

A Field Guide to the Wildlife of South Georgia

Robert Burton and John Croxall. 2012. Princeton University Press 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 200 pages. 24.95 USD. Paper.

A short time ago we decided to return to Antarctica. This magical place has wildlife that is not tame, but ignores you. If you sit among the penguins they will walk past you or even over you if you are in their way. Humans are simply nonentities; a wonderful and unique experience. South Georgia is technically a sub-antarctic island, being north of 60°S, but it is an essential stop on an Antarctic trip. Being milder, the biology is different from the continent itself and the island is a key component of the region's history. This was the base for the whaling industry and, no matter your viewpoint on killing whales for profit, it is a fascinating story. South Georgia also plays a major role in the most exciting tale in exploration history: the open boat voyage by Shackleton and his crew.

So I was delighted to pick up my copy of this new book. I noted that "All profits from the sale of this book will support conservation work in South Georgia" – a good reason in itself to buy the book. The South Georgia Heritage Trust [SGHT] seeks "to redress the damage to its environment done in the past." The book has introductory chapters on Topography and Geology, Climate, The Fertile Sea, History of Exploitation, Habitat Restoration, Biosecurity, Protected Areas and Regulations, and Vegetation and Plant Communities. The main section is a field guide to wildlife and there is a Glossary and an Index of English and Scientific Names. The area covered is South Georgia, the South Sandwich Islands, Shag and Clerke Rocks. The field guide section describes 65 species of birds, 20 species of sea mammals, 60 species of insects, and over 40 species of flowering and non-flowering plants, using 368 computer-manipulated photographs. The book has ten contributing authors two of which are the editor and editorial consultant.

The first chapters cover geography, climate, ecology, and conservation. While they brief they contain a lot of information and set the scene for the visitor. It is particularly important to understand the high productivity of the surrounding sea. The impact we humans have made is very significant and I applaud the SGHT and others who are now taking steps to restore the island.

The wildlife guide starts with the birds. The authors have dealt with the taxonomic nightmares in a logical fashion so readers can enjoy their sightings and still be happy with their identifications. The 65 species of bird include both the nesting and vagrant species. The important species, like Wandering Albatross and King Penguin, have a page of text and several photographs depicting the various plumages leading to adulthood. The text covers the biology of the species, especially identification and behaviour. Each species has a box giving the status [e.g., endangered, breeding visiting species], number of breeding pairs on South Georgia,

number of breeding pairs worldwide, length, wingspan, threats and where to see the species. The content of these boxes varies widely, depending on the data available. Less important species to the ecology of South Georgia like vagrants are shown four to a page, with correspondingly less information.

After birds comes the section on land and sea mammals. A similar format gives the equivalent information on the 20 mammals – mostly seals and whales. Then to my surprise there are some pages on insects, arachnids and molluscs.

Prior to our earlier trip we were disappointed we could not find much information on the vegetation. When I went to see the nesting Light-mantled Albatross near Grytviken I was chagrined to see [and photograph] the Eurasian Common Dandelion. So I was delighted to see a guide to 40 of the 60 to 70 species of plants likely to exist on South Georgia. About 35 to 40 of these are introduced, like the Dandelion. The guide not only covers the flowering plants, but grasses, ferns, lichens and others.

The book ends with some taxonomic notes that any book user should read before consulting the main text. There is a very short glossary of 19 words. Unfortunately it did not include the word I did not understand – on page 12 – Föhn [Föhn or foehn wind is a rain shadow wind that occurs on the downwind side of a mountain.]

An important theme throughout the book is the degradation of South Georgia's native wildlife by introduced problems. The SGHT is working and plans to continue to correct these impacts. I applaud their decision to remove the Reindeer. One photograph shows the devastation caused by the grazers on the native vegetation [a fenced area allowed native plants to recover and show the dramatic difference of eliminating this introduced mammal].

The text is a good summary of the pertinent information. I particularly liked the statistics in the box giving the number of breeding pairs on South Georgia as well as pairs worldwide. The illustrations are computer-modified images arranged in the classic field guide format. This works really well.

The photographs of the birds are beautifully crisp and clear, making them ideal as identification guides. Getting such photos takes skill, knowledge and patience. This is also true for the seals, but it takes much more to get great pictures of cetaceans. I get annoyed at guides that show lovely photos of whales taken underwater. Most people arrive in the southern oceans by ship and see these beasts on the surface, and this is what this guide shows. They are some of the best illustrations I have seen to help identify a whale in the water. A few of the photos are exceptional. I love the Reindeer

confronting the pair of king Penguins. The boulder covered with *Xanthoria* lichens set in a moody landscape is one I have been trying to find for years.

So this is a book to drool over. Anyone planning to visit South Georgia must buy this book, whether you are an avid naturalist or not. Even if you are only going to the region, this book is really worthwhile. I wish I

had got my copy earlier this year when I was struggling with prions and petrels in the Cape Horn-South Atlantic Area. In fact any naturalist would enjoy this book, just for the fun it gives.

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