

# Beauty of the Beast

BIRDS OF THE FALKLANDS

# SO FAR, SO CLOSE



Celebrated bird photographer David Hemmings takes us to the remote South Atlantic outpost - a lonely place where avian subjects show no fear of humans



*Thalassarche melanophrys*

Close-up portrait of a Black-browed Albatross or Black-browed Mollymawk, *Thalassarche melanophrys*, also seen in flight on the title spread. This species is listed as Endangered on the basis of current rates of decline at the large breeding colonies in the South-West Atlantic. These declines have been attributed to the impact of incidental mortality in longline and trawl fisheries.



TEXTS AND PHOTOS BY DAVID HEMMINGS



## *Pygoscelis papua*

A Gentoo penguin *Pygoscelis papua* strides into the surf. This species is easily recognized by the wide white stripe extending like a bonnet across the top of its head and its bright orange-red bill. They have pale whitish-pink webbed feet and a fairly long tail - the most prominent tail of all penguins.

If you have never been to the Falkland Islands to photograph penguins and other species such as Elephant seals and Sea Lions, it is difficult to explain in words what a natural wonderland the Falklands are. You really have to experience it to believe it.

Most of the wildlife, notably with the exception of Black-necked Swans, is unafraid of human presence and will often sit right down beside you out of curiosity. While at Volunteer Point on East Stanley we sat amongst King Penguins and their chicks as they went about their business, seemingly oblivious to our presence. I had one young King lay down two feet from me and fall asleep!

It was a similar experience with the three other common species of penguins on the Falklands, Gentoos, Rockhoppers and Magellanics. While sitting outside their colonies they would go about their life, coming and going from the ocean and switching nesting duties with their partners while fending off intrusive neighbors and feeding their young. At one point I was surrounded by a dozen Rockhopper penguins while they picked at my boots and slept in the surrounding grasses.

One of the best experiences for me was watching the Gentoo penguins swimming into shore in small groups and springing out of the water onto the beach to begin their walk back to the colony along one of the many "penguin highways", as they are cal-

led by locals. You could watch them porpoising in from sea about 100 yards out right until they reach the breaking surf, looks like they are having fun but it just could be that they are in a hurry. Either way it was so cool to witness this behavior.

Then there are the colonies of Elephant seals on the beaches at Sea Lion Island. There you can see and photograph up close three-week old calves and young males practicing their fighting skills to prepare for when it is time to find mates. The noises these seals make are loud and impressive as they voice their opinions to the other individuals in the colony.

Then there are the Striated Caracaras. These beautiful falcons, which nest and breed in the outlying islands, are very photographable, sometimes up close. Then there is the majestic Black-browed Albatross. There are a few colonies that are accessible to humans and the photo opportunities are unbelievable. To watch these beautiful seabirds coming and going from their nests and doing greeting displays is something that you really need to see once in your life. Sometimes I just watched in amazement and forgot that I was there to take pictures!

Throw into the mix an abundance of other species such as Snowy Sheathbills, Upland Geese, Kelp Geese, Cobb's Wren, Long tailed Meadowlark, Crested Ducks and Silvery Grebes, and you have a place with so much to offer to the bird and nature photographer.





## *Spheniscus magellanicus*

A trio of Magellanic penguins *Spheniscus magellanicus* braves a gale. These are medium-sized penguins which grow to be 61–76 cm (24–30 in) tall and weigh between 2.7 kg and 6.5 kg (5.9–14.3 lbs). Millions of these penguins live on the coasts of Argentina and Chile, but the species is classified as "threatened", due to the vulnerability of colonies to oil spills, which kill 20,000 adults and 22,000 juveniles every year off the coast of Argentina.

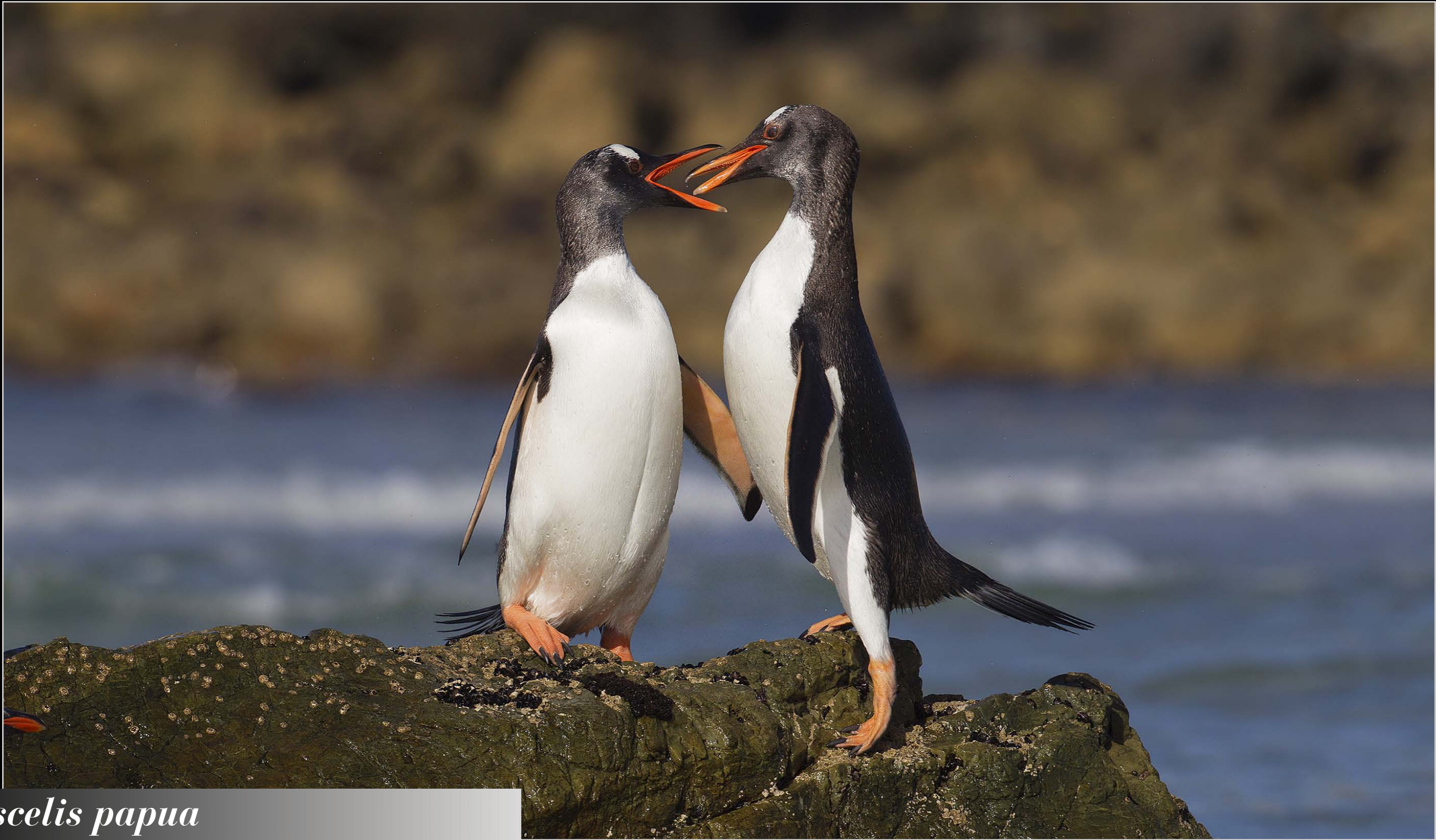




*Pygoscelis papua*

A portrait of a Gentoo penguin *Pygoscelis papua*. Adult Gentoos reach a height of 51 to 90 cm (20–36 in), being the third largest species of penguin after the two giant species, the Emperor Penguin and the King Penguin. Males weigh about 8.5 kg (19 lb), and for females the maximum weight is 8.2 kg (18 lb). They are the fastest underwater swimming penguins, reaching speeds of 36 km/h.

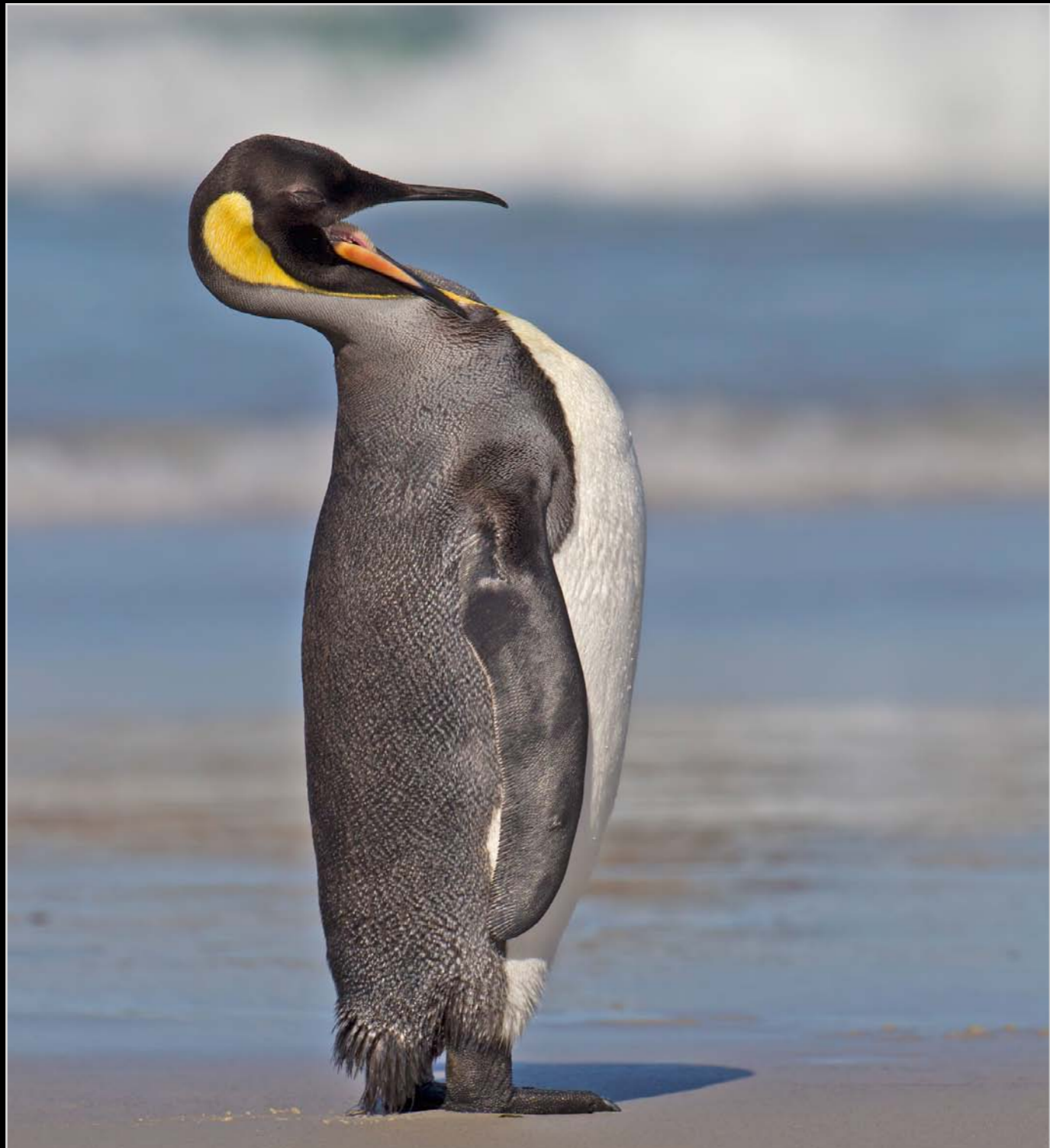




*Pygoscelis papua*

A discussion between two Gentoo penguins. The total breeding population of this species is estimated to be over 300,000 pairs. Nests are made from a circular pile of stones and can be 20 cm high and 25 cm in diameter. They are jealously guarded and their ownership can be the subject of noisy disputes.





*Aptenodytes patagonicus*

The King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus* is the second largest species of penguin at about 90 cm (3.0 ft) tall and weighing 11 to 16 kg (24 to 35 lb), second only to the Emperor Penguin. Like all penguin species, it has a streamlined body to minimise drag while swimming, webbed feet to propel more force when swimming, and wings that have become stiff, flat flippers.



*Chloephaga hybrida*

The Kelp Goose *Chloephaga hybrida malvinarum* is found around the Falkland Islands throughout the year. This species mainly inhabits rocky coasts, where it feeds on green seaweed of the genus *Ulva*. The male has completely white plumage, making him prominent as he holds territory and stands guard over the incubating female or chicks.





*Mirounga leonina*

A portrait of two adorable baby Southern Elephants seals *Mirounga leonina*. Southern Elephant seal bulls reach a length of 16 feet (4.9 m) and a weight of 6,600 pounds (3,000 kg), and are much larger than the cows, which measure about 10 feet (3.0 m) and 2,000 pounds (910 kg). Elephant seals spend upwards of 80% of their lives in the ocean.



*Thalassarche melanophrys*



*Mirounga leonina*

Young Elephant seal *Mirounga leonina*. Elephant seals can hold their breath for more than 100 minutes, longer than any other noncetacean mammal, and can dive to 1550 meters beneath the ocean's surface. The average depth of their dives is about 300 to 600 meters (2,000 ft), around 20 minutes for females and 60 minutes for males, as they search for rays, squid, octopuses, eels, small sharks, and large fish.





## *Haematopus leucopodus*

The Magellanic Oystercatcher *Haematopus leucopodus* is a species of wader in the *Haematopodidae* family. It is found in Argentina, Chile and the Falkland Islands. Its natural habitats are freshwater lakes and sandy shores.





## *Haematopus ater*

The Blackish Oystercatcher *Haematopus ater* is yet another species of wader belonging to the *Haematopodidae* family which is found in Argentina, Chile, the Falkland Islands and Peru, being also a vagrant to Uruguay. The entire population is estimated at 22,000–120,000.





## *Eudyptes chrysocome*

The Southern Rockhopper penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* is the smallest yellow-crested, black-and-white penguin in its genus. It reaches a length of 45–58 cm (18–23 in) and weighs 2–3.4 kg (4.4–7.5 lb). It has slate-grey upper parts and a straight, bright yellow eyebrow ending in long yellowish plumes projecting sideways behind a red eye.





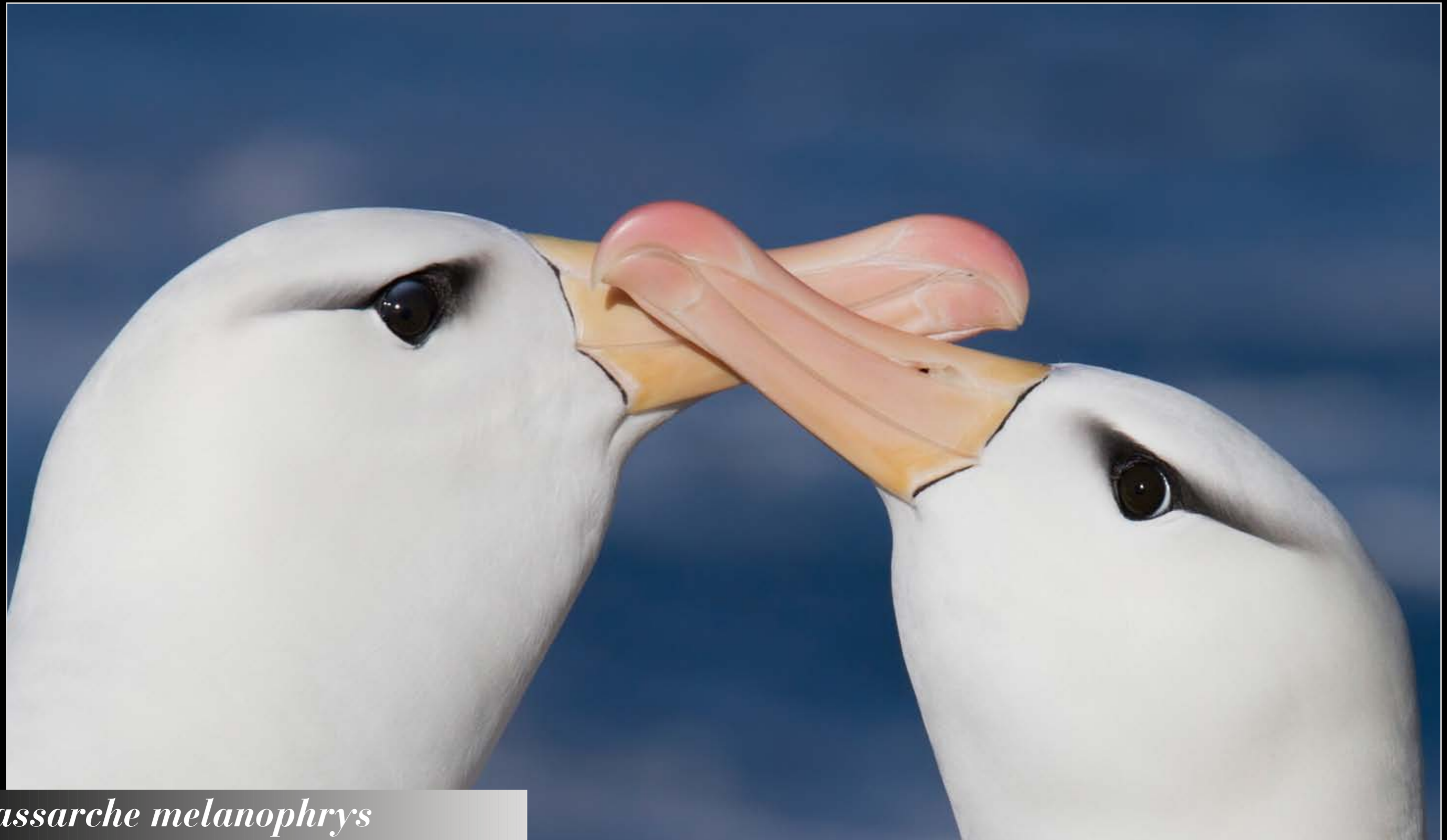
Birdwatching trips and bird photography workshops in the Falklands - as those conducted by the author of this article, David Hemmings, via his company Nature's Photo Adventures - can offer to the discriminating traveller unsurpassed opportunities for close observation and interaction with the local avian fauna.



*Phalacroboenus australis*

A Striated Caracara *Phalacroboenus australis* with its chick. Nests are built on the ground or on a cliff ledge, where the female lays up to 4 eggs. Their hatching is timed to coincide with the nesting season of seabirds, providing a constant food supply for the chicks. Once these have fledged, they gather into flocks and roam through the islands, often close to human settlements.





## *Thalassarche melanophrys*

The Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophrys* is a medium-sized albatross, 80–95 cm (31–37 in) long with a 200–240 cm (79–94 in) wingspan and a weight of 2.9–4.7 kg (6.4–10 lb). It can live for more than 70 years. It has a dark grey saddle and upperwings that contrast with the white rump and underparts. The underwing is with broad black margins. It has a dark eyebrow and a yellow-orange bill with a darker pink-orange tip.





## *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus* have adapted to their extreme living conditions in the subantarctic: to keep warm, they have four layers of feathering. King Penguins have 70 feathers per every square inch. The outer layer of feathers are oiled and waterproof. The inner three layers are down feathers, very effective insulation. A chick is born without the oily outer layer, and therefore cannot fish until maturity.





## *Chloephaga picta*

The Upland Goose or Magellan Goose *Chloephaga picta* is a South American member of the family *Anatidae*. Males have a white head and breast, while females are brown with black-striped wings and yellow feet. These birds are found in open grasslands, are 60–72.5 centimetres (24–28.5 in) long and weigh 2.7–3.2 kilograms (6.0–7.1 lb).





*Eudyptes chrysocome*

The Southern Rockhopper Penguin group has a global population of roughly 1 million pairs. About two-thirds of the global population belong to *E. c. chrysocome* which breeds on the Falkland Islands and on islands off Argentina and southern Chile. These include Isla de los Estados, the Ildefonso Islands, the Diego Ramírez Islands and Isla Noir.



*Larus maculipennis*

Brown-hooded Gull *Larus maculipennis*, a beautiful and very elegant species which can be commonly observed in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the Falkland Islands, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Its natural habitats are swamps, freshwater lakes, intertidal marshes, and pastureland.