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Island Restoration News: Gough Restoration Update





Gough Island Restoration—on the brink of delivery

Six months after making the decision to go for a 2021 project implementation, we have completed three of the four voyages and all the remaining operational team have successfully arrived in South Africa. We are finally on the cusp of delivering this species-saving mission.

Three voyages down and with half the team already on island, we now just have the main voyage to complete, transporting the rest of our team, helicopters and bait to Gough. The vessel, the S.A. *Agulhas II*, is scheduled to depart Cape Town by the end of May and the team should be at Gough ready to start the mouse eradication a week or so later.

As I write, the team members not already on Gough Island are quarantining in Cape Town having flown into South Africa from the USA (mainland and Hawai'i), Mexico, the UK, New Zealand and Australia over the last few days. The advance infrastructure and aviculture teams had tested several of these routes, but between February and May, travel restrictions and viable routes seemed to change by the day. International travel has been transformed from one of the most straightforward, to one of the least stable aspects of the project's logistics as a result of the pandemic. We needed borders and routes to stay open —and thankfully, they did, though for the management team in charge, this has been a stressful and tense time!

The shipping route for the bait from New Zealand also remained open and the bait has arrived in Cape Town in good condition. This was never a given. Crossing the equator, twice, for a delicate, moisture sensitive product, is not a journey to be taken lightly. That's why we trialled it first, with temperature and moisture loggers (and non-toxic bait). All worked well and the route looked viable—but that was just the practice run.

The real run with the expedition bait was somewhat more nerve-wracking as the intended vessel departure was cancelled at the last minute, and the next departure a week later immediately ate into our contingency time. Fortunately, we had accommodated such delays as part of standard planning for 'expedition style' eradication operations, and then added an extra helping of Covid-delay time budget on top of that. Planning for everything that can go wrong to go wrong — the adage all good eradication projects should heed (and doubly so in a time of Covid) — paid off in this case.

Over the next two weeks of quarantine, the team members will all be tested for coronavirus—again. We cannot afford to take anyone aboard who might be pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic, nor risk taking the virus to the island; we also have quarantining backups on standby, just in case. A successful project for them will be to return home, perhaps not having even set foot on the island.

So, it's so far, so good. But we need many more things to go right for us over the next four months. We've had Plan As and Bs and Cs in place—and Covid has undoubtedly caused more than a few Plan Ds to be made along the way— but we are now within touching distance of implementing the eradication operation.

Our advance teams on island are ahead of schedule with their necessary preparations, so hopefully when the *Agulhas* arrives, the team will be able to start baiting as soon as training and safety checks are completed and there is a suitable weather window. It won't be a moment too soon, with news from Gough that mouse attacks on adult albatrosses are occurring and, moreover, proving fatal (p3).

The weather presents one very significant variable with which the team will have to contend—and about which we can do little (p5). We have of course always known this and have incorporated as many contingency plans for the weather as feasible—but these are ultimately limited by the tilt of the Earth's axis! We need around 20 days of good weather to distribute the bait. We have around 80 to play with.

It's taken a Herculean effort, from very many people, to get to this point. As I have written before, but cannot continue to stress enough, we could not have even got to this point without the extraordinary commitment, flexibility and support of all our partners, and especially the forbearance and understanding shown by our funders. I would like to thank you all for supporting this project over the many years it has been in the planning. Without you, we wouldn't be here.

Andrew Callender
Gough Island Programme Executive

First confirmed death of adult Tristan albatross due to mice

We now have the first conclusive evidence that mouse attacks on adult albatrosses on Gough Island can be fatal. Proof, if it were needed, that the attempt to eradicate mice can't come soon enough.

Counting Tristan albatross chicks shortly before they fledge is one of the first tasks our Overwintering Team does when they arrive on island. Guided by the team they're replacing, it gives them an opportunity to get their bearings on the island they will call home for the next year. The job takes several days with the team camping out across the island. Despite the arduous terrain and often dreadful weather, it is usually one of the highlights of their year.

This fledging count is then compared to observations made the previous January of the number of eggs or (more usually) pairs of Tristan albatrosses rekindling their bond after more than a year at sea. From these two figures, breeding success of this Critically Endangered bird is calculated. On Gough it is always tragically low.

In between these two island-wide counts, the team monitors the nests at two sites more closely – Tafelkop and Gonydale. From these we get a better picture of the numbers lost to mice and when this happens (e.g. at egg, early chick or late chick stage). It was here, a few weeks ago, that two nests with adults sporting mouse injuries were observed.

One adult, ringed as E80, was sitting on her nest, still brooding her chick. Her wound was under her wing—it was very deep and looked serious – much worse than those seen on other birds in previous years. When the team returned to the area next, she was dead.

She was the second oldest breeding Tristan albatross known, having been ringed as a chick on Gough back in 1986. She was also one of the most experienced breeding Tristan albatrosses in the

world, and had successfully raised six chicks to fledging since 2008, when the long-term study of Tristan albatrosses was established. Given around 2 in 3 Tristan albatross chicks on Gough don't make it to fledge and she had to find a new partner during this time, this record is astonishing—and the tragedy of her loss made all the worse.

This is the first time on record that a Critically Endangered Tristan albatross *adult* has been killed by house mice. As the chicks (at their heaviest) are heavier than the adults, we knew the adults' size was no protection against the mice. But whilst the chicks *can't* fly away, the adults technically *can* – we had thought that this may be the reason mice seemed to leave them alone.

Mice, like all species, change and adapt to their surroundings – so it has, perhaps, always been a matter of time before we would come across adults which had been attacked. In some cases, like on Midway Atoll (North Pacific), new learning between house mice seems to have been transferred at speed. We can only hope that this behaviour is not yet widespread on Gough, and that the imminent eradication attempt is successful.

The death of each breeding Tristan albatross is a serious loss – in terms of the species' survival it is an even bigger blow than the loss of a chick. As we said when we first suspected mice were attacking adult albatrosses—adult mortality will expedite their path to extinction.

As for what is left of these two nests—?

At our last check, E80's partner was still providing for their chick. But with only one parent providing food, the chick will almost certainly take longer to

fledge and is likely to be in a weaker state, making it more vulnerable to mouse attack and making it less likely both individuals will be at peak fitness when they set out to sea.

At the other nest there was no sign of the wounded adult and the chick had died.

Since the discovery of these two nests, a third wounded adult brooding a wounded chick has also been seen in the area.

Below: The remaining adult tends the chick alone. The chick is now at even greater risk of being killed by mice (*R. Daling*)





Above: One of the most experienced breeding Tristan albatrosses continues to brood her chick despite deep, open wounds under her wing (*P. Ryan*)
Below: The same adult later provides the first conclusive evidence that mouse wounds on adult Tristan albatrosses can be fatal (*R. Daling*)



Meet Pete McClelland: Operations Manager & architect of Gough's mouse eradication plan

Pete McClelland is amongst the world's most experienced island restoration practitioners. In 2001, he led the ground-breaking restoration of the first 'large' island—11,300ha Campbell Island/Motu Ihupuku. He has been instrumental to the success of multiple eradication projects around New Zealand, Australia, North America and the Pacific, including several other 'bar-raising' endeavours. He was a member of New Zealand's Island Eradication Advisory Group for 7 years, and has also led many projects to translocate threatened species back to predator-free islands from which they had been lost. Here he answers some of our questions about his experiences working to restore some of the world's most remote seabird strongholds.



Pete, you could probably work on any island in the world—why did you choose Gough?

I'd decided I wasn't going to get involved in Gough for a range of personal reasons, not least having another project lined up! But I got invited on a "no strings" visit to the island in 2018 by the then Project Manager John Kelly. Being somewhat of an 'island nut' how could I refuse? – A look at a new island (several in fact as we also called past the rest of the Tristan group) and then back to what passes as normal life for my family. But during the fortnight I spent on Gough I realised this was a special opportunity – an opportunity to remove the invasive predators from an island BEFORE the birds had been lost completely. There are still a lot of seabirds on Gough, so the impact of the mice is not as obvious as when you visit an island which has fallen silent. Having visited and worked on many islands where the birds have already been wiped out, I wanted to be part of a proactive rather than a reactive project. In hindsight I think it was

a cunning plan by John, and it worked! The other lure for me was the then new Project Executive (Andrew Callender a.k.a. The Boss). My first meeting with him and departing manager Clare Stringer was held at RSPB's Rainham Marshes Reserve and after walking around the reserve discussing the project I thought *this is a bloke I can work for*. And the last two years have shown how right I was – he's motivated a great team through the planning and now it's up to the Operational Team to play their part.

What's the most complicated eradication you have been involved with, and how does Gough compare?

Every island eradication is different and brings with it its own set of issues and challenges and some would say the most complicated eradication is the one you are working on at that time!

A couple of projects that come to mind are Campbell Island, now 20 years ago, due to its size, isolation and the fact that up to that point no one had tried to do an eradication like it (since then several similar projects have been completed including Macquarie and South Georgia), and Lord Howe Island with its large community which gave rise to a raft of challenges both for removing the rats and mice and keeping them off. Gough is certainly up there, with a range of agencies, project partners and countries involved, challenging logistics and topography and

predictably bad weather. However, I have dealt with all of these things in previous projects so I am confident we can manage these on Gough. The big difference is Covid and the additional challenges it has brought.

You're now in quarantine, waiting to sail to Gough. What's been the hardest thing about the project so far?

The hardest thing about the project to date has been the added challenges thrown at us by Covid. Already challenging logistics have been made even more exacting. While every eradication is a team project, this one is more so than most as team members are scattered around the globe: Covid has put more pressure on every team member to make sure they do their part and to communicate well with the rest of the team. I'm used to having more direct control over a project – packing the gear to make sure nothing is left behind, nothing we don't want to take is hitching a ride, and doing the helicopter and ship checks – which simply isn't possible this time. Fortunately, we have a very capable team and I have every confidence that it will all come together. We've worked our way through every obstacle to date!

I think it has been hard for all the team members to keep the required level of focus and dedication going for the extra year after we were so close in 2020 (though they have risen to it!) and now also having to have the extra month away needed for

quarantine at either end. It is also a huge pity we've not been able to have face to face meetings – in this sort of work the conversations held over a cup of coffee or a beer can often identify small but important things that may otherwise fall through the cracks. But soon we'll be on the ship and can start to have that face to face time.

Given no eradication project can guarantee success, what's the scariest thing about the Gough operation?

While we still have to get to the island and set up (which will be a challenge in itself) now that we have come this far and have got the team into quarantine, my biggest concern is the weather.

While there will still be other things which could lead to us being unsuccessful (i.e. we complete the baiting but it doesn't work), or to us not completing the

baiting job, we can influence most of them. But with the weather we have to take whatever is thrown at us. I've been involved at both ends of the spectrum before – on the Campbell Island and Rat Island/Hawadax operations, good weather meant we finished well ahead of schedule, whilst on Macquarie particularly appalling weather meant we couldn't get the job done the first time and had to turn around with the baiting incomplete.

Fortunately, the Australian government had the capacity to go back a year later and finish the job. But it's very unlikely that we, or anyone else, will get another shot at Gough in the foreseeable future. As well as stopping bait spreading, the weather brings other risks including damage to helicopters and our bird enclosures. While the team have worked hard to minimise these they can't ever be completely eliminated.

What's the most important biosecurity lesson you can impart?

Biosecurity is everybody's job from administrators and managers and even funders, down to every individual involved in transporting cargo or people to an island and every individual who steps foot on the island.

No quarantine system is fool-proof so having multiple layers of checks – and double checks – minimises the chances of any breaches.

Biosecurity is usually a hidden cost where you don't get anything tangible to show for your money, but it is nearly always cheaper than the financial, ecological and often social costs of having invasive species establish.



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Contact

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

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Cover image: **A new dawn on Gough Island (M. Risi)**



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