NEWS FROM THE PERCY FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE

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Chicks of the Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross on Gough Island.

Gough Island is a natural World Heritage Site in the heart of the South Atlantic Ocean, 2 800 kilometres west of Cape Town and 425 kilometres south of Tristan da Cunha. This extremely remote island is one of the most important seabird islands in the world, providing breeding sites for millions of pairs of penguins, albatrosses and petrels. It supports almost the entire population of Tristan Wandering Albatrosses (listed as Endangered) and Atlantic Petrels (Vulnerable). Gough is also home to the world's largest populations of Sooty Albatrosses (Vulnerable), Broad-billed Prions and Kerguelen Petrels, as well as the world's second largest populations of Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses (Near-threatened) and Rockhopper Penguins (Vulnerable). Other seabirds of conservation concern that breed on the island are the Southern Giant Petrel (Vulnerable) and Grey Petrel (Near-threatened). The only landbirds, the Gough Bunting and flightless Gough Moorhen, are endemic, and both are listed as Vulnerable.

Despite this impressive list of populations of global importance, surprisingly little is known about the conservation status of birds at Gough Island. There are few, if any, data on population trends at the island, and for many species the population estimates are extremely crude. To rectify this omission, the British Government funded a joint project between the FitzPatrick Institute and the UK-based Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which resulted in Richard Cuthbert and Erica Sommer spending 13 months on Gough. This was the first year-round ornithological visit to the island, and the main objective was to establish methods and techniques for repeatable, long-term monitoring of species of global conservation concern.

Cuthbert and Sommer recently returned from Gough Island, having established population estimates or indices for key species. Not all species lend themselves to accurate censuses, and even large, obvious, surface-nesting species such as the Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross could not be counted over the whole island because of the dense vegetation and very rugged terrain. However, using the detailed count protocols, it will be possible for future visitors to obtain comparable population estimates with the baseline estimates collected during 2000/01, and thus assess whether there have been dramatic changes to the island's bird populations. It is planned that repeat surveys will take place every three to five years, enabling population trends to be assessed and so providing a scientific basis for the conservation of Gough Island's birds.

In addition to setting up monitoring protocols, Cuthbert and Sommer conducted ecological research that included tracking Tristan Albatrosses to investigate their foraging range and potential overlap with longline fisheries. They found that breeding birds range widely across the temperate Atlantic from the edge of the continental shelf off South America to that off southern Africa. They also collected information on morphometrics and plumage characteristics of this newly-recognised species that will help to identify birds killed at sea, and hopefully even shed some light on differences from Wandering Albatross in the field.

Other studies included investigations of the breeding biology of the winter-breeding Atlantic Petrel and the Gough Bunting, the latter being of particular interest when compared with the more abundant buntings at Tristan. Perhaps the most alarming finding was the apparent predation of seabird chicks by introduced house mice. The mice on Gough have evolved increased body size, with large individuals weighing more than 50 grams. Mouse predation was a significant cause of mortality for Atlantic Petrel chicks, and even the much larger Tristan Albatross chicks may not be safe; several were found with open wounds that appear to have been inflicted by mice. □

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