

Jonathan Goldsmith, our Falkland Islands expert, endeavours to encounter his King in a remote and rewarding land.

Rockhopper penguin



Many people think that we have one of the best jobs in the world, and they are not wrong. The look of slight, but definite, bemusement on the faces of my family can therefore be understood a little when I announced that I was going to the Falkland Islands. Images of deserted, windy, rainswept islands where life is tough flashed through their minds, alongside memories of the 1982 conflict. However, the 700 islands are home to around 75% of the world's rockhopper penguin population and had been a dream destination of mine for some time.

As the trip got closer my wife adopted a king penguin for me at Volunteer Point through the Falklands Wildlife Trust and now I had an aim – travel halfway around the world to meet King 'Smartie' the Penguin, whose photograph nestled in my wallet.

Landing at the military base at Mount Pleasant takes you out of the modern world and is the perfect introduction to the islands. Somehow my contact Sally identified me. I suppose she knew everyone else on the plane, and we headed for Darwin. With few roads, Land Rovers are the favoured form of land transport. In the air there is the Islander eight-seater aircraft and, after my

first night in the wonderful company of Ken and Bonnie at Darwin House, I was thankful for a strong stomach as the plane bounced over stunning clear waters and white sand beaches to Saunders Island. Arriving slightly late after our pilot had spotted a whale and circled tightly to get a better look, Susan took me out to The Neck, a narrow strip of land that joins the two halves of the island together. This is home to thousands of gentoo and magellanic penguins as well as 22 pairs of king penguins. While cheeky caracaras hopped along beside me I explored the cliffs where there are huge colonies of rockhoppers living alongside black-browed albatross and king cormorants.

The general rule about approaching wildlife here is that you should not get closer than five metres. However, the funky punk-like rockhoppers will soon come over to check that your boots are not edible. Returning to The Neck I got my first look at the kings, and began to get the feeling that picking Smartie out of the crowd might be tricky.

Next stop was Pebble Island where Allan proved himself to be the most knowledgeable guide I have ever encountered. Pebble is home to stunning wetlands that are perfect for many smaller birds and peregrine falcons that seem to love teasing

In search of my KING



the geese. A beautiful beach was to be the highlight where gentoos ride the surf before running comically back to their colony.

The wind died down for my flight to Carcass Island where wildlife has flourished thanks to the absence of rodents or cats. The owner, Rob McGill, has reduced the sheep population, allowing tussock grass to regenerate, providing the perfect habitat for many smaller birds. It also proved that you can hide a three ton elephant seal in the grass.

Crossing the water to neighbouring West Point Island is a must. While dolphins played under the bow of the boat, seals, albatross and cormorants fished. On the island fluffy chicks sat on nests and snapped for the regurgitated meal which I could not provide.

Port Howard was my last stop before visiting Smartie. At Gladstone Bay you cannot help but laugh at the gentoos who reluctantly share their lives with cows.

Finally I arrived in Stanley, and Volunteer Point (home to Smartie) beckoned. An arduous but stunning three hour off-road journey ended at a small portacabin by a sweeping crescent of white sand. Set back from the beach, slightly out of the wind, lies the colony that is home to some 400 pairs of king

penguins. Clutching my photograph I headed off to find my adopted son. Perhaps I would discover brown fluffy grandchicks (the king's breeding cycle means that there are birds at all stages of development at all times)? As I got close a head popped up above the crowd and crowed a welcome. Unfortunately, finding Smartie was not that easy. I asked around but my description of a black and white bird, around one meter tall with a yellow flash on his head did not help. After three hours sitting with the birds, watching them come back from fishing trips and preening themselves I gave up the search, but who knows - perhaps it was Smartie who wandered over and sat down using me as a wind break. I like to think so.

Jonathan Goldsmith
Falkland Islands Specialist



Visit www.falklandsconservation.com
if you would like to adopt a king penguin.

FACT FILE

A two week trip to the Falkland Islands, flying from RAF Brize Norton or via Santiago de Chile, costs from £3,750 per person, including most meals. For details, please contact Jonathan on 01993 838 609.



Elephant seals on Carcass Island

