

ERRATUM

With this issue you will find a reprint of pages 139 – 146 which first appeared in the March 2012 issue of *British Birds*. Due to an error which occurred at the printing stage, the author biographies on page 144 and the abstract on page 145 were incomplete.

We know that many readers refer back to and also bind their issues for future reference and therefore wanted to ensure that a corrected and complete version was provided.

Apologies are offered on behalf of the printers.

Cattle Egrets have occurred elsewhere in Antarctica, as far south as the Argentine Islands off the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula at 65°S. Recently, sightings have been fewer, although they are still recorded in most years.

Passerine vagrants are few and only Chilean Swallow *Tachycineta leucopyga* and Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* have occurred more than once. Dark-faced Ground-tyrant *Muscisaxicola maclovianus* and Long-tailed Meadowlark *Sturnella loyca* are both widespread in South America and breed in the Falklands, while Grey-flanked Cinclodes *Cinclodes oustaleti* is found in southern South America and Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus* winters south to Argentina.

The South Georgia avifauna thus totals 87 species, of which 29 are regular breeders, three are occasional breeders, nine (all seabirds) are regular non-breeding visitors, 45 are vagrants (two of which were ship-assisted) and one species was introduced but is now extinct on the island. Species for which we have anecdotal knowledge of sightings since 1995 in or near to the South Georgia area, but insufficient information on date, location or observer, include Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata*, White-bellied Storm-petrel *Fregetta grallaria*, Red Knot *Calidris cauntus* and Brown-hooded Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*.

Potential future records

The many changes in status and additions to the South Georgia avifauna evident from Prince & Payne (1979), Prince & Croxall (1983, 1996) and this paper, coupled with rapidly increasing knowledge of field characters of seabirds and significantly greater observer coverage, suggest that new species will continue to be added to the South Georgia list. Increased observation will probably show that some species known only as vagrants or rare visitors are actually regular in small numbers. These could include Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi*, White-headed Petrel *Pterodroma lessoni*, Great-winged Petrel *P. macroptera*, Atlantic Petrel *P. incerta*, Broad-billed Prion and Little Shearwater *Puffinus elegans*. Seabirds that might be expected to occur occasionally

include Manx Shearwater, Mottled Petrel, White-bellied and Leach's Storm-petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*. It is also conceivable that oceanographic conditions bringing warmer water south, coupled with a strong northerly airstream, might also bring species common in temperate and subtropical waters of the South Atlantic, such as Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche chlororhynchos*, Spectacled Petrel *Procellaria conspicillata*, Trindade Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* and White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina* into South Georgia waters. At present there are no records of any other taxon in the Wandering Albatross complex (e.g. Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena*) from South Georgia waters, although recently a single (ringed) Antipodean Albatross *D. antipodensis* was found on Bird Island. Tristan Albatross is widespread (but rare) in temperate waters well to the north and the Antipodean Albatross occurs regularly on migration off the coast of southern Chile; both might occur in South Georgia waters but will be challenging to identify at sea.

Both Pomarine *Stercorarius pomarinus* and Arctic Skuas *S. parasiticus* have been seen at latitudes farther south than South Georgia, while Sabine's Gulls *Xema sabini*, which winter in the Benguela Current and are seen commonly off southern South Africa, might wander to South Georgia occasionally. A number of other shorebirds with long migration routes that carry them to southern South America may overshoot to South Georgia; these include Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*, Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda* and Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*. It is also possible that South American Snipe *Gallinago paragnaiiae* might wander to South Georgia from the Falklands or southern Patagonia. Passerines are less easy to predict, but possibilities include Purple Martin *Progne subis*, White-crested Elaenia *Elaenia albiceps*, Patagonian (Rufous-backed) Negrilo *Lessonia rufa*, and Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis*. But experience elsewhere suggests that the safest prediction would be that one of the next species to be added to the South Georgia list will not have been predicted.

The importance of South Georgia

In terms of seabird abundance, and especially biomass, South Georgia is without doubt one of the world's most important seabird islands. Even today, with petrel populations perhaps an order of magnitude lower than before the introduction of rats, it is estimated that over 100 million individual seabirds are based there. South Georgia is the world's most important breeding site for six species (Macaroni Penguin, Grey-headed Albatross, Northern Giant Petrel, Antarctic Prion, White-chinned Petrel, Common Diving Petrel) and is probably in the top three such sites for seven others (King Penguin, Gentoo Penguin, Wandering Albatross, Black-browed Albatross, Southern Giant Petrel, Black-bellied Storm-petrel, South Georgia Diving Petrel). Several of these species are also Globally Threatened or Near Threatened (see table 1), which underlines the importance of South Georgia and of actions to improve the conservation status of its species. Although South Georgia is currently classified by BirdLife International (see Poncet 2006) as a single Important Bird Area (IBA), closer scrutiny may well reveal that it is better

viewed as comprising several distinct IBAs. In addition, if the South Georgia subspecies of the Yellow-billed Pintail was reinstated at species rank, then South Georgia would, under the BirdLife classification, become a full Endemic Bird Area, rather than a secondary area as at present (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998).

Present threats to South Georgia breeding birds

The populations of breeding birds on South Georgia are threatened both on land and at sea. On land, the most important factors governing the distribution and abundance of breeding seabirds are the presence of introduced Brown Rats and Reindeer, and the impact of the expanding population of Antarctic Fur Seals.

Brown Rats have had a major effect on the South Georgia avifauna. Rats were introduced accidentally by the early whalers and sealers, possibly as long ago as the eighteenth century, and now occupy the entire northeast coast of the island, and the northwestern portion of the south coast. Their most significant impact has been on the endemic South



Ewan Edwards

88. Where Tussac Grass *Poa flabellata* is accessible to Antarctic Fur Seals *Arctocephalus gazella*, the habitat is extensively degraded, and no longer supports nesting birds. The rapid expansion of the seal population following collapse of the sealing industry has significantly reduced the area of nesting habitat for seabirds on South Georgia.

Georgia Pipit, which has been completely eliminated in all areas with rats. However, the presence of rats also has a major impact on some burrow-nesting seabirds, with some smaller species being absent entirely in areas with rats. In addition to Brown Rats, House Mice are known from a few areas of South Georgia. In areas where mice are present, populations of South Georgia Pipit are significantly reduced.

Where Reindeer are present, their grazing has modified the natural vegetation extensively. In particular, they have reduced the coverage of Tussac Grass, thereby eliminating important breeding habitat for many burrow-nesting species, and have collapsed existing burrows by trampling. However, areas with Reindeer also contain Brown Rats, and while these areas have greatly reduced numbers of burrow-nesting seabirds it is not easy to separate the relative impact of these two introduced mammals.

The expansion of the Antarctic Fur Seal population also affects the habitat for breeding seabirds. The most severe impacts are the destruction of tussac grassland (plate 88) and a shift in the vegetation, with replacement of Antarctic Hair-grass *Deschampsia antarctica* by the introduced Annual Meadow-grass, which is more tolerant of trampling and enhanced nutrient input. In northwest South Georgia (the source of Antarctic Fur Seal population recovery and expansion), much of the low-altitude grassland has been effectively destroyed as a breeding habitat for seabirds, as well as for South Georgia Pipits and South Georgia Pintails, thus restricting many species to sites inaccessible to the seals. The extent to which such displacement has been accompanied by local population decline is uncertain.

In the marine environment, widespread and traditional threats such as oil pollution, toxic effects of chemical residues and ingestion of plastics are generally uncommon, even rare, among South Georgia seabirds, though more problematic for those species which move to South American coastal waters in winter or are transequatorial migrants. The main threats to seabirds at sea come from interactions with commercial longline and trawl fisheries. A substantial mortality of albatrosses as bycatch in long-

line fisheries, and its major role in their population declines, was discovered in the early 1990s. It was then recognised also to involve giant petrels, and especially White-chinned Petrels, for which population trend data were scarce or absent. In 1997, bycatch estimates were produced, indicating that around 6,000 albatrosses and petrels were being killed annually around South Georgia and that longline fishing was the likely main cause of the declines in the island's Wandering, Black-browed and Grey-headed Albatross populations. Decisive action for the compulsory use of a suite of technical and operational measures to address this problem was taken from 1998 onwards by CCAMLR, the body responsible for the management of Southern Ocean fisheries, including those around South Georgia. With the wholehearted support of the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and the UK, these actions reduced the problem to negligible proportions locally over the next five years (Croxall 2008). Similar problems, but at a smaller scale, were also evident in seabird mortality associated with trawl fisheries and these were also tackled effectively in the fisheries around South Georgia.

Unfortunately, bycatch of South Georgia seabirds in longline and trawl fisheries is still widespread and substantial in many areas outside South Georgia waters. This affects juveniles and immatures throughout the year and adults outside the breeding season. For South Georgia birds the most serious problems are in the waters of, and adjacent to, northern Argentina, Uruguay and southern Brazil; there are also severe problems in the Benguela and Humboldt Currents and in the southern Indian Ocean for some species. Despite the creation of an international convention, the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), to address these (and all other) threats to albatrosses, giant petrels and *Procellaria* petrels and the increasingly effective activities of the BirdLife Albatross Task Force in the Benguela Current system and in the southwest Atlantic, South Georgia albatrosses and large petrels are still being killed at levels that are unsustainable. Most species continue to decline at rates of between 1% and 4% per annum.

Mitigation: eradication of rodents

A phased eradication of introduced rodents on South Georgia began in March 2011, with the aerial spreading of rodenticide-laced cereal bait over 128 km² of the central north coast. This project is financed and run by the South Georgia Heritage Trust, and it is expected that two further seasons of bait spreading will be required before the entire island can be declared rodent-free. South Georgia is many times larger than any island hitherto targeted for rodent eradication, but its larger glaciers are barriers to rodent movement and effectively divide the island into many separate but contiguous baiting zones, each of which can be treated independently.

The return of birds to breed in areas from which their ancestors were displaced decades or centuries ago is expected to commence in some species soon after rodents have been removed. However, most of the seabird species affected demonstrate high natal philopatry, so range expansion will be slow and it may be centuries before a new steady state is achieved. At that time the abundance of species especially vulnerable to rat predation, such as storm-petrels, Blue Petrels and South Georgia Pipits, may be one or two orders of magnitude greater than now.

Past and present climate change

In common with all of Antarctica, South Georgia is recovering from the last glacial maximum, when it was covered in glaciers that extended to the edge of the present continental shelf. Although the presence of small refugia cannot be discounted, we must assume that the bulk of the present flora and fauna has colonised in the past 17,000 years or so. In geological and evolutionary terms, the present seabird fauna represents a relatively recent colonisation. The growth and decay of continental ice sheets in cycles of 40,000 and 100,000 years, driven by changes in the earth's orbit (Milankovitch climate cycles), will thus have exposed and removed breeding habitat for seabirds on a regular basis, and also shifted feeding grounds as the oceanography changed.

At present, most of the glaciers on South Georgia are retreating as the climate warms (Gordon *et al.* 2008). While altitudinal shifts

in breeding distribution are possible as vegetation zones move higher, the major influence of current climate change is to allow the further spread of introduced Reindeer and Brown Rats out of areas that were previously delimited by impassable glaciers and the sea. This leads to the probability that, in the absence of rat eradication measures, seabirds currently isolated from such threats will become exposed, with consequent declines in population and breeding success.

The warming climate is also having more subtle effects, including reduced winter snowfall and summers that are becoming longer, and perhaps wetter. The data are currently anecdotal but there are indications that climate change is increasing the breeding potential of both Reindeer and Brown Rats, and also of South Georgia Pipits. In the last case, longer summers allow for longer and more productive breeding seasons, with dispersing juveniles being seen more widely than previously.

It seems probable that the species most vulnerable to ongoing climate change are those whose ecology is intimately associated with sea-ice. It is quite possible that Snow Petrels and Chinstrap Penguins may eventually not breed at all on South Georgia. Those species with specialised habits closely adapted to current South Georgia conditions are also likely to be affected, and both Gentoo Penguins and Imperial Shags may decline. For species dependent on the proximity of feeding areas such as the Antarctic Polar Front, which may move farther from South Georgia, more demanding foraging may lead to the population decline of, for example, Macaroni Penguins, King Penguins, and Grey-headed Albatrosses. If oceanographic conditions cause a substantial change in krill availability around South Georgia, that could promote large-scale changes in the abundance and composition of the marine avifauna.

The future: tourism and conservation

Some 6,000–7,000 people visit South Georgia each year. The majority are recreational visitors on cruise ships but other visitors include yacht crews and contract workers, researchers, military personnel and passen-

gers on a variety of vessels associated with resupply, research, fishing and military activities. Ship-based tourist activities include shore landings and Zodiac cruising, with occasional sub-aqua diving, camping, mountaineering and kayaking excursions. The only land-based tourism facility on the island is the South Georgia Museum at Grytviken. There are no accommodation facilities for tourists on the island, although those on climbing and scientific expeditions are permitted to camp, and both day and longer-term visitors occasionally occupy the field huts on the central north coast. Current legislation requires all expeditions and any visitors wishing to stay overnight on South Georgia away from King Edward Point to obtain Government permits.

It is unlikely that the tightly regulated tourism will have any significant negative impacts on the environment or wildlife of South Georgia. Indeed, the burgeoning awareness of South Georgia and the problems faced by its wildlife is likely to be beneficial in bringing increased pressure for all initiatives seeking to restore the wildlife to its former glories (before humans arrived); the ever greater number of visiting birders will also undoubtedly add to our knowledge of the island's birdlife.

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Andrew Clarke has had a lifelong interest in birds, and spent 40 years as a marine ecologist with the British Antarctic Survey. He worked on South Georgia between 1970 and 1982, spending two winters there, before moving farther south in Antarctica. **John Croxall** worked on the seabirds and seals of South Georgia for the British Antarctic Survey for 30 years, retiring in 2006 as Head of Conservation Biology. He is Chair of the Global Seabird Programme of BirdLife International, and is a Trustee of the South Georgia Heritage Trust. **Sally Poncet** is an ecologist who has been studying South Georgia's seabirds since the 1970s. She lives in the Falkland Islands, from where she regularly returns to South Georgia. **Tony Martin** is Professor of Animal Conservation at the University of Dundee, and directs the South Georgia Habitat Restoration Project for the South Georgia Heritage Trust. **Robert Burton** worked on albatrosses at the British Antarctic Survey research station on Bird Island in the early 1970s; he has maintained an interest in the wildlife and history of South Georgia ever since and has visited the island many times.



89. Peter Prince at Bird Island, South Georgia, where he undertook pioneering work on the feeding and reproductive biology of albatrosses. He also made the first scientific study of Blue Petrels *Halobaena caerulea* there, and both organised and led the first all-island survey of the breeding birds of South Georgia.

Citril Finch on Fair Isle: new to Britain

Deryk N. Shaw and Roger Riddington



Richard Johnson

Abstract A Citril Finch *Carduelis citrinella* was found on Fair Isle on 6th June 2008; it remained on the island until 11th and was trapped on 7th. The bird was in immaculate condition and was accepted by both BBRC and BOURC as the first record for Britain. As well as the circumstances of the record, this article discusses the status and distribution of the species, together with information about movements and migration, and the possible origins of the Fair Isle bird.

For both of us, Friday 6th June 2008 will forever remain an acutely poignant day for reasons entirely unconnected to birds. At 2.00 pm that afternoon, along with most resident Shetland birders and a few hundred others, we had attended a memorial service to celebrate the life of Vaila Harvey, the youngest daughter of Paul and Elizabeth Harvey, who died of cancer at the age of 16 on 22nd May 2008. It was inevitably a highly emotional afternoon, and, puts the rest of this paper in its true context. All mobile phones were switched off at the service; held in Sandwick, in south Mainland Shetland, and we were thus unaware of events on Fair Isle,

where DNS was then the Observatory warden.

At about midday, Fair Isle resident Tommy Hyndman spotted a yellowy-green, finch-sized bird feeding in his garden at the Auld Haa. An inexperienced but enthusiastic watcher of birds, Tommy had arrived with his family from his native USA to live on Fair Isle in 2006. Unsurprisingly, he didn't recognise the bird immediately, but after watching it and consulting a field guide he decided that it was a Citril Finch *Carduelis citrinella*. He phoned the Obs and left a message, as he often did when he saw unfamiliar birds. Some little time later, Mike Gee was the first birder on the scene, although he was unaware

of the news and just happened to be passing. He listened to Tommy's story, but the bird had by then disappeared. Given the circumstances, Mike was understandably sceptical but, half an hour or so later, as the bird materialised in front of him, he perked up significantly as he realised that it was indeed a male Citril Finch! Shortly afterwards, Elizabeth Riddiford and then Paul King arrived on the scene, followed by Kevin Shepherd, who had been Assistant Warden at the Obs in 1985 and was staying at the Auld Haa with his wife Roya. With the identification finally confirmed, news spread quickly at last and all interested parties on the island made a beeline for the Haa.

Back on mainland, and a little after 4.00 pm, RR was taxiing Deryk, his wife Hollie and Neil Thomson, skipper of the *Good Shepherd*, back to Grutness (the *Shepherd* had been chartered to bring friends to the service). About halfway to the boat, we finally became aware of what had been happening on Fair Isle, via that year's Assistant Warden, Simon Davies. Having the skipper in the car meant that there was sufficient flexibility for RR to nip home and change out of his suit and join the Fair Isle residents heading back to the isle. After an extraordinarily smooth trip in calm, foggy conditions, we arrived on

Fair Isle at about 7.00 pm. The two of us were whisked down to the Haa in the Obs van and were relieved to find that the bird was still within 100 m of where it had first been found. We were soon enjoying good views: what a smart little bird!

It remained on the island until 11th June, and some 50 or more folk made the trip to see it, either from Shetland or from farther afield. It was trapped on 7th June, which enabled a closer examination of its condition.

Identification and description

As the multitude of excellent photographs of the bird testify, it was a distinctive creature. It was essentially a small, yellowish finch, about the size and shape of a Siskin; the bill shape was pretty similar to that of a Siskin (marginally shorter?) and it was long-winged, the primary projection being judged in the field to be as long as the exposed tertials. The tail was strongly cleft and it looked relatively long-tailed in flight.

The bird's head sported an extensive pale, ash-grey 'shawl', wrapping right round the nape and across the ear-coverts to finish either side of the throat. Forehead/fore-crown, chin/throat and the ear-coverts beneath the eye were, like the rest of the underparts, a bright, slightly greenish-tinged



Rebecca Nason

90. Male Citril Finch *Carduelis citrinella*, Fair Isle, June 2008.