In the last week of June I was lucky enough to attend the Joint British Ecological Society and IUCN UK Peatland Programme Symposium 2012 ‘Investing in Peatlands – Demonstrating Success’, held at Bangor University in Wales. Professor Jim McAdam presented a jointly produced talk about peatlands in the Falkland Islands – their origins, status and active conservation work taking place to help look after them, as well as future priorities.

The conference really emphasised the need for cross-sectoral partnerships when tackling peatland conservation issues. In the UK this means, for example, links between water companies, conservation practitioners, university researchers, policy makers and landowners. In the Falklands we can similarly only make real progress in improving eroded sites by working in partnership with landowners and the government.

In the UK the major causes of peatland degradation are past and ongoing alterations to drainage, overgrazing and land conversion. Investment in peatland restoration work is mainly being driven by concerns about reduced water quality, carbon storage and biodiversity. This is a noticeable shift to focus on the important services provided by peatland ecosystems.

A novel community project which was presented in a brief film. Artist Pip Woolf works with volunteers to trial felted wool as a geo-textile on an eroded area of upland peat. The project is showing signs of success with the wool providing a more favourable microclimate for establishment of mosses and most recently seedlings. Something similar could be trialled in the Falklands, using poor quality left-over wool that isn’t useful for anything else.

The last day of the conference focused on policies related to peatland restoration and gave a good overview of how funding structures work in the UK as well as the EU. Some of the aspects discussed would be good to use as starting points for considering potential agri-environment schemes that suit the Falkland Islands. An insight into the emerging carbon market was also provided; this is a field that the Falkland Islands may want to investigate in the future.

Before and after the conference there were opportunities to go on two extremely insightful field trips. I went to a site on Anglesey where calcareous fen is being restored and a site close to Bangor where blanket bog has been successfully restored. It was immediately obvious how many different people need to collaborate to bring success to such large-scale restoration projects. A botanical highlight at the fen site was seeing the rare Fly Orchid Ophrys insectifera for the first time.

The primary reason for going to the conference was to make contacts that should prove useful for Falklands Conservation’s upcoming Darwin Challenge fund that will be investigating the use of native seed mixes for re-vegetation of eroded peatland areas. We are currently recruiting for a project officer to work on the project, which will include:

~ Botanical surveys of revegetation plots set up in 1998
~ Identification of sites for large-scale restoration trials
~ Intensive seed collecting of target species to be used in restoration trials

Over the course of the conference I made some useful contacts for this project and it is hoped that we can benefit from various collaborations. The conference also provided a good overview of the range of resources to hand which will be invaluable when planning the large-scale restoration trials.

Overall, the three days proved a rewarding and useful experience, raising the profile of Falklands Conservation along the way.
Cynthia visits Kew Gardens with help from FI Shackleton Fund

Cynthia Williams, an employee of Stanley Nurseries and Garden Centre of 15 years, has been involved in the Native Plants Nursery since early 2009. With thanks to the Shackleton Scholarship Fund, Falklands Conservation and Stanley Nurseries she was able to visit and work at the Royal Botanical Gardens Kew for a period of four weeks. Here Cynthia reports on her experiences:

After fifteen years another opportunity presented itself for me to work at Kew Gardens. My aim this time was to gain more specialist training in maintaining and developing the collection of plants we have here in the Falkland Islands Native Plants Nursery that was set up in November 2009.

Over the four weeks at Kew I worked with various specialists and have gained a variety of skills:
- Practical and theoretical training about the conditions which are maintained in the Alpine unit that benefit the slow growing plants of the Falklands.
- General plant cultivation, plant health hygiene and behaviour including a focus on invasive species issues.
- Record keeping and labelling.
- Different techniques using seeds and cuttings from mature plants without having any detrimental effect on the wild population.
- Seed sowing, selecting cuttings, potting and re-potting, production of displays for sale.
- Working with botanical keys to help identify plants and weeds.

All of these skills will help to further expand and continue to maintain the native and non-native plants that are kept at the Stanley Nurseries, to the highest level of care.

The highlight of my trip was a behind the scenes visit to the Millennium Seed Bank (MSB), Wakehurst Place, with spectacular views of natural rolling hills, valley water-ways and grand garden displays. The aim there is to collect and conserve seeds from the world’s flora. Each batch of seeds that arrives undergoes a series of processing and monitoring steps before finally reaching the long-term storage area held at -20°C. I was lucky to be part of the team for three days and follow the process step by step. The building has huge thick walls, doors, vaults and huge walk-in freezers.

With a batch of seeds that had been drying in a special Dry Room, I was introduced to a number of principles and practices of seed drying using low cost measures - an area I was comfortable working in:
Step 1: Rub seeds in a sieve using a rubber glove and this method freed many seeds from their outer husks.
Step 2: Place seeds in an aspirator, where the gentle airflow separated the good seeds from any empty seeds (that are much lighter), the husks and any other debris.
Step 3: Cut-testing where a selection of seeds were collected and cut in half to check the embryo under the microscope to see if they were viable or not. On finding a successful batch they were then added and updated on the MSB database.
Step 4: The next step was to take a collection of 50 seeds (or fewer for rarer or smaller collections) to the X-ray machine and we were able to see if the seeds were viable, empty, partially full or even infested. Depending on the results the seeds would be given further consideration.
Step 5: Germination testing and the scoring of these tests were the final stages; this is when seeds are placed on agar and once a seed produces a radical it is then scored. All the information gained from these steps is then updated on the MSB database.

I also worked at the Herbarium with the UK Overseas Territories Team (UKOTs) where I learnt more about plant conservation including the legal aspects. Brief overviews were provided of CITES, the IUCN Red Listing, allowing me to gain knowledge in areas that are applicable to the process of growing and selling native plants of the Falkland Islands. This knowledge will also be vital if there are requests to move plant material out of the islands. An overview of the Falkland Islands Red List helped me to appreciate the conservation status of the plants that are being cultivated in the Native Plants Nursery.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my time and found it to be very successful. The experience of working in a professional botanical research environment was invaluable and I cannot wait for spring when I will put my experiences into practise here in the Islands.
In the last week of March we had a friendly visit from Katharine Lowrie. She had popped in to say hello and to find out about conservation efforts in the Falkland Islands. We thought our readers would be interested to hear an account of her visit to the Islands.

Katharine formerly worked as an ecologist for the RSPB. On leaving the UK, the couple undertook the first complete breeding seabird census of the Eastern Caribbean and an extensive marine education programme. “The Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles” was published in 2012 and is available at CreateSpace.com and Amazon.com.

Katharine is currently living with her husband David in Uruguay, planning and training for the 5000 mile project expedition. On the opening day of the London Olympics, 27 July 2012, they will begin running the length of South America, over 5000 miles, without a support crew, in a year. They aim to raise money and awareness about South America’s threatened wild lands and wildlife.

As well as running they have created “the Big Toe Classroom” aimed at involving students from around the world in the project. They are also undertaking the world’s longest “Mega Transect”; a survey of birds and other wildlife along the route.

For further information on the project check out, www.5000mileproject.org and www.facebook.com/5000mileproject.

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During our all too rapid two week sail in the Falklands, we counted over 22,400 individual birds, 36 species of which 26 were marine birds and four species of marine mammal… and that’s excluding the king penguins and many other incredible species that the Falklands are renowned for!

As well as being struck by the sheer diversity and abundance of marine life in the Falklands, we were also surprised by the boldness of the wildlife. We were joined near our kayak by curious cormorants, ogling at us metres above our head and fat steamer-ducks, apparently interested as to the nature of the new floating ‘duck’ in their bay.

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Small Grants Success at Paragon House

This time last year Vernon and Gail Steen applied to our Falklands Conservation Small Grants Scheme. They needed a contribution to fencing off an area to then plant with native tussac grass. The area is located at Paragon House, East Falkland. Gail recently let us know how the project was progressing:

Our tussac trial has been fairly successful so far. We seemed to have everything going against us at the outset - things seemed to conspire against us but we were determined to get it started. Consequently it was later in the year than intended when we planted and it has been exceptionally dry at Paragon this last summer.

We originally planned to get tillers from an island belonging to FLH at Kelp Harbour (permission given), but ended up using a big bog from our garden (this bog was planted in February 2005 from tillers from a Goose Green hen yard to decorate Karen and Paul’s wedding venue at our cowshed). These tillers were tied to the building for a few days and when I took them down they were still looking okay, so just to see how they would do, I planted them into the top of the garden, which is fairly dry (and I never soaked them) and by the time we used this bog (October 2011) it was 5ft tall with a good root structure.

We took 103 tillers from our bog and soaked them in the pond for 4 hours, then planted them along with some water (30 October 2011). From that day it only rained properly twice in November and we thought they would fail; we gave then no water after the initial watering in as we felt they either survived naturally or not.

Now a year later we have 45 healthy looking plants. I was surprised that most surviving plants are on the more exposed part of the site – so although we had initial problems in getting started we are encouraged that this season will be even more successful. We plan to get planting earlier – it will be interesting to see if the tillers from the island will be any different to those from old hen runs. I still have a bog in the old hen run here and aim to plant from that too to have a comparison.

The fencing from the small grant scheme has withstood any invasion from the many hares that live around here.

Thank you to Falklands Conservation for the grant; it is much appreciated.

Gail and Vernon

Welcome to FC

I am very pleased to be the new Conservation Officer and, though I am new to the team, I am not new to Falklands Conservation or the Falklands Islands. I have now been in the Falklands for almost two years having come down from the UK with my wife Andrea and two children, Neve and Hayden, in 2010. As a result, I have already been involved in several Falklands Conservation projects, as well as working locally in nature tourism, and undertaking fisheries work at South Georgia, slightly further afield.

I started out in nature conservation in the early 90’s wardening a small, island nature reserve with a residential field centre. The island supported a large, mixed, gull colony and during this time I completed my doctorate on lesser black-backed gulls, looking into the adaptive nature of egg-size variation, egg production and dietary switching. Later I moved to agricultural research, primarily ecotoxicology and risk assessment working with beneficial invertebrates and integrated pest management systems, before a short return to college to obtain a teaching qualification.

Most recently before arriving in the Falkland Islands I have worked for several years in ecological consultancy. This has involved working with, amongst others, developers, landowners, government and non-government organisations on ecological projects involving a wide range of species and habitats, wildlife legislation, planning policy and conservation initiatives.

As Conservation Officer I am certainly looking forward to even greater opportunities to work with the incredibly inspiring fauna and flora of the Islands, and to further our understanding and conservation of them.

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