Thanks to the amazing generosity of our supporters, ranging from small individual donations to large grants from major foundations, we were able to complete the baiting of South Georgia in March this year. If our work has been successful, there are now no live rodents on South Georgia. The island’s birds need no longer fear the destruction of their eggs and chicks, and can return to breed safely in areas long denied to them.

It is tremendously exciting to be witnessing already the impact of our work. South Georgia pipits, the world’s most southerly songbird found only on South Georgia, are already breeding in places where they have not been seen within living memory. South Georgia pintails are likewise appearing with chicks throughout the island. Wilson’s storm petrels are doing their delicate dance over the waves in inshore locations where they have until now been a rarity. A separate article in this newsletter describes this in more detail.

But our work is not over yet. It is essential that we return to the island to check whether we have indeed succeeded in eradicating every last rat and mouse from South Georgia. Following thorough monitoring we are already confident that the work we did in 2011 has been completely successful. We now need to revisit the areas we baited in 2013 and 2015. We plan to do so towards the end of 2017. By then a sufficient time will have elapsed for us to be confident that, if any rodents have survived, we shall find them.

We need to do this because:

- If there are any survivors, timely action must be taken to deal with them before they spread too far

- We must be sure that our donors’ funds have been effective in carrying out the largest such eradication ever attempted

- It will help those who carry out future eradication projects to know what techniques are effective and, if we have failed in any respect, why.

We still have to raise the funds to pay for this vital task. We need £300,000 to pay for our team to revisit South Georgia and spend several months in some of the remotest parts of this remote island deploying gnaw sticks, remote cameras, and other sophisticated techniques to detect whether any rodents have survived.

Large numbers of pintail ducks are observed around the Cumberland Bay area cleared in 2011.

We also need funds to meet SGHT’s overheads – office costs and the salaries of our small paid staff - so that we can continue our vital work to protect and conserve South Georgia’s unique natural and historical heritage.

We are extraordinarily grateful for your generosity to date. May I thank you in anticipation for your continued support!
The birds are back in town

Alison Neil, CEO SGHT

When we began the Habitat Restoration Project, we understood that, when it came to the island’s recovery, we were in it for the long haul. The full impact of eradicating rodents from the island would not be realised for decades. Birds like petrels and prions, whose nests were confined to offshore islands while rats infested the mainland, would tend to return to breed to the area close to where they themselves were hatched. Moreover, they lay an egg only once a year. Repopulation of the main island by those species will therefore take some time, but it will happen, bringing about the same proliferation of seabirds on the main island as visitors are delighted to discover on Bird, Prion and Albatross Islands.

There are two bird species that are only found on South Georgia: the South Georgia pintail, a delightful duck (below right), whose numbers have been greatly impacted by the presence of rats; and the South Georgia pipit (below), the island’s only songbird, which was under threat of extinction while there was a risk of rodents reaching the few areas where pipits were still able to breed in safety. To turn around the fortunes of the endemic birds was a worthy goal in itself.

So our hearts have been gladdened by the many reports already received of a significant increase in the numbers of South Georgia pipits and South Georgia pintails. The pipit begins to breed when one year old and can produce up to ten eggs each season. It is, as Project Director Tony Martin aptly describes it, our canary in the coalmine for the Habitat Restoration project. In the 2014-15 season many more pipits were spotted by visitors to the areas cleared in Phase 2 (2013), but everyone was waiting with baited (pardon the pun) breath for the first pipit nest to be discovered – and here it is, in the photo below.

South Georgia pintails have likewise been thriving since the completion of our work. This attractive duck, which is partial to a meaty nibble from the odd carcass, had never been seen to breed successfully on mainland South Georgia in living memory. But one year after the first phase of baiting, fluffy pintail chicks were waddling behind their mother in full sight of the delighted residents of King Edward Point.

Finally, earlier this year, Team Rat was treated to the lovely spectacle of fifteen Wilson’s storm petrels (see photo above). Storm petrels seldom breed successfully where rats are present, and this unprecedented number of birds in front of the base at KEP may well indicate that the species is already exploring local scree slopes for future nesting opportunities.

The birds are back in town and it’s all thanks to you!

Pleasingly and appropriately, the first pipit nest on the mainland in living memory was found by South Georgia naturalist and Team Rat member Sally Poncet in January 2015.

Take a good look at the picture above. Every living creature in that nest is alive because of the baiting work that together we made possible. Even now, somewhere on South Georgia, a pipit chick that would never have survived the nest pre-2011 is making its first flight and singing its first song.
Readers of past editions of the newsletter have been introduced to Professor Tony Martin, the Director of the Habitat Restoration Project, and other members of the fantastic team who have carried out the eradication fieldwork on South Georgia. But I’d like to tell you about some of the others who have made less glamorous but absolutely essential contributions to the success of the project.

First, the Board of Trustees of SGHT and the Directors of our sister organisation in the USA, the Friends of South Georgia Island (FOSGI), all of whom devote their time totally free of charge. The SGHT Trustees and their US counterparts shared the ambition of the late Brigadier David Nicholls, who set up the Trust in 2005 and tragically died in 2006, to eradicate rodents from South Georgia. In 2007 the SGHT Trustees took the courageous decision to tackle the project. I don’t think any of us realised at the time quite what we were taking on – probably just as well! Without the Board’s strategic vision and commitment we could not have got to this point.

I must in particular single out two Board members: Frederik Paulsen, without whose amazingly generous financial support we could not have got either the Trust or the Habitat Restoration Project off the ground; and Mike Richardson, whose committed and meticulous chairmanship of the project steering committee and hours spent on the preparation of complex planning papers have been the key to successful operations on the ground. The generosity of the Island Foundation, a family foundation in the USA, also played a vital role in the early stages of the project, thanks to the involvement and strong advocacy of former Trustee Michael Moore.

SGHT Trustees, staff and friends in Cambridge 2012

SGHT’s CEO, Alison Neil, and her staff team have shown exceptional commitment and enthusiasm, working long hours to bring in funds, arrange complex logistics, set up meetings, produce newsletters, and carry out a myriad of other tasks. In addition to Alison, I should mention Peter Taylor and Stephanie Strutt (the fundraising team), Nici Rymer (administration and logistics), Kelly Hague (fundraising consultant) and Marie Shafi (website and design), together with Sarah Lurcock and her staff on South Georgia, who have done a wonderful job of telling visitors to South Georgia about the project and encouraging them to donate to the project.

Ship operators have played a vital supporting role in the Habitat Restoration Project, from raising funds to helping with physical operations around the island.

South Georgia welcomes numerous IAATO cruise ships throughout the Antarctic summer. Cruise operators and staff have organised charitable auctions, encouraged their passengers to donate and offered all sorts of help in kind by shipping both our equipment (including our helicopters in 2011) and our people to South Georgia. Funds raised from cruise ship passengers visiting in the 2014-2015 summer season totalled more than £200,000. Since the pilot phase in 2011, IAATO members, operators and passengers have raised more than £860,000 in support of the project.

Special thanks must also go to the British Antarctic Survey, whose vessel RRS Ernest Shackleton delivered Team Rat and all its equipment to South Georgia for operational phases 2 and 3. Robert Patterson, captain of the ‘Shack’, and his team have been excellent caretakers of our precious cargo of fuel, bait and equipment, not to mention our three helicopters, packed like sardines aboard the ship. BAS’s Operations Director, John Hall, and Chris Hindley, who coordinated the charter, played a vital role in making all this possible.

Team Rat and all of these unsung heroes need your support to complete the project. Find out how to help below.

The RRS Ernest Shackleton, British Antarctic Survey’s vessel used in Phases 2 and 3

Sarah Lurcock gives a presentation to cruise ship passengers on the importance of the Habitat Restoration Project.

Photo by Tony Martin
Did you hear the latest?

Alison Neil, CEO SGHT

SGHT and FOSGI urgently need your continued support to complete the Habitat Restoration project.

Unless we are able to raise £300,000 to monitor the effectiveness of the eradication work, we will not be able to claim the South Georgia project as a major milestone in the fight against island invasives.

We also want to help and encourage other charities and organisations who are contemplating similar projects, by passing on the lessons learned during this ground-breaking work. Already others are looking to South Georgia as a model for island eradications. The success of this project will influence what is attempted in future, and the survival outcome for other endangered species around the world. We are planning on hosting an international conference in 2017, where those new to the field can learn from eradication experts what has been achieved to date.

The South Georgia Heritage Trust and Friends of South Georgia Island have put everything into raising the £6.5 million funds needed to bait the entire 100,000 hectares of rodent-infested land on South Georgia. We now urgently need your help and support to complete this project and make it count on a worldwide scale.

Please help us reap the benefits of all our hard work on South Georgia by supporting us today.

Did you know that the HR project still needs your support?

Donate now

UK residents
Go to www.sght.org/Sponsor-a-hectare and use Paypal to gift aid your donation

US residents
Go to www.fosgi.org/donations to make a tax deductible donation

Everyone else
Go to www.sght.org/Sponsor-a-hectare or www.sght.org/make-donation and donate via Paypal or credit card

Thank you!