



# *Bulletin 114*

## The Magic of Magellanic Oystercatchers

I have to admit: I am a hypocrite!

Several times in IWSG meetings and here in the *Bulletin*, I have preached the virtues of paying more attention to the large proportion of the world's waders of which we have inadequate knowledge. I have called for waderologists to turn away from Red Knots, Eurasian Oystercatchers and Dunlins and focus on obscure species like seedsnipes, jacanas, all those snipes that resemble *Gallinago gallinago* but are really very different, Little Curlew, Rufous-chested Dotterel, Pied Lapwing, Oriental Pratincole and many more. But what do I do myself? I spend my time working on the same old Red Knots, Eurasian Oystercatchers and Dunlins!

But at the IWSG workshop on the world's oystercatchers in La Rochelle, France, reported in this issue, I was volunteered to present the talk about the most ancient of oystercatchers, the Magellanic Oystercatcher *Haematopus leucopodus*. None of the ten authors of the talk, led by Graciela Escudero, could attend and I suppose I was picked for the task because at least I had seen the species.

So it was that I found myself enthusing about a species I hardly knew: about its fantastically high-pitched voice, which I can hardly hear and which is thought to be an adaptation to living in windy environments, about its spectacular tail-up display, about its unique louse *Saemundssonina bakeri*, named in honour of our esteemed colleague, Allan Baker, and about the fact that despite its interest and its attractiveness it is one of the world's least known oystercatchers. So what was I going to do about it?

Fortunately an opportunity unfolded. My U.S. friend, Larry Niles, wanted me to take part in an expedition to Tierra del Fuego in January 2008 to continue our Red Knot studies and was persuaded to allocate some of our precious time to making a catch of Magellanic Oystercatchers. Ricardo Matus (Punta Arenas, Chile) and Graciela Escudero (Puerto Madryn, Argentina) were keen to individually mark some of these birds to give impetus to their studies and start to learn about their behaviour and movements.

So it was that we arrived at Bahia Lomas on the Straits of Magellan with a cannon net and a supply of oystercatcher bands. But there was a problem: Magellanic Oystercatchers



were not top priority for the expedition. Red Knots came first, then Hudsonian Godwits and only then oystercatchers.

One day we managed to make a modest catch of knots close to a large oystercatcher roost. A few days later we returned hoping to catch godwits. But no godwits showed up and neither did the knots. Therefore we could fall back on "Plan B": at last, we could catch some oystercatchers!

After a 20-minute "twinkle" we managed to catch 75 Magellanic Oystercatchers and everyone was delighted. What fantastic birds! Bright yellow eyes, brilliant orange-red bills; tough characters, one with a foot missing, one with crossed bills, one with its bill bent to the right like a Wrybill. And what a voice! In the field their calls seem thin and feeble; when they objected to being handled, they were ear-shattering!

So we renamed Magellanic Oystercatchers "Magic Oystercatchers", and I renewed my enthusiasm for obscure waders and decided that perhaps I was not quite such a hypocrite after all!

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