



giving  
nature  
a home



Issue 6  
October 2020

# Island Restoration News: Gough and Henderson





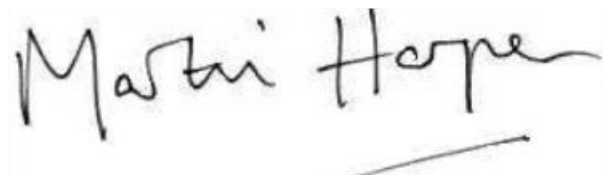
# STOP PRESS

## The loss of the MFV *Geo Searcher* off Gough Island

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020

As we went to press with the latest *Island Restoration News: Gough and Henderson* we received the shocking news that the MFV *Geo Searcher* had sunk off the north coast of Gough Island. Thankfully, everyone aboard made it to land on Gough where they spent several days at the South African weather station base (where our overwintering team is stationed), awaiting rescue. Two crew members sustained injuries. The crew are now all aboard the SA *Agulhas II* and sailing back to Cape Town. The two Tristanian Fisheries Observers are already safely home on Tristan da Cunha. We wish everyone involved a speedy recovery from this ordeal.

We do not know at this stage the exact depth to which the vessel has sunk, nor have any information about the likely environmental impacts at this World Heritage Site. We will bring you more news on this as the situation becomes clearer.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin Harper". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature, there is a single horizontal line.

Martin Harper  
Executive Director, Global Conservation





## Gough Island—where are we now?

Six months after making the devastating decision to postpone the 2020 restoration of Gough Island, our team is back in strength and starting to gear up for what we hope will be a 2021 mouse eradication attempt.

Many months in to the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to operate within a highly uncertain set of circumstances. Nonetheless, it is fair to say we now have a greater understanding of the likely procedures we will need to build into a future operation.

Whilst the operation itself will be little changed, the need to quarantine everyone setting off to Gough or entering South Africa means we have a much greater lead in time for every aspect of the preparatory off-island work. Of course, the safety of the South African weather station staff based on Gough, the population of Tristan da Cunha, our team members and those with whom they come into contact is paramount. But this has serious implications for several aspects of our work – most noticeably, cost. Some things that should have taken five days to complete in a pre-COVID-19 world will now take 35, for example.

We are in no doubt that the project could not have proceeded this year and that our decision to postpone back in March was the right one. To paraphrase New Zealand's world-leading Island Eradication Advisory Group, hundreds of things have to go right for an eradication operation to succeed and just a single thing going wrong can cause it to fail. The spanner COVID-19 threw into the 2020 operation was a rather large one, thrown too late and too quickly for us to adapt. Although we had one team already on island establishing the temporary infrastructure the operation requires and another team quite literally about to step aboard a Gough-bound vessel, the third team (not due on island for several more weeks) was spread disparately across four continents in countries with closed or closing borders. We had no alternative but to call time on a 2020 operation.

Postponement was devastating for the whole team – for some a missed opportunity of a lifetime was added to the grim reality that another 2 million or so chicks and eggs would fail to fledge on Gough this year. Michelle Risi, one of our Gough-based scientists, shared a short message about the harsh realities of the postponement for Tristan albatross at our July webinar (you can watch it [here](https://bit.ly/3cJAABH) / <https://bit.ly/3cJAABH> if you missed the event). And things become more desperate still for the likes of the MacGillivray's prion, with yet another year of 0% fledging success at our monitored colony.

It is of huge credit to the team and our partners that we are even able to contemplate a 2021 operation. We owe thanks to our many funders

who have been understanding about the delay in delivery and even dug deeper into their pockets to try and help make 2021 possible. Our appeal to RSPB members had only just launched when we had to take the decision to postpone – despite knowing we couldn't go ahead this year, many people continued to donate leading to one of our most successful appeals in recent history. If you would like to donate, we are still welcoming online donations [here](https://bit.ly/3ikFo1r) (<https://bit.ly/3ikFo1r>) or you can contact Michelle McNally in our Philanthropy Team at [michelle.mcnally@rspb.org.uk](mailto:michelle.mcnally@rspb.org.uk).

But we are taking nothing for granted. The postponement and the new realities of managing COVID-19 risks mean that the increase in project costs are substantial. With a now very considerable funding gap of £3M we cannot simply assume that the operation will go ahead next year, despite the fact the first 'on the ground' practical work towards a 2021 operation is underway with the sailing of the S.A. *Agulhas II* to Gough Island for the annual relief voyage.

We will shortly start incurring some of the larger unrecoverable costs of a 2021 operation and all our eyes will be on the series of 'go' / 'no-go' decision points we have put in place preceding each of these financial commitments. We have only one shot at this operation. A postponement to 2022 may still end up being necessary but this will only be viable if we avoid incurring too many of 2021's costs.

We'd like to say thank you to all supporters of the Gough Island Restoration Programme and thank you for your patience in these last few months whilst we have scaled back our project communications. Much has been going on behind the scenes to repatriate our team on Gough (which you can read about [here](https://bbc.in/2HyHEFJ) / <https://bbc.in/2HyHEFJ>), to put in place fresh contracts for personnel, vessels, helicopters and insurance for next year, as well as to consider how we might be able to reduce the substantial funding gap. Our 2020 charter vessel *Evohe* finally arrived back in her home port in mid-July having sailed 48,000km – 8,000km more than the Earth's circumference! Gough 2021 will not be easy, but we have some of the best people in the world supporting us.

**Sophie Thomas**  
Assistant Programme Manager  
Gough Island Restoration Programme





# The start of the Gough Island story

Knowing as much as we do about Gough Island and its species takes years of research and hard work. The first scientific exploration of the island was in 1955 (long before our current team of Field Assistants were even born!), and this brave exploration paved the way for the work and scientists that followed. This article is written by Michael Swales, the Seabird Scientist on that first expedition in 1955, and describes his incredible experience of Gough.

As a scientist and keen birdwatcher, it was my good fortune to be selected as a Vertebrate Zoologist for the Gough Island Scientific Survey of 1955-56. I had no prior experience of South Atlantic seabirds, but had undergone training on Fair Isle and been on three expeditions to Norway, so was excited at the prospect of taking part in the first scientific exploration of this remote, uninhabited British Overseas Territory.

To get there, we sailed for nearly a month on board a cargo vessel to Cape Town and from there for a week in a Royal Navy vessel, all of which gave me my first visual experience of some of the relevant seabirds at sea.

We stayed in the Edinburgh Settlement on Tristan for six weeks before a ship could take us to our destination. This was an excellent opportunity to meet the islanders (who are very familiar with their local wildlife) and to study the birds. Among the first things I learnt was the Tristan name for each species; "Mollies, Pinnamins, Sea-hens" etc. When we and two islanders finally got to Gough, we established our Base in the preferred location of The Glen, from where we hoped to find a way inland.

On the first day we were delighted to see that the beach at The Glen was a landing place for what we assumed was a rockhopper penguin colony in the valley; so we saw quite a few for the first time at close quarters. As the day came to an end we saw many seabirds gathering not far off-shore and later flying into The Glen to nest behind our hut, calling as they came. Meanwhile, quite near to our campsite, we saw several small land birds (buntings). All of this was exciting; but there was much more to come...

We planned to go inland on foot and round the coast by boat (when the sea was calm!) using a dinghy we had brought from Tristan. Following the stream from The

Glen, we soon came to the penguin rookery and caught sight of first one and then another very shy, flightless moorhen-like rail. Not far ahead we entered the thick forested zone; to our delight there was a yellow-nosed albatross nest with adult and chick. Emerging from the dense undergrowth onto a more open and undulating area a big surprise to conclude our excursion was the sight of wandering albatrosses on nests\*.

This whole experience emphasised to me (and colleagues) the need to plan how best to proceed. The seabird species list was already growing, but their distribution on the island and identification of others had to be recorded.

We had however an immediate problem which affected us all: mice were invading our food store! We all noticed that these mice were larger than any we might have caught at home; but we were sure they were still *Mus domesticus* (house mice).

Next, we set off inland towards Mount Rowett, onto South Peak and the (up to thirty) wandering albatrosses nesting in what we named Gonydale. We continued south where we got our first glimpse of the largest colonies of rockhopper penguins imaginable – many thousands nesting on the low gentle sloping cliffs from South Point to Rockhopper Point.

Returning to Mount Rowett we saw a pair of nesting sooty albatrosses with young (we had only seen this rarer species flying until then). Continuing north we found more "Gonies" nesting in an area to be named Albatross Plain, concluding an exciting day. We decided that that we must camp in the uplands in future as we were sure there were many more exciting discoveries to be made. We established two camps, at South Peak and on the slopes of Edinburgh Peak.

Another excursion was to the west coast via what became known as Michael's Col, where we were able to get down to the beach where we did a rough count of breeding fur seals. Back on the upland, the main interest was the wandering albatrosses, the nests of which we were able to approach within yards of without disturbing the adult. We were also very drawn to watch, photograph and sound record the courtship behaviour. We accepted that it was a privilege to do so.

The team continued towards completing every aspect of our scientific exploration and mapping of the island, reaching as far southwards as Snug Harbour by boat. I recorded the penguin distribution by counting from the boat and noting them on a rough outline map. As the weather changed towards the end of the summer I studied more the two species of endemic land birds, the flightless moorhen (we had two in a pen) and the Gough bunting (singly in cages in the open cave). This was fascinating and seen as a privilege.

Our time on Gough Island came to end after six months, when the South African Met Office reached an agreement with HMG and sent a replacement team on board a naval vessel to set up a permanent Met Station, which also took us off. There followed much time spent by all of us analysing and publishing our results, which for me had been most remarkable. There are few islands where so many seabirds breed in such vast numbers – I recorded a minimum twenty species. Personally too, this was the experience of a lifetime and led me to revisit the Tristan archipelago several times and continue studying there, especially on Inaccessible Island.

Michael Swales.  
January 2020.

\* *Tristan albatross* were not recognised as their own species until 1998, so at the time of Michael's trip, they were still considered to be wandering albatross.





Sub-Antarctic fur seals on Gough Island (*J. Cleeland*)



## Habitat Spotlight: Gough's coast

With so much of our focus on the impacts of mice on the conservation of Gough's albatross and burrow nesting seabirds, it is easy to forget the spectacles which occur around the island's coast. At this time of year, thousands of seals and penguins are coming ashore to breed.

### Northern rockhopper penguin

#### Key facts

- The Tristan da Cunha group of islands is a globally important breeding site for the northern rockhopper penguin, supporting approximately 90% of the world population.
- Around 17-31% of the global population is found on Gough Island alone—up to an estimated 32,000–65,000 breeding pairs.

#### Breeding Biology

Adults return to Gough in the austral spring and nest on open rocky slopes around much of the island's coast. Egg-laying starts in September/October with chicks fledging in January/February.

#### Conservation

Not thought to be affected by the mice—but some small penguin species elsewhere do lose their eggs to invasive rodents.

The northern rockhopper penguin is globally Endangered due to historic and ongoing population declines.

### Sub-Antarctic fur seal

#### Key facts

- Around 80% of the world's Sub-Antarctic fur seal population breeds on Gough.
- That's approximately 300,000 individuals with an estimated 60,000 pups born each year.
- The first record of an individual with partial albinism was sighted on Gough in January 2019.

#### Breeding Biology

Adult males return to the island in October to mark out their territories—the females arrive shortly after. Pups are born between November and January on beaches all around the island.

#### Conservation

The species is recovering following legal protection and is assessed by the IUCN as Least Concern.

Our overwintering scientists weigh 100 pups each year as part of a long-term monitoring programme.

### Southern elephant seals

#### Is the end in sight for Gough's population?

Gough Island is also home to a small population of around 100 Southern elephant seals — the largest carnivore on earth!

Gough Island is of particular interest as it is the northernmost breeding site for the species. But the population has been in decline for the last half century.

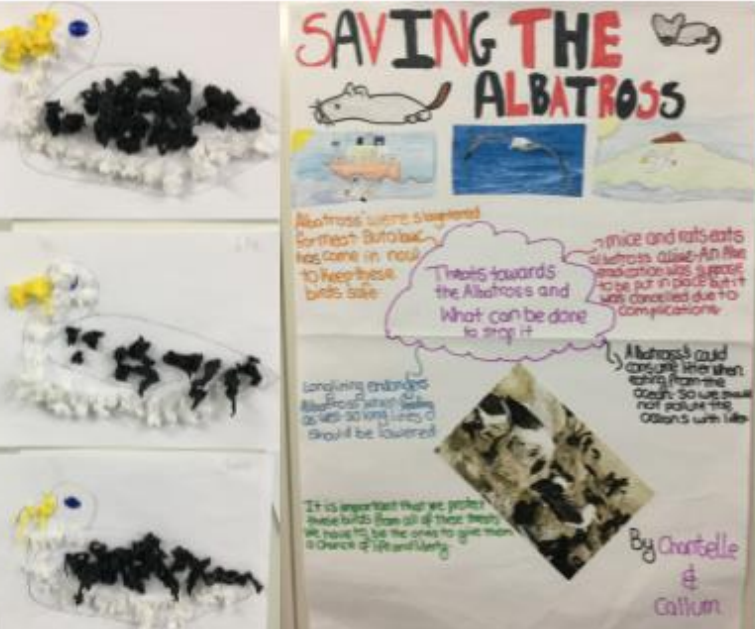
Many top marine predators at the northern extent of their range in the Southern Ocean seem to be in decline, so there is no reason to suspect mice or anything else relating specifically to Gough Island lies behind this trend.

However, the sad reality is that it seems time is being called on this colony. The most recent estimate is that the breeding colony will disappear within the next 20 years — and possibly much sooner.



Northern rockhopper penguins (*M. Ris*)





*Above left:* Posters and pictures made by pupils on Tristan da Cunha to celebrate World Albatross Day. *Above right:* Gough Island Field Assistant Michelle Risi supported the World Albatross Day #albiecakebakeoff with this impressive Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross cake. Photos by St Mary's School Tristan da Cunha & Michelle Risi

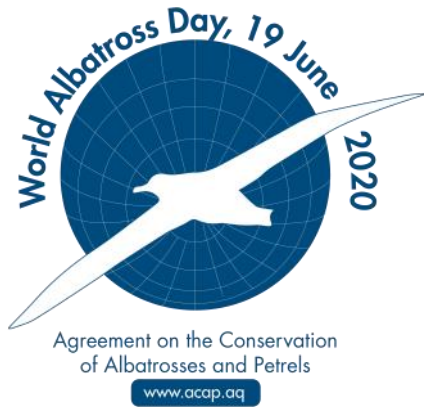


*Above top:* Chris, Alexis and Michelle—three seabirds scientists on Gough Island get the support of a Tristan albatross chick to promote World Albatross Day. *Above:* the Albatross Task Force in Chile are the first to take their World Albatross Day banner out to sea! Photos by Gough Field Team & Christian Ibieta.



# World Albatross Day

International awareness days unite people from different continents, sectors and ages as they all share an interest in the day's theme. So what better way to bring people together to celebrate albatrosses than with their own official day of recognition?



The 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 marked the first ever World Albatross Day (WAD). The idea to establish an awareness day for this highly threatened group of species was suggested by Michelle Risi, and we are delighted that the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) embraced it.

The 19<sup>th</sup> of June was chosen to commemorate the day that ACAP was signed in 2001 with the ambition to protect these stunning species. Of the 22 albatross species recognised by the IUCN, all but one are classified as threatened (Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable) or Near Threatened with extinction, making them the most threatened group of birds. The theme for this year's day was 'Eradicating Island Pests'.

Albatrosses range widely across the Southern Ocean and North Pacific. Whilst they raise their young on land, albatrosses spend the rest of their (potentially very long) lives at sea travelling vast distances. They face significant threats both on land and at sea, and both sets of habitats need to become safer if albatrosses are to thrive. Fishery by-catch, invasive non-native predators and climate change are amongst the biggest threats faced by albatrosses, and require working across borders and sectors to be resolved.

World Albatross Day aimed to bring albatross communities together, encouraging international relationships to be fostered for the common goal of saving albatrosses, as well as raise

awareness of albatrosses and their struggles to new audiences.

Australia marked the day by uplisting its only endemic albatross species — the shy albatross — from Vulnerable to Endangered on its own national threatened species list and reaffirmed its commitment to reversing the birds' fortunes.

Leading experts including from the Albatross Task Force, RSPB, BirdLife International, British Antarctic Survey and the fishing industry gave talks to explain the threats facing albatrosses and what they are doing to save them. Everyone was asked to consider how they can personally contribute to improve the conservation status of albatrosses through behavioural choices. The RSPB's story map about albatrosses in the UK Overseas Territories can be found [here](https://bit.ly/3cbiPe8) <https://bit.ly/3cbiPe8>

Tristan Conservation Department helped the pupils of St Mary's School and playschool (Tristan da Cunha) mark the day, too, with [cake, artwork and a presentation](#) (see above left).

Various competitions were held, including a poster competition (with 234 paintings entered by 77 artists after ACAP teamed up with *Artists and Biologists Unite for Nature*) and an albatross cake bake-off. Banners were submitted from 24 locations including Antarctica and the South Pacific Ocean. Winning designs have been turned into posters which are freely available for use to promote the conservation of albatrosses. One such poster is pictured opposite.

The event prompted a flurry of donations to the RSPB members' appeal for the Gough Island Restoration Programme.

The inaugural World Albatross Day was a great success and we are looking forward to hearing about progress towards saving these wonderful species on World Albatross Day 2021.



World Albatross Day, 19 June 2020  
"Eradicating Island Pests"



*Above:* Poster design by Anne Shoemaker, a volunteer of Artists and Biologists Unite for Nature.

*Below:* Pete McClelland, Operations Manager for the Gough Island Restoration Programme speaks in support of World Albatross Day.

*"Albatrosses represent everything that is special about the Southern Ocean. From the impressive size of the great albatrosses as they glide effortlessly across thousands of kilometres of ocean to the haunting cry of a light-mantled albatross as it undertakes its courtship flight, it is impossible not to be moved by these birds. To lose them is to lose part of our soul. World Albatross Day reminds us of just how important they are and why we must work to protect them."*

# Islands around the World

## Tackling new threats to ‘back from the brink’ iguanas

Whilst protecting birds might be the RSPB’s ‘bread and butter’ conservation, for a number of years we have also been working, with others, to enhance the fortunes of threatened endemic reptiles in the Caribbean.

The recent reclassification of the extinction risk of the Turks and Caicos rock iguana *Cyclura carinata* from Critically Endangered to Endangered, in part due to island restoration initiatives, has been a most welcome outcome of our partnership work in the region and allowed for a brief moment of celebration. But there is always more to be done.

Many islands in the Caribbean have been cleared of invasive mammals but invasive *reptiles*,

most notably the green iguana *Iguana iguana*, continue to pose a huge threat. There are no proven methods to eradicate invasive non-native iguanas once they have established, their numbers can rise rapidly into the millions, and they can hybridise with native species. Preventing their spread is paramount.

As such, it was a heart sinking moment when reports reached us of potential green iguana sightings on two islands in the Turks and Caicos (a UK Overseas Territory) – thought to be the only island chain in the northern Caribbean to be free of invasive iguanas. We were able to recruit and deploy a team of experts to the islands within a matter of weeks – a testament to our strong partnership.

After two weeks of searching and talking with dozens of island residents, the experts concluded that green iguanas are not established and that it is still possible to prevent their establishment. We have recently been awarded Darwin funding to enhance biosecurity across the islands and are helping to develop and implement a green iguana action plan together with the Turks and Caicos Government, Turks & Caicos National Trust and San Diego Zoo.



Turks and Caicos rock iguana (S.Havery)



## Building support for Pitcairn and Henderson

Darwin-funding has also been instrumental to our approach to protecting the investment of the restoration projects on Gough (Tristan da Cunha) and Henderson (Pitcairn) through enhancing pre- and -post-border biosecurity.

Whilst restrictions in movement due to COVID-19 have hampered some aspects of this vital project, important progress has been made and we have successfully secured a project extension to take account of delays incurred by the pandemic.

Pitcairn Island's two Biosecurity Officers received comprehensive training from a New Zealand Biosecurity Academy expert who visited the island before lockdowns hit.

This expert also assessed the full suite of current biosecurity risks and mitigation measures *en route* to the islands. Some of the recommendations he put forward for improvements have already been adopted by Pitcairn Government and others will be delivered next year through the Darwin project. A Biosecurity Manual detailing all requirements for all vessels, tourists and residents has also been drafted.

The Biosecurity Academy expert will return next year, too, this time for an extended stay on the islands to help embed all recommendations.

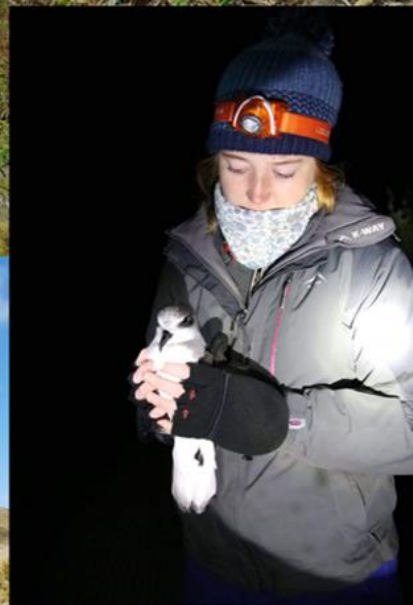
Meanwhile, the findings of work undertaken to remove Pacific rats *Rattus exulans* from a small island, Reiono (Tetiara Atoll, French Polynesia) - mentioned in this newsletter back in 2018 - have now been published.

This work is of particular relevance to a future eradication attempt on Henderson, although we need explore the implications of scaling up the findings and applying them to an island the size of Henderson (Reiono is just 22 hectares).

We will report in more detail on this in the next edition.









## Goodbye MAC, but hopefully not for long...

Michelle, Alexis and Chris, or 'MAC' as they've come to be known, have been the RSPB Field Assistants on Gough Island for the last two years. Staying for an exceptional second year stint, they are now preparing to return to their homes in South Africa. They share some of their highlights from the last two years and the mixed emotions of saying goodbye to the mountain in the sea.

**After two years living and working on Gough Island, Michelle, Alexis and Chris have become familiar faces to many of our supporters through our social media pages, blogs and newsletters. They have shared their vital work and given us a glimpse of the amazing place that is Gough Island through their stories and spectacular images, all the while being passionate advocates for the island's restoration. After completing their second overwintering season, it is now time for them to leave Gough and return home, even though the mice are still there.**

It is almost time for the three of us to leave Gough Island. It is difficult to compress two years into a few hundred words. We feel we have accomplished so much in this time, from completing all of our fieldwork tasks and helping to establish the annual World Albatross Day, to assisting with the planning of the eradication project and sharing bits of our time on the island and the beauty of Gough with you in social media posts and blogs.

Our highlights from a 'professional' point of view include nest monitoring of the Gough bunting, confirming with video evidence that mice are attacking adult seabirds, and gathering footage highlighting the extent of the terrible impacts mice are having on MacGillivray's prion.

However, at the same time we feel we are leaving without completing the most crucial task we had set out to finish. We had big dreams and set our hearts on being part of the eradication stage of the Gough Island

Restoration Programme, a momentous conservation action which aims to restore the homes of so many animals so close to our hearts.

COVID-19 has changed everyone's lives in a big way, and it was very bizarre to experience a pandemic from a remote island. Although we were completely unaffected in the sense that our day-to-day lives did not have to change, our whole mindset had changed significantly. We were constantly worrying about the health and safety of loved ones at home, wondering how things will be when we get back to South Africa, and hoping that the postponement of the 2020 operation will not stop the project from going forward entirely.

As our fantastic replacements embark on their journey across the ocean, we are currently witnessing the return of many of Gough's iconic animals. The air is again becoming filled with the braying calls of the northern rockhopper penguins, exultant cries of the sooty albatrosses and it is a joyful sight to once again come across many Atlantic-yellow nosed albatrosses refurbishing their nests on our slog up the Gonydale path. All this beauty is finished off with the emotive image of watching a Tristan albatross chick that has survived winter stretch its wings in the wind, and have our hands brooded by the very friendly southern giant petrels when we read their rings. There really is no place like Gough.

Soon we will be completing the annual Tristan albatross round island chick count, which will

give an indication of the impact that mice had on Gough's seabirds this year.

We are excited to hand over the ropes to our friends from South Africa's Marion Island research station, Kim, Vonica and Roelf. When you enjoy a place so much, it is extra special showing someone around who you know will love it just as much as you do — we know we are leaving the island in good hands.

This is also an opportunity for us to say thank you to you, our supporters. Without you we would not have been able to attempt the operation this year, or be able to return to finish the work once it is safe.

Despite the rollercoaster of emotions that we have faced over the last two years, we leave Gough on a very positive note truly hoping that the eradication can go ahead in 2021.

For now we say goodbye to Gough Island, but Team MAC hopes to come back!

MAC – Michelle, Alexis and Chris

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of our funders and supporters, both organisations and individuals alike.



environmental affairs  
Department:  
Environmental Affairs  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



HM Government



ISLAND CONSERVATION

Preventing Extinctions



LUDWICK  
FAMILY FOUNDATION

the David &  
Lucile Packard  
FOUNDATION



Jephcott Charitable Trust

John Ellerman  
Foundation



## Contact

If you would like further information about the Gough and Henderson Island Restoration Programmes, please contact

**Laura Beasley** RSPB, Assistant International Officer

**Email:** [goughisland@rspb.org.uk](mailto:goughisland@rspb.org.uk)

**www:** [www.goughisland.com](http://www.goughisland.com)

**Tel:** + 44 (0) 7548155366

**rspb.org.uk**

**Follow us:** [@goughisland](https://twitter.com/goughisland)

Cover image Tristan albatross (*M.Jones*)



The RSPB is the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.



The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.

The RSPB is a registered charity: England & Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654