

## My two weeks with the Falkland Islands

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So by this time you're probably shifting in your seat, wondering uncomfortably what I mean by 'sampling'. One word, 1 000 001 uses. For me, sampling means taking penguin ticks from their colonies, putting them in tiny tubes filled with ethanol and doing genetic work on them. I am looking at how they move and interact across the Southern Hemisphere, and want to figure out how penguin movement effects their gene flow and evolution. I am a phylogeographer, and my penguin-tick system is brilliant because it's a rare case of immobile, terrestrial parasite meets highly vagile, aquatic host. Not quite boy meets girl, but for us science geeks, it's an interaction equally fit for the silver screen.

In real life, this means that I get to hang out with two of the coolest and most odd groups of species on the planet (though one is fluffier than the other). It also means I get to go to penguin colonies all over the world (Southern Hemisphere limited of course), pull parasites off the adults and their babies (fluff-balls of poo and noise) and from around their nests. In the Falklands, it meant walking around Rockhopper, King and Gentoo Penguin colonies, grabbing ticks from under rocks, and getting investigated by the inhabitants who were clearly vexed that I wasn't paying them enough attention.

My first stop, was at Volunteer Point, where Gentoo's, Magellanic's and the ever popular King Penguins breed in a cacophony of feathers, feet and (you guessed it) poo. The only way to get to this part of the East Falklands, is with some talented drivers and a flock of Land Rovers. It's hard not to see these ever present symbols of Falkland Island life as alive in their own right, especially when they race across the swampy landscape in a pack formation. Volunteer Point itself was beautiful, with Magellanic burrows skirting the beach and King and Gentoo's in discrete patches behind. It rained (perhaps sleet is a better term), and although crawling through mud and poo looking for parasites isn't everyone's cup of tea, I couldn't wipe the grin off my face. Everywhere around me were penguins, all interested in me and what I was doing. They grew bolder, and came closer and closer until eventually I was just one of them, wandering about the colony. An experience I would trade for no amount of sunny days.



# SAERI NEWS

The remainder of my stay in the Falklands was noteworthy for its brilliant weather. The sun was out, the wind was playing fairly nicely (a rarity I am told) and my site visits to The Murrel and Pebble Island (as well as a short stop at Bertha's Beach) were made fun and easy. Rockhopper colonies were my main focus, and these were invariably perched on the sides of beautiful lichen-covered cliffs. I assume the famed yellow eyebrows of the penguins raised slightly when I turned up (tweezers in hand), but their fears were soon abated and only curiosity remained. There were plenty of ticks for my project, and a few great photos as well.

I was also lucky enough to coincide my trip with the Falkland Islands Science Symposium, which meant I got to chat to the delegates throughout most of my first week. The delegates were from all around the Pan-Americas, and brought with them impressive scientific knowledge from an incredible range of disciplines. Public seminars gave the Falkland Islanders the opportunity to hear about scientific goings-on in everything from mosses, to microbes in oxygen-depleted environments and whale conservation using phylogeography (hooray for phylogeography!). Together we had a memorable trip out to Kidney Island to watch nesting Sooty Shearwaters en masse in the sunset (a sight to be seen indeed). I must admit, however, that the real winner for me, was the pod of Sei Whales we encountered along the way. I was in awe, but got the impression that it was just another day in the Falklands.

My time in the Falkland Islands was brilliant, not just because I am a huge nerd (though I am) nor because I adore environments that are extreme and rare (though I do). I met great people, in particular the SAERI team who helped me through every step of the process, I saw amazing things and I got to join the small number of people on the planet that have made it out to this tiny island group. That's not a bad way to start a year.