

Dispatch from the field – Bird Island 2018 fur seal deployments

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South American fur seals breed along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of South America, from Uruguay to Peru, including the wildlife wonder spot that is the Falkland Islands. As some of our previous posts have highlighted, despite their extended breeding range, much of their ecology is still inferred from anecdotal observations dating back to the 1960s. South American fur seals breeding at the Falkland Islands are, however, fast becoming one of the best studied South

American fur seal populations in the world. SAERI, with the collaboration and support of the Falkland Islands Fisheries Department, the Falkland Islands Fishing Companies Association and the Falkland Islands Government Environmental Studies Budget, have been working hard to address knowledge gaps. This includes a 2018 population census (topic of a previous post), which, as I near the end of counting photographs, indicates that the Falklands is one of the largest populations of South American fur seals in the South Atlantic, perhaps the world.

More recently, this winter we (Al Baylis, Rachael Orben, Kayleigh Jones) were exceptionally privileged to spend 6 weeks on Bird Island, West Falkland as part of a SAERI led-project to better understand where fur seals go to find food and what they eat. The field work involved deploying fancy GPS tags and less fancy satellite tags on adult female fur seals. GPS tags are fancy because they collect both high-quality location data at 10-minute intervals, in addition to depth and temperature data at 1 second intervals. Satellite tags are less fancy because locations are associated with a large error (typically km's), and location data is often sparse. They are however, ¼ the price of GPS tags. Our trip was timed to coincide



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with late lactation, and the second loligo fishing season. So that we are all on the same page, Falkland fur seals are a temperate fur seal species that give birth to a single pup during summer (peak pupping is sometime in late December). Like all temperate fur seals, Falkland's fur seals provision their pups for about 10 months, before pups wean in October. This differs from Antarctic fur seals in South Georgia, where females only provision pups for 4 months (and is perhaps one

of the many reasons that a proposal to transfer Falkland's fur seals to re-populate South Georgia in the 1930s was swiftly canned). Data is still coming in. However, as a brief summary, female fur seals undertook foraging trips that ranged from 9 days, to 3 weeks and foraged to the North (King George Bay), West and South (Beauchene and Burwood Bank) of Bird Island. They also dived to depths of over 330 m. However, the most surprising observation was male sea lions at Bird Island, which were killing and eating adult female fur seals. Even a visiting Antarctic fur seal juvenile was on the menu.

This may not surprise some folks (especially if you read National Geographic and saw their recent headline "Cannibal sea lion kills and eats pup – never before seen"). While sea lion males eating sea lion pups maybe uncommon, sea lions do seem to have a sweet-tooth of sorts for fur seal pups. For example, NZ sea lions are reported to eat NZ, Antarctic and sub-Antarctic fur seal pups, Steller sea lions eat Northern fur seal pups, Southern sea lions eat South American fur seal pups, and so-on. However, sea lions killing adult females seems unusual. I am interested to learn more about sea lion predation on other seals in the Falklands, so a call out to anyone reading this post.....if you have observed sea lions in the Falklands killing fur seals, elephant seal weaners or otherwise, then please do get in-touch (ammbaylis@gmail.com)! Our thanks to FIG, FIFD, and FICA for supporting this research and Dr Rachael Orben (Oregon State University) and Kayleigh Jones (BAS PhD student) for their help with fieldwork.

