military exercise and with great success. Conservation tools used to be binoculars, telescopes and field notebooks. South Georgia conservationists buy helicopters (we are very proud of our two) and beg for astronomical amounts of rat poison. They build fuel dumps and work out how to transport machines long distances on ships and tranship them in lousy weather. They agonise about where to maintain equipment – in situ, with the ever-present weather challenges, or with yet another transhipment back to the Falkland Islands.

They acquire at least two of everything

like acquisitive jackdaws. You can't pop out and buy something that breaks or gets mislaid when you are thousands of miles from the shops and have a narrow window of weather opportunity to fly and spread bait. We did drop the helicopter bait bucket in the ocean almost immediately we began Phase 1, but we had thought of that and had another and also dredged the dropped one out of the sea and hammered it back into shape in typical can-do style.

The helicopter flying for the bait-laying was precision, satellite aided and expert. It drew staff from eradication projects elsewhere in the world, particularly New Zealand, who would win a gold if rodent eradication were an Olympic sport. Teamwork was vital and the team was a joy to behold, blending skills and comradeship, sometimes not an easy thing to do. Above all, the weather was kind and the flying hours that were so needed were flown.

Phase 1 was completed in half the anticipated time and under budget. Close monitoring seems to indicate that the baiting was successful and no rats have been seen in the trial area since the spreading of the bait in March 2011. The monitoring programme covers rats, birds and also how the bait pellets break down and become harmless. The results to date are encouraging. Every day has brought the agonies of looking for rat tracks in the snow while hoping earnestly not to find them. Besides the lack of any sign of rats so far, the inevitable loss of some birds has already been shown to be recoverable. South Georgia Pintails were the hardest hit immediately after baiting, but in only a few months their numbers around King Edward Cove had recovered substantially, due partly to the ducklings that started emerging once the rats had disappeared. The exciting prospect now is that the Phase 1 area, for decades a 'sink' for ducks, where few if any were reared, will soon generate a surplus of young pintails. It would be nice if the skuas recognised how precious and expensive these ducklings are and cherished them, rather than having a go!

The convention is that two years have to pass without any sign of rats before an eradication project can be deemed a success, but it is looking good.

Phase 1 covered 12,500 ha, but that dealt with only 12% of the rat-infested land area of

South Georgia. The main phase of the project will tackle the remainder of the island, is estimated to cost approximately £5 million and will take two to three Antarctic seasons to complete, beginning in 2013. There is no time to waste: climate change means that the glaciers currently dividing the island are retreating, threatening to release more areas to rodent colonisation in a few years. Donations to help this visionary project can be made via the South Georgia Heritage Trust website (www.sght.org). Restoring a hectare of the island forever costs £90, a square mile costs £23,000 and there are 94,000 hectares or 360 square miles to cover!

Once the project has been completed, vigilance and biosecurity measures will still be required as between 6,000 and 7,000 people visit South Georgia each year, from cruise ships to those associated with fishing, research and the military. Personally, I would ask for strip searches of everyone landing on the island in case they had a rodent secreted about their person, an indignity I once suffered on a much cherished, rat-free New Zealand island that will remain nameless. At least that's what they said it was about! Can we please also tell Argentinian scrap dealers that they are unwelcome?

But effective eradication followed by ongoing biosecurity and monitoring should mean that previously threatened or depleted species should start to bounce out of the ground, some faster than others. For me, success will be when there are pipits in abundance. I only hope that I can muster aged strength to visit South Georgia in 30 years' time to see how even more important one of the most important Important Bird Areas has become.

Barbara, Baroness Young of Old Scone

Barbara Young, Baroness Young of Old Scone, is a President of the South Georgia Heritage Trust. She has been involved with bird and environmental organisations for over 20 years and was formerly Chief Executive of the RSPB and Chief Executive of the Environment Agency. She is currently President of the BTO, President of the Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust, a Vice-president of the RSPB, of BirdLife International, and of Flora and Fauna International. She is also Chancellor of Cranfield University. Her global bird list is extensive but (she tells us) unreliable.