We’re underway. The South Georgia Heritage Trust’s yellow helicopter G-TVAM began the clearance of rats from South Georgia today, March 1st 2011, by dropping the first load of bait on the Greene Peninsula. This momentous flight, with Peter Garden at the controls, marked the beginning of fieldwork for Phase 1 of the South Georgia Habitat Restoration project. It was the pathfinder for many hundreds of similar flights planned over the next 5 years, by which time the island should stand ready to welcome millions of birds back to their ancestral home.

The field team had worked tirelessly over the previous fortnight to be ready for this day, with a tight schedule of preparing and testing equipment, consumables and themselves. Led by our three experienced New Zealanders (Peter Garden, Nick Torr and Gary Patterson), protocols for carrying out all elements of the baiting operation were established, and everyone was trained in how to undertake the refuelling and hopper refilling safely. Meanwhile Bob Brett was learning how to apply his previous experience of flying in Europe and Africa to the demands of accurately dropping bait pellets on a matrix of gridlines on a mountainous and windy sub-Antarctic island.

Earlier, the advance field party of five had welcomed the arrival of first George Lemann and then Dion Poncet, Deirdre Galbreith and the Kiwi trio, who came from three continents via the Falklands. With them came six of the seven bait-filled shipping containers plus assorted other gear, resulting in the completion of the huge logistical feat of assembling on this remote island many hundreds of assorted items from all over the globe. Credit for this monumental task, and overcoming the seemingly endless delays and frustrations involved, goes largely to Nici, Alison, Geoff and Sally, with welcome support from a great number of sources including the British Forces in the Falkland Islands.
Our bait arrives
Completing a journey of over 13,000 miles, the Bell Labs bait finally reached South Georgia towards the end of February. It arrived in perfect condition, having left Wisconsin in October.

Improving helicopter comms
A highlight of our field preparations was the placing of a VHF repeater station high above the operational base at Grytviken, in a place where it would facilitate good radio communications with the two aircraft throughout the Phase 1 area. Dion, Deirdre and I were flown up to a col behind Mt Hodges on a glorious day, to await delivery of the repeater underslung from TC. Bob gently placed the cargo on the ridge, released the load and swung away to await the call to return and pick us up. This he did, with Roland filming the scene, before we returned to base via a wide sweep to allow a first look at the Mercer baiting zone and the fast-retreating Neumayer glacier.

Roland films the arrival of the bait containers at King Edward Point. (Photo Sam Crimmin)

Deirdre and Dion secure the repeater station on the col, with Cumberland East Bay in the background.

With millimetre precision, Dion guides the telehandler forks under a bait pallet, with George at the controls. Each shipping container houses 10 pallets, and every one has to be carried around to the operational base at Grytviken on the back of a trailer before being packed in another container for protection from the elements. George, Dion and Bob spent many hours carrying out this task, and now we have plentiful supplies adjacent to the helicopter re-loading site.

Bob and TC deliver the VHF repeater

TC (foreground) and AM during the work-up phase prior to the commencement of bait-spreading.
**SAR exercise**
As part of our preparations for fieldwork, we carried out a Search and Rescue (SAR) exercise, simulating the finding of a downed helicopter and the recovery of an injured pilot. The operation was conducted in collaboration with BAS and the South Georgia Government, and went very well. Nici and Alison in the Dundee SGHT office were involved, advising by satellite phone where the aircraft flight-following device had last transmitted, thereby allowing Peter and Deirdre to locate the site very quickly.

**Peter Garden returns**
The Habitat Restoration project was very fortunate to engage the interest and participation of New Zealand pilot Peter Garden from the outset. Peter is one of the most experienced and knowledgeable practitioners of aerial baiting, and has been central to the planning and design of the South Georgia operation. He joined me for a reconnaissance visit to the island in March 2010, and it was his assurance that the project was feasible which gave SGHT the confidence to make it happen. Peter is now back as part of the team, and has been enjoying getting to grips both with a twin-engined helicopter and some of the most spectacular flying terrain in the world.

**Beeping ducks**
In order to monitor the population of South Georgia pintails during and after bait spreading, we have been fitting miniature VHF radio transmitters to a sample of adults around King Edward Cove. These devices are attached to leg rings, and tests on captive birds showed that they have no effect on the behaviour of the birds. To date four ducks have been adorned with a transmitter, and up to 11 more will receive theirs before we begin operating on the Thatcher peninsula.

Peter Garden at the controls of AM overlooking the mighty Nordenskold Glacier

An altogether different encounter with South Georgia’s birdlife! Here Sally competes with a skua for a biological sample or a meal, depending on your perspective.
Home for two months. Everyone in the HR field team is getting used to looking out of the window onto a very different landscape to that which normally greets them when they open the curtains at home. We live in Larsen House on King Edward Point (extreme bottom left corner of uppermost photo) and operate the helicopters from the old whaling station at Grytviken (mid way up on the right hand side). The western boundary of the Phase 1 baiting area is the huge Neumayer glacier (lower photo, taken from helicopter TC).
We need your help: we have 80,000 Hectares to clear!

So now the baiting has begun – and we’re all working hard and fast to ensure it all runs smoothly. Getting to this point has been a massive achievement. And we are all very aware that we would never have got to this point without the generosity of our sponsors. Every single penny you donate goes towards this project and we are making good use of it. What better way than to save the beautiful birds of South Georgia.

Our fundraising activities have continued throughout this season; and we have had enormous support from both crew and passengers. But the opportunity to sponsor the clearing of hectares is not only open to our visitors this year, you can also help us by sponsoring online:

£90
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 will make 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/sght-donors

If you would like to contribute a lasting legacy to South Georgia, please do sponsor the Project. Restoring a hectare (2 ½ 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!