

Kidney menu with shearwater soup

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The recipe for wildlife magic is simple: bring in together hundreds of thousands of flying seabirds, boil together with some sea lions, penguins and giant tussac and there you have it: Kidney menu! This is the summary of my recent visit to Kidney Island for some seabird work. A SAERI team has spent three nights working on [Kidney Island](#), a small nature reserve island covered in tussac at the mouth of Berkeley Sound, home to a large (> 50,000 breeding pairs) colony of sooty shearwaters.



Tussac on Kidney Island in the area used by shearwaters.

The aim of the trip was to recover geolocator tags (small light-based tracking tags) that had been deployed on sooty shearwaters in 2012 and 2014 by an overseas researcher. SAERI is facilitating the recovery. The team comprised of team leader Nathan McNally (SAERI senior field technician), two wonderful volunteers Amanda Kuepfer (FIG Fisheries seabird observer) and Brendon Lee (FIG Fisheries scientist), and me (Amélie Augé). The data from geolocator tags give information on large-scale movements of animals. Dr April Hedd (Memorial University) and her team have already revealed [the incredible migration](#) that the Kidney's shearwaters undertake each year between the Falkland Islands where they breed and the North Atlantic Ocean where they feed in open-waters off Newfoundland.

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The work can appear slightly dire: all-nighters out in the cold Falkland summers (as I am writing it is snowing...). However, as soon as the sun disappears behind the horizon, the sky darkens, not because of the fading light though, but because of the number of shearwaters returning! They fly over the island for some time. Then they land (or more like crash-fall!) in the tussac, and it does not stop for 3 hours. We keep busy checking the 'sock nets' that we placed earlier on burrows where tags were deployed on birds and looking at the legs of every bird we come across in case we can spot a tag.



Shearwaters flying over Kidney Island at dusk before landing.

During a small down time between midnight and 2 am, things are a little quieter with birds in their burrows and a few sleeping on the ground. Then the shearwaters start talking-chatting-calling again, loud and louder, from every burrow then from the ground where pairs or groups socialise. They seem to come out at once and the ground is covered with them, looking seemingly like a shearwater soup we have to walk through. Another opportunity to find more tags and the 'sock nets' have now been pulled out so that we can catch any birds coming out of the nest. Then by 3 am, its take-off time just as the sky lightens. The take-off patches are busy with a constant stream of birds. By 4.30 am, they are all gone and on their way to go feed at sea for a few days.



Burrows are most often too deep to reach by hand so 'sock' nets are used to catch birds entering (when the 'sock' is pulled inside the burrow, left picture) or leaving the burrow (when the net is pulled out). The net is unpinned and the bird is easily caught (middle). Right: Amanda holding a bird caught in the net before the geolocator tag was removed from its leg.

Over the night, some brave other seabirds enter the shearwater soup. The white-chinned petrels (the giants in a world of shearwaters) breed in the same area. The cute tiny grey-backed storm petrels also breed in the tussac

SAERI NEWS

above the shearwater burrows. While the white-chinned petrels seemed to work on the same timing as the shearwaters, the storm petrels arrived at the quietest moment of the night after midnight, likely to avoid the madness of the shearwater landing or taking off time! All in all, time flies over night with all the wildlife (because I have not even mentioned the sea lions, the Magellanic penguins and other animals that can be encountered in the tussac too!) and with sleepy eyes, it is time... for breakfast with a couple of hot drinks, and then the tent for a good day sleep!

This amazing taste of wildlife flavour gave the Kidney menu and its shearwater soup a great star! I am back in the office now, working on Marine Spatial Planning for the Falkland Islands. Data such as those gained from the tags recovered from the shearwaters provide great information to understand the use of the marine environment by seabirds and how we can ensure that maritime activities do not affect these remarkable animals.