The search for surviving rodents

Dickie Hall – HR Project Director

In March 2015 the last bait pellet was dropped on South Georgia and the third eradication season came to an end. All of the indications since that day have been positive and no rodents have been sighted. Bird life is present in numbers not seen in living memory, with pipits and pintail ducks returning to breeding grounds abandoned many years ago following the invasion of rodents.

Now, midway through August, less than two months remain before Phase 4 begins, the monitoring element of the rodent eradication of South Georgia. Whilst the island was baited over the course of three seasons, the bulk of the monitoring will happen in just one. To accomplish this mammoth task we will be relying on a small team of tried and trusted field workers and dog handlers, using three vessels, the SV Wanderer III, FPV Pharos SG, and MY Hans Hansson, and relying on the support of yet more ships, people, and organisations to thoroughly and systematically survey South Georgia for any evidence of surviving rodents.

The South Georgia pipit is reclaiming its former territory

This strongly suggests that the eradication of rodents has been a success, but we need to be sure. When that last bait pellet was dropped, plans were already underway to return to South Georgia to search the island and monitor for any signs of surviving rodent populations.

Rodent Monitoring sites 2017/18

Some of the sites targeted for the Phase 4 monitoring work.

Protecting the past and future of South Georgia

www.sght.org and www.fosgi.org
Our monitoring season really gets underway in late October, when an eight person team of field workers departs for South Georgia. Some will be joined by South Georgia Government staff on FPV Pharos. Others will camp in overland teams. In total they will spend six weeks placing rodent monitoring devices around the island. These devices will be left undisturbed for two months to allow ample time for any surviving rodent population to make their mark.

Just before Christmas we will have several four-legged visitors to South Georgia, not reindeer but dogs! These are specially trained sniffer dogs that, with their expert handlers, will use their powerful noses to sniff out any trace of rodents. With the help of the MY Hans Hansson we will be taking the dog team and the field survey team from one end of the island to the other and landing at sites rarely visited in modern times.

Over the coming season we aim to visit over a hundred sites, deploy and retrieve thousands of monitoring devices and walk many thousands of kilometres in our work. At the end of the season in April of 2018 it is my sincere hope that we are able to officially declare South Georgia to be rodent free and to hail the largest rodent eradication programme ever undertaken a success.

Wanderer III at Prince Olav Harbour

Wanderer III was made famous by her previous owners Eric & Susan Hiscock who completed three around-the-world voyages in this little craft and pioneered small boat circumnavigation. Today Wanderer III is owned and run by Thies Matzen and Kicki Ericson who, like her previous owners, have not shied away from exploration and expeditions in this little craft. They have logged 150,000 nautical miles, spent the last two decades sailing in the Southern Ocean and overwintered at South Georgia — a fine pedigree for the work ahead of them this coming season.
As another lucky artist thinks about which pigments and canvases to pack for the coming season, we take a look back at the Artist in Residence post at the South Georgia Museum.

In 2009 a multi-talented young artist called Bridget Steed was the Museum’s first Artist in Residence. Bridget’s connection with South Georgia started with a project in Scotland on a building that was owned by a company involved in South Georgia’s whaling industry. The whaling link continued to permeate her work both during and after the summer season she spent embedded with the museum team. She came up with some exciting projects such as a natural but ephemeral sculpture made of whale bones. One evening she projected images of whaling onto the decaying buildings, filling the abandoned station with ghosts of the past.

Sculptor Anthony Smith was drawn to South Georgia because of his passion for natural history - a draw that has not diminished yet as he still visits regularly as an artist photographer on cruise ships.

During his time as Artist in Residence, Anthony built up a body of material and a wealth of ideas that still inspire his work today. Witness two recent bronze pieces, a pair of albatross heads and a recently cast bust of Shackleton.

The Shackleton bust will be put on display in the museum next season and the museum hopes to find the funds to purchase it so that it can remain on permanent display.

www.anthonysmithart.co.uk

(In case you think the artists spend all their time pursuing their own interests, they actually all sign up to be full members of the museum team; helping out with all the many and varied chores necessary to keep the museum clean, well-presented and staffed.)

Theo Crutchley-Mack, with his distinctive style and focus on the effect of nature in decaying man-made objects, is naturally compelled towards the rusting collapsing whaling stations and wreck strewn coast of the island. He will be the fifth artist to be offered the chance to spend time in South Georgia on this programme.

www.crutchley-mack.com

Next up was photographer Jamie Grant. He had been enthralled as a teenager by a book from his father’s shelves. It was Shackleton’s ‘South’. After the residency he wrote: “Sometimes life throws up the strangest of gifts and I am still pinching myself that after so many years I finally made it to the Antarctica of my dreams. South Georgia’s impenetrable wilderness gripped me with a strange mix of fascination and terror that stayed with me for my entire stay”. Jamie had a hard job winnowing down the many thousands of photographs he took into the selection of wildlife, landscape and architecture images to form a book. ‘Summer in South Georgia’ aims to share in words and pictures a unique tale of wildlife, conservation and adventure at the end of the world. It was published by Watermill Books in September 2016 and a donation is made to SGHT with each sale.

www.jamiemurraygrant.co.uk

Last summer Steve Massam arrived in the dual role of taxidermist and Artist in Residence. Steve has a long association with the museum and his taxidermy fills the natural history displays. These days Steve spends an increasing amount of time making sculptures to be cast in bronze. With his understanding of the structure of animals from his taxidermy, he often builds a sculpture as if he was assembling a taxidermy piece: a skeletal structure, covered by a layer representing the musculature, topped off with the final outside detail.

We now have the work of all of our Artist in Residences represented in the goods we sell in the museum gift shop; from bronzes costing thousands to bookmarks for pennies. The exhibitions, press coverage and publications resulting from all the artists’ visits have helped to spread the word about the work of the SGHT and the great value to nature and to man of this remote and wild island.
When Professor Tony Martin and SGHT joined forces in the early days of the Habitat Restoration project, one of Tony’s first tasks as Project Director was to attend an Island Invasives conference in Auckland, New Zealand in 2010. There Tony met a network of people who were leading the charge to remove invasive species from islands around the world. They included Keith Broome, Chair of the Island Eradication Advisory Group, Keith Springer, who would be Team Rat’s Field Operations Manager and Peter Garden, Chief Pilot on South Georgia. For a charity and a Project Director who had never undertaken an eradication project before, never mind the largest one in the world, the advice that the Island Invasives community gave so generously was invaluable. On South Georgia it may well have meant the difference between failure and success.

A Team Rat reunion: - Keith Springer with GIS expert Dave Will and pilot George Philips

From the 10th to the 14th of July 2017, we went some way to repay its debt to this community by co-hosting the latest conference in the Island Invasives series with the University of Dundee, in Dundee where SGHT has its headquarters. The purpose of Island Invasives 2017 (II17) was to share the knowledge from eradications like the HR project on South Georgia, and to inspire the next generation of dedicated conservationists intent on removing alien invasive species from not only islands but increasingly from land surrounded by predator-proof fences, and unfenced but isolated patches of habitat such as coral reefs. II17 was the first such meeting for seven years, and the first to be held in the northern hemisphere, meaning that it attracted new participants from Europe and America.

Tony Martin acted as Conference Chair with an Executive Committee composed of myself and Vice Chair of Trustees, Professor Elaine Shemilt. SGHT Trustee Professor John Croxall was on the conference Programme Committee, and with Professor Mike Richardson wrote a conference paper on biosecurity in the South Georgia HR project, which Mike presented.

Prof. Mike Richardson, SGHT Trustee and Chair of the SGHT Habitat Restoration Steering Committee

Key to the local conference team were SGHT staff Nici Rymer and Marie Shafi, with Museum Director Sarah Lurcock leading our group of volunteers during the week.

SGHT and FOSGI Trustees Denise Landau, Sasha Borodin, Lisa Kelley and Nick Prentice were amongst the 275 delegates who attended the conference. SGHT Chair Philippa Foster Back welcomed SGHT Patron HRH The Princess Royal, who formally opened the conference on Monday 10th July. Later the same day Philippa introduced a public lecture on the South Georgia HR project by Tony, with an opening lecture by Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, Lord Gardiner.

Lord Gardiner (DEFRA) delivers a public lecture on UK Government’s support for conservation work in the UK Overseas Territories

Over the week there were 19 different sessions, 96 talks and several workshops in an excellent programme skilfully assembled by Tony. In addition to the public lecture, conference events included an icebreaker at Discovery Point, poster sessions, a choice of excursion and a Gala dinner at Glamis Castle on Wednesday evening. We hope that at II17 the connections were made that will increase the success rate of many new island eradication attempts worldwide.

All of the II17 conference photos are on the SGHT Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/SouthGeorgiaHeritageTrust/
Delegates enjoy Highland Ben Vrackie – one of three conference excursions which were organised on the Wednesday.

Conference Chair Tony Martin and head of the Local Organising Committee, SGHT CEO Alison Neil Craig Riekena of Bell Labs who were a major Conference Sponsor.

SGHT Chair, Philippa Foster Back

Glamis Castle, venue of the conference dinner.

Volunteer Amy King (RSPB), Dickie Hall (SGHT) and Sarah Lurcock (SGHT)

Tony signs a copy of his book, Reclaiming South Georgia.
Please help to preserve South Georgia’s precious environment and heritage

Thanks to your donations SGHT and FOSGI raised the £7 million in funds to pay for the baiting of the largest island eradication ever attempted.

As we survey the island in 2017-18 for any remnants of the rodent population, we know that there is still work to be done – to deal with any surviving rats and mice, to ensure that South Georgia stays rodent-free forever and to monitor and study what will be an inspirational story of island restoration and re-population of native species.

We want to attempt yet more conservation work on South Georgia; to help protect the albatrosses that breed on the island and die needlessly in foreign waters, to discover South Georgia’s untold sealing history and to open up previously inaccessible heritage sites to visitors.

Please help SGHT and FOSGI to continue to protect and preserve South Georgia by making a donation today.

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