

Title

A new report indicates a healthy increase in the numbers of Black-browed Albatrosses breeding in the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas). The report, submitted to the Environment Committee of the Falkland Islands Government, indicated that recent and historical survey results show an increase in this threatened species.

Black-browed Albatross is currently classified as Endangered by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List. Over two-thirds of the global population breed in the Falkland Islands, so the status of the Falklands population has significant bearing on the global conservation status of the species. Within the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas) different methods have been used independently to census the Black-browed Albatross population.

Ian, and more recently, Georgina Strange have conducted aerial photographic surveys of colonies in the Falkland Islands since 1964, with archipelago-wide surveys in 1986, 2005 and 2010. Members of Falklands Conservation have carried out ground and boat-based surveys of the Falklands population in 2000, 2005 and 2010.

Up until and including the 2005 census results, these initiatives reported contrasting population trends. The aerial based surveys indicated an increase in the population between the mid 1980s and 2005 and the ground based surveys a decline between 1995 and 2005.

However, the aerial and ground based surveys conducted in 2010 both reveal an increase in the population between 2005 and 2010 of at least 4% per annum. The positive trends from both of these surveys is further supported by favourable survival and breeding data from an ongoing study carried out by scientists at New Island (one of the twelve breeding sites in the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas)), and an additional aerial photographic survey carried out later in the 2010 breeding season.

The breeding population estimate obtained from the 2010 ground-based survey was larger than the estimate for 2000. Furthermore, the 2010 ground-based estimates for the two largest colonies in the Falklands (at Steeple Jason and Beauchêne islands) were similar to those derived from surveys carried out in the 1980s.

Dr Cleo Small from RSPB/BirdLife's Global Seabird Programme said: "When 17 out of the world's 22 species of albatross are listed as threatened with extinction, it is hugely encouraging that Black-browed Albatross colonies in the Falkland Islands are now known to be increasing. There is still some way to go - with the UK Overseas Territories other major population on South Georgia continuing to decline. But this result gives us great hope for turning around the fortunes of other albatrosses. Bycatch in fisheries is their main threat, and efforts are underway in many longline and trawl fleets worldwide to reduce the numbers killed. If we can keep this up, there is real hope that the black-browed albatross will set a trend for the future."

Dr Anton Wolvaardt, ACAP (Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels) officer for the UK South Atlantic Overseas Territories and author of the report said: "The exact reasons for the increase are not entirely clear, but efforts to reduce seabird bycatch, and beneficial feeding conditions, are likely to have contributed."

On the basis of the reported results, and the fact that the Falklands population comprises approximately 70% of the global total, the report recommends that consideration should be given to downlisting the species from Endangered. The report has been submitted to BirdLife International for use in the Red List assessment process. The report also recommends that efforts to further improve seabird bycatch mitigation should continue, both to buffer the local population against possible future changes, and to improve the conservation status of other populations and species.