Almost done!

**Blessed with excellent weather, the South Georgia Habitat Restoration team has made fantastic progress since the commencement of operations on March 1st.** By the middle of the month all three of the major objectives of Phase 1 (Greene, Thatcher and Mercer baiting zones) had been treated, leaving only Saddle Island outstanding. There will now be a pause of at least a week until a ship is available to provide the required Search and Rescue cover for this longer journey, and then the job can be rounded-off in just half a day.

The near-completion of Phase 1 fieldwork in a little over two weeks is testimony to the dedicated hard work provided by all members of the team. Each day begins with a communal breakfast before dawn. If the first rays of light above the mountains reveal flyable weather from the dining room window, then a brief meeting to sort out priorities is followed by an exodus around the cove to Grytviken, and a welcome bracing start to the day. There, Bob, Peter and Graham check and prepare the aircraft for work, while others check and fill the bait buckets, start the spinner motors and get everything ship-shape around the loading site. The now-familiar sound of turbine engines starting up precedes a roar, a hurricane-like blast of air and dust, and then Peter sets off for a quick recce to evaluate wind speeds and turbulence. A minute later he’s back, having radioed ahead to say he’s ready, and then he hovers while Nick attaches the bucket and all the control leads and tubes. Then he’s off, and an often long day of refilling the bucket and refuelling the aircraft gets underway, involving a now well-practiced team of five, six or seven supporting the pilots.

After two weeks the work is becoming routine, with no surprises or concerns, but it wasn’t always like this. On the first day, fieldwork got off to a cautious start as team members familiarised themselves with helicopter operations on our adopted base at Grytviken, clad in their brand-new protective clothing. A number of small problems were encountered and resolved, and then all went well until I noticed the red helicopter circling without its bait bucket, having seen it come by WITH the bucket only a few moments earlier! What we discovered later to be a malfunction of the hook release cable had resulted in an accidental dropping of the bucket into King Edward Cove! It was to be a week before the bucket could be found and recovered, thanks to the enthusiastic and skilled involvement of many of the King Edward Point community, especially Ashley, Keiron, Dion & Martin. Fortunately, we brought a spare bucket in anticipation of loss or damage, so the episode did not hinder progress, and to my great relief we haven’t lost another one since!

Each day ends with the aircraft shutting down and being cleaned, a walk around the cove in the other direction, and in most cases a shower before a well-earned beer. A briefing meeting at 1830 in the Larsen House dining room, with BAS and SG Government representation, precedes dinner at 1900. For most it’s then an early night in preparation for an early morning. For others, sleep takes second place to a good night out catching and marking ducks in the elephant seal wallows. Never before have I seen so many stars, nor (having failed to outwit any pintails) laid down to enjoy the spectacle with so many four-tonne malodorous fellow astronomers.

*South Georgia Heritage Trust – Protecting the past and future of South Georgia. www.sght.org*
Daily briefing session underway in Larsen House – an important time to get everyone together after the day’s work, exchange views and ideas, and enjoy a drink before dinner.

**In the loop**

During our time at King Edward Point, the community has comprised people from many different teams – Government, British Antarctic Survey (BAS), SGHT and two film crews. Everyone is involved in, or at least affected by, the Habitat Restoration project to some extent, and consequently everyone needs to be kept informed of what’s occurring on a daily basis and be able to discuss the day’s events or plans for the morrow. The best way to achieve this is by having a briefing meeting every evening before dinner, with the entire SGHT team present and representation from BAS, Government & the film/magazine crews. We review the day’s activities, discuss the things that went well or not so well, and make tentative plans for succeeding days. The following morning we are up before dawn to see what the weather holds, and then the decision on whether to fly or not is passed to the rest of the Base, and kept under review during the day.

It works! Many millions of bait pellets have been distributed, but from the ground it’s very difficult to see anything happening. In this photo, taken from the second aircraft, the pellets can be seen shooting out in all directions. They land like hailstones, liberally sprinkled over a swath 80m wide. The pilot then flies back on an adjacent reciprocal course, ‘painting’ the island line by line until the entire land area has been covered. We have been sowing at rates of 2kg per hectare in areas without vegetation and 6kg per hectare over vegetation (where most rats occur). The higher rate equates to 4 pellets per room-sized piece of ground (20 square metres) and should be more than enough to deal with even high densities of rats.

A veteran of many earlier eradication operations, Peter Garden’s helmet has flown hundreds of thousands of kilometres. Graham said the helmet looked very old. ‘So is the head that fills it’ said Peter.

This is what 300kg (660lb) of bait pellets looks like. On a good day one pilot can spread more than 30 such loads; more than nine tonnes. This will clear rats from 5,000 hectares (12,500 acres) – that’s equivalent to the Vatican City x 120! Our bait-loading team is very slick, and can send each helicopter on its way with a new load of pellets in just 20 seconds.
Bucket retrieval
The first day of Phase 1 fieldwork was a mixture of highs and lows. Not surprisingly we had to overcome a number of problems as we learned how to do many things for the first time. One such was the accidental loss of a bait bucket off a cargo hook underneath helicopter BATC. Fortunately it landed in the cove rather than on land. With great help from BAS and SG Government officers, the bucket was eventually retrieved from 9m of water. Astonishingly the spinner motor was soon working, but the bucket was bent out of shape and will need to be returned to the manufacturer for refurbishment prior to Phase 2.

A pilot’s work...
Our two pilots Peter and Bob are usually the first to arrive at the ‘Helibase’ at Grytviken in the morning, and among the last to leave at night. Their pre-flight checks include an inspection of the fuel, fuselage and rotors to ensure that everything is as it should be, and meanwhile Graham (engineer) checks the function of the hook and often gives the compressors a wash. At the end of the day, after many hours of flying, the aircraft can be quite grubby with soot and oily deposits, so it’s out with the cleaning fluid, hose and brushes (the bane of Nici’s life for months as she fought to have them shipped south) to restore the original shine and lustre to our smart helicopters.

Would you like anchovies on your pizza, sir? Nick Torr takes the lunch order from Peter Garden using Marine Band channel 65 on our repeater station high in the mountains above Grytviken

Graham, Peter and Bob (L to R) clean AM at the end of a day spreading bait (upper). A much-needed cuppa (below). Peter Garden has flown long hours, and does so with the door off so he can see what’s happening with the bucket and bait spread. Here he grabs a quick drink before leaping back into the saddle again.
Helicopter AM returns to base for another load of bait

Refilling the bucket using the telehandler
Success in Phase 1 of the project has been substantially due to the excellent team of people that carried it out - drawn together from far-flung parts of the globe. The photos above, and those on previous pages, depict life at Grytviken/KEP in February and March 2011, centred around our two much-loved helicopters G-BATC and G-TVAM. The fact that we got here, with all the necessary equipment and supplies, was due to the efforts of many people who sadly could not join us on the island, especially Alison, Nici, Geoff, Wiz, Richard and the good people of Bell Laboratories Inc, One Ocean Expeditions, BAS, Bond Air Services, Police Aviation Services, British International Helicopters and GSGSSI. The whole Project was made possible by our many supporters, and the vision of the South Georgia Heritage Trust Board of Trustees. It has been my pleasure and privilege to work with these people towards our remarkable goal, and I look forward with relish and enhanced confidence to completing the transformation of the island in Phase 2. The preparation for that starts now!

Tony Martin
Phase 1 complete, another 80,000 Hectares to clear!

This year has been the first year of our local fundraising. We’ve been visiting each cruise ship and spreading the word about our ambitious project. We’re now nearly at the end of the cruise ship season with only two more ships to arrive – and have raised over £60,000 from passengers and crew this season. So an enormous thankyou to all of you!

The opportunity to sponsor the restoration of your own piece of South Georgia is open to everyone. We urgently need your support.
If you would like to contribute a lasting legacy to South Georgia, please do sponsor the Project. Restoring a hectare (2½ acres) of the island for evermore costs £90 ($140); a square mile costs £23,000 or $36,000 – and we have a total of 80,000 hectares or 300 Square Miles to cover!

£90/$140
To Sponsor a Hectare...

You can directly help return millions of seabirds to South Georgia, and restore the island’s native ecology, by joining the increasing number of donors who are making this all happen. Details are available on the South Georgia Heritage Trust website http://www.sght.org/Sponsor-a-hectare

The South Georgia Heritage Trust is a UK charity, so donations can be enhanced by the recovery of tax from UK tax-payers. US citizens can make tax deductible donations by downloading the form from the SGHT website at http://www.sght.org/make-donation