

# WATCH THE BIRDIE

RICK TOMLINSON LEADS A WILDLIFE ADVENTURE  
PHOTOGRAPHY EXPEDITION IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS



A 'waddle' of King penguins at Volunteer Point with *Pelagic Australis* at anchor in the background

Photos by Rick Tomlinson



**‘High latitude sailing with wildlife photography mixed in is my idea of heaven’**

**“Orca – port bow!” The cry came from the pilothouse. A sense of excitement swept through the boat as 24 hours earlier we’d taken the decision to sail overnight from Beaver Island to Seal Island where it’s known that orcas are often sighted... but not always. It was a bit of a gamble.**



Mike Boardman

Our alternative was to sail to the Jason Islands, regarded as one of the jewels of the Falklands, where we’d definitely see albatross, penguins and seals. But we’d already had some great encounters with those and the prospect of killer whales won our hearts, and now we were here and so were the orcas!

We were in the last few days of our 14-day trip with a group I was leading on a ‘Photographic safari of West Falklands’ aboard Skip Novak’s expedition yacht *Pelagic Australis*. Our group had met up in Santiago, Chile. Some had come from the UK, others from the USA.

We flew to the Falklands via Punta Arenas in the Magellan Straits landing at the Falklands Mount Pleasant airport. On the ground a pair of 4x4s took us across East Falkland to Port San Carlos, passing San Carlos and Goose Green – names familiar to those who know anything of the Falklands War in 1982.

*Pelagic Australis* was stationed at Port San Carlos to save us at least a day by getting straight out to the wildlife sites situated mainly in West Falkland. Skipper Chris Kobusch and mate Sophie O’Neill met us on board, along with local Falklands guide Dale Evans.

*Pelagic Australis* is a 73ft, 48 tonne, aluminium expedition boat so the two sailing crew were always going to need some help, which I was certainly up for. High latitude sailing with wildlife photography mixed in is my idea of heaven.

Breakfast and briefings completed, the following morning we set off into 30-knot headwinds for Pebble Island. Dolphins accompanied us the whole way, which I took as a positive omen. This was going to be good.

It wasn’t to be a do-this, do-that type of photography course; I was there to help as much or as little as people



**Photographer Rick Tomlinson and the 22.5m aluminium-hulled expedition boat, Skip Novak’s *Pelagic Australis***

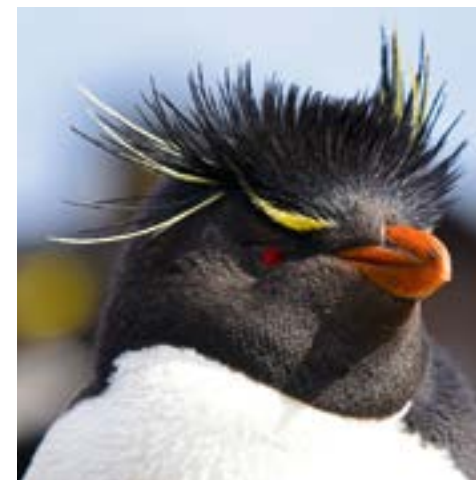
wanted. The group was small enough to offer individual coaching, though we did do a group session on how to set up your camera. For those with DSLR cameras this would start with matching the viewfinder to your eye so you can see when the subject is in focus. My main advice for shooting wildlife is to keep the shutter speed as high as possible, fill the frame with your subject and, where possible, focus on the subject’s eyes.

We were able to start as soon as we left the dock, photographing the dolphins playing on our wake. Here my technique is to keep the camera focused on one spot, as dolphins usually jump the wake in the same place. Then when they jump you’re already looking through the viewfinder, already focused and ready to fully press the shutter. For sure, I get lots of splashes and tails, but among them are photographs of the dolphin clear of the water.

Once anchored at Pebble Island we were met on >



**Black-browed albatross soaring off Split Island on an early morning start**



**Rockhoppers are the smallest of the penguins and have distinctive yellow crest feathers, yellow eyebrows and red eyes**



**Talented amateur photographer and keen sailor Mike Boardman had updated his photography gear especially for this trip**



**Elephant seal pups swimming off the beach at Sea Lion Island are the reason the orcas are there at this time of year**



‘The orcas were very special. It’s wonderful to see such a fine animal’

shore with a couple of 4x4s to take us to three sites that were too far to walk. This was to be the only time we had transport ashore. We started at a rockhopper penguin colony. These small penguins have so much character, with their long, yellow eyebrows and red eyes.

I suggested shooting from low down so you were not looking down at the penguins and could get the blue sky behind them. Focus on the eyes!

We then drove to where gentoo penguins were coming ashore. Larger than the rockhoppers, they looked so clean and pristine as they waddled up the beach. The collective name for penguins ashore is actually a waddle – very appropriate.

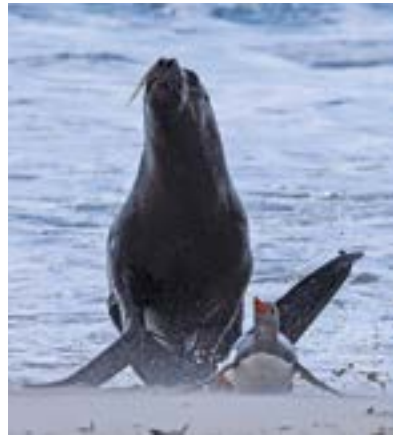
Another drive took us to see some sea lions. Here the seals were backlit by the sun basking on the rocks so it provided another teaching point, this time in exposure compensation. It was almost dark by the time we returned to the boat. It had been a great and full-on first day: a few hours of sailing, three different wildlife sites and many great photographs. This set the tone for the next 12 days.

Back on board, the computers and iPads came out and everyone looked at their pictures. I explained that keeping the shutter speed high freezes any motion and this also gives a shallow depth of field, isolating the subject from the foreground and background.

Over the course of ten days we sailed round West Falkland. Our routine was often an early start to move the boat to the next site, which required only three of us to rise at 0500, up anchor and sail for a few hours.

Once safely anchored in our new location we went ashore by dinghy and spent most of the day there. We’d walk to the bird colonies and beaches that were usually on the windward side of the islands, and as we’d anchored on the leeward side it was often a bit of a hike. We had as much time as we wanted to photograph the wildlife before returning to the boat for dinner, taking turns doing the cooking and enjoying some fine meals, good stories and the odd glass of wine.

We saw some fantastic wildlife: thousands of black browned albatross, blue-eyed shag, upland geese, Kelp



**Above: a sea lion waits for penguins to return to shore, gives chase right onto the beach and takes a gentoo penguin. We saw ‘him’ make many attempts but the penguins nearly always got away**



**A sea lion patrolling the shoreline appeared in the wave for just a split second**

geese, striated caracara, long-tailed meadowlark, rufous-chested dotterel, several types of dolphins, elephant seals, Magellanic oystercatchers, Patagonian crested ducks, short-eared owls, black-crowned herons... and on it went. I was particularly impressed when Chris, our guide, found the one owl that lived on Hummock Island. I’d never photographed an owl before and certainly never expected to photograph one here.

There were so many high points its hard to choose just a few, but perhaps the best photograph of all those I took is of a sea lion swimming in a wave. Dale knew this individual often hunted penguins off a beach on New Island; in fact the BBC had been there a filming few weeks before. We walked over to the beach and there he was, patrolling the beach waiting for prey.

We photographed here for a while, which is photographer speak for ages. The penguins were out at sea in big numbers and when a group headed for the shore the seal would move to intercept. Penguins >



**When photographing wildlife, try to focus on the subject’s eyes for the most engaging results**



**A long lens and shallow depth of field will help the subjects – here a rufous-chested dotterel and a short-eared owl – stand out from the background**





**'It is wonderful to see such a fine animal in its natural environment'**

**A large male killer whale patrolled the beach for nearly two hours, cruising back and forth as close to the beach as possible. Suddenly he slapped his tail on the surface, seemingly in frustration that none of the seal pups had ventured into the water**

would swim for their lives, ducking and diving, and when in the water they always seemed to get away. On the beach, though, the sea lion was faster and made several attacks. Narrowly, most penguins escaped, but as we watched the sea lion closed in and managed to grab one penguin as it ran up the beach. That's nature, but you have very mixed emotions when you see life and death in close up.

The sea lion in the wave shot was rather special. Most of the group had moved onto to photograph an albatross colony, but Mike Boardman and I hung around much longer. I'd glimpsed the sea lion in the wave a few times and really wanted to get that shot. The waves were big, the water very clear and in one instant the sea lion appeared right in the wave. It was only there for a second and then it was gone. But that second was what I'd been waiting for.

The orcas too were very special. It's wonderful to see such a fine animal in its natural environment. We'd allowed for a couple of days in this location and we saw them a number of times, including at first light one morning making a kill. We saw them from onshore too where we were lucky (again) that out of the five whales in the pod it was the biggest male with the tallest dorsal fin that was patrolling the shoreline that day.

I had a few pictures in my mind that I wanted to take and I'd have been happy to achieve just one of them. In particular I wanted the seal pups on the beach with the orca in the frame to show the reason he was there. I also wanted to show the extreme height of the fin by shooting at water level with the fin breaking the horizon line. And I wanted a shot with the whale in the foreground and *Pelagic Australis* out of focus behind. We achieved all of the above, and more. >

**A king penguin 'waddle' heads down the sand dunes at Volunteer Point on East Falkland towards the open sea**





## 'It's not about the camera. Technique and composition are more important'

Our final location was not in our original schedule but I'd photographed king penguins at Volunteer Point back in 2006 when I was sailing on the superyacht *Adele*. I really wanted our group to see these penguins which are bigger and more photogenic than any of the other species we'd seen.

As we walked up the beach a waddle of penguins came along the ridge, looking like a school outing, and beyond were many hundreds more, some in the colony and others among the grazing sheep.

I quietly offered some advice, a reminder to shoot from low down for the blue sky behind and that a picture of both the penguins and the sheep together would be quite funny. The best shot, though, was of a waddle of penguins that had just come ashore. I spotted that they'd cross a small, damp patch of sand and made my way to get in front of them.

In photography, reflections always work well but with this gang you had to be fast as they changed course a few times before I caught them in just the right place.

Our trip ended in Port Stanley with a day to look around the town and visit the local pubs. It had been a fantastic adventure. We'd seen more wildlife than any of us expected and enjoyed some spectacular photography.

Perhaps my main teaching point on the trip was that it's not about the camera. To take good pictures your technique, the composition and the light are more important. There are two old photojournalism adages that I always remember. 'What's the best camera in the world?' The one you have with you. And 'How do you take great pictures?' f8 and be there! So true. ■

Rick Tomlinson is a professional yachting, wildlife and expedition photographer. He started taking pictures in the 1985 Whitbread

Round the World Race while crewing on *Drum*, owned by Simon Le Bon and skippered by Skip Novak. His pictures have been published in magazines all over the world, including *National Geographic* and in particular *Yachting World*. His signature calendars have documented yachting for more than 30 years.



## IN MY CAMERA BAG



I've always used Nikon cameras. Currently, I'm using the Nikon D810 and for wildlife (and yachting) you need long lenses. I like the Nikon 200-500 f5.6 zoom lens as it gives me a range to compose a picture.

- Also in the bag is:
- 16mm fisheye (not used on this trip)
  - 17-35 f2.8mm wide angle zoom
  - 24-70 f2.8 mid range zoom
  - 70-200 f2.8 telephoto zoom
  - 200-500 f5.6 long telephoto zoom.

I also had a back-up camera body, flash gun, ND filters, cards, hard drive and, most importantly, a compact camera, the Sony RX100 that I always have

ready in my pocket. This camera also fits in a housing for underwater shots hanging off a monopod.

I found that a 10lt waterproof bag slung across my chest made access to the camera with a long lens fitted much easier and quicker than a backpack, also safer in the dinghy while coming ashore.

I use a minimum shutter speed of 1/1000 second (or faster) and an aperture around f8, ISO400. My favourite lens for photographing wildlife is the Nikon 200-500 f5.6.

The main technique I teach is to fill the frame with your subject and by using a fast shutter speed and a wide aperture you keep the subject sharp and the foreground and background out of focus. Always try to focus on the subject's eyes.



Mike Boardman

Reviewing and editing our pictures in the cosy main saloon aboard *Pelagic Australis*