

**FLAG RETURN REPORT OF EXPLORERS CLUB FLAG NO. 161
ECOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE PENGUINS OF ISLA NOIR AND OTHER
COASTAL ISLANDS, SOUTHERN CHILE (ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN,
EUDYPTES CHRYSOCOME, AND MACARONI PENGUIN, *E.
CHRYSOLOPHUS*).**

DATES: NOVEMBER 6, 2005 TO NOVEMBER 18, 2005

**Prepared and submitted to the Explorers Club by W. Roger Fry, MN97, and
Leonard A. Weakley, Jr., MN97**

PARTICIPANTS:

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EXPEDITION PURPOSE AND RESULTS:

The purpose of this expedition to Isla Noir and other coastal islands in Southern Chile, was to continue the ecological study of the Rockhopper penguins on the west coast of South America, and document the presence of both Macaroni and Magellanic penguins and other avifauna. Isla Noir is one of the most westerly islands south of the Straights of Magellan, standing alone in that part of the South Pacific. Isla Recalada, another island visited is north of Noir. These islands have never been inhabited, and show little sign of human presence, past or present. The islands have for the most part been left alone, probably due to the unpredictable weather and hazardous seas.

The islands in this part of southern Chile are partially vegetated with low growing soft wood trees, all angled to the east, bearing the brunt of the prevailing westerly winds. The temperature in the early Spring (November) averages about 40 degrees, somewhat warmer during the day and noticeably cooler at night. Cloud cover, wind and rain are everyday occurrences.

The Rockhopper penguin colonies on the east side of South America, off the coast of Argentina, including the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, have reduced in number in recent years. The reasons for this need to be better understood. It is possible that some of these birds have migrated to the western side of the continent where colonies seem to be expanding.

On November 6, 2005 Explorer Club Members W. Roger Fry and Leonard A. Weakley, Jr., together with expedition leader, David A. Oehler, left Cincinnati for Punta

Arenas, Chile via Santiago. We arrived in Punta Arenas on schedule and were joined by Manuel Marin, of Santiago. We boarded the 55 ft. S/S Chonos captained by Francisco Ayarza Ordenes. We headed southwest through the Straits of Magellan, to the South Pacific, 100 miles or so north of Cape Horn. We then turned west and then south toward Isla Noir, avoiding the rocky shallows known as *Via Lochte* (the Milky Way). The waters of that 20 mile crossing are shallow with frequent high winds making the timing of the crossing an essential component.

Our goal in returning to Isla Noir was to further our earlier studies of the Rockhopper penguins and other avifauna of the island, which was begun by David Oehler in the mid 1990s and continued with a return to the island in 2003, 2004 and now 2005. (See flag return report from November, 2003). While on the island we established the perimeters of all of the accessible Rockhopper and Macaroni penguin colonies, utilizing GPS readings. This will enable a more accurate map to be created of the colonies on the island and will allow for future monitoring of increases or decreases in colony sizes. We also established counts within measured 10x20 meter plots in most of the Rockhopper colonies, by which the total number of nesting birds will be estimated with much greater accuracies. Other species, including caracara and giant petrels were recorded. Blood samples for DNA comparisons were taken from Rockhoppers from three separate colonies, and several were fitted with satellite transmitters by which we hope to identify foraging areas utilized during egg incubation and chick rearing and, following that, during the many months these birds are at sea. Cloacal and choanal cultures were collected for analysis from one Rockhopper colony.

After finalizing our work on Isla Noir we traveled northwest to Isla Recalada, some 90 miles. Recalada is one of the most westerly islands of its group and, like Noir, shows few signs of past human presence. It is a larger island, approximately 5x10 miles in size, surrounded by islets alive with marine mammal and avian life, unpredictable surging seas and stiff offshore winds.

Recalada was selected based on reports of the presence of at least five Rockhopper colonies. The existing reports are not current and it was our belief that no actual recent surveys had been made. On reaching shore we were able to identify the areas of the previously identified Rockhopper colonies from longitude and latitude information, and from earlier photographs. Although Magellanic penguins were present with chicks ranging in age from one week to several weeks, the Rockhopper colony sites, which were evident from the earthen hillocks, valleys which would have been filled, calf high, with penguin guano, and paths to the sea, were completely devoid of Rockhopper penguins. Mosses and grasses were moving back. The sites, which repeated themselves in each of the former Rockhopper colonies, were described by one of our party as ghost towns. Although former populations could not be ascertained, the GPS elevations, gradients, impacted fauna and the distribution of vacant nest sites was much like we had observed on Isla Noir, leading to the conclusion that the Rockhopper colony density and lifestyle had once been approximately the same as that which we found on Noir.

The cause of the disappearance of the Rockhopper penguins from Recalada is now under study utilizing available reports, published and unpublished, as well as our observations and oral history obtained from local seamen. This may involve natural as well as non-natural causes, having culminated in the total disappearance of these birds as recently as 5 years ago.

Wind, weather and mechanical concerns prevented a survey of the west side of Isla Desolación further to the north. This is an ocean torn land mass facing the Pacific, and infrequently visited. Early reports indicate that Rockhoppers may have inhabited the more northern sub Antarctic islands such as Desolación, however that study will need to remain for another day.

Our goal of furthering knowledge and educating others in the beauty and ecological importance of Isla Noir and the costal islands of Southern Chile was advanced by this expedition. We have much more precise information from Noir which will improve and update our Rockhopper counts and colony mapping. Blood work and cultures will provide baseline data and will form the basis for comparable studies of birds known to be from the Falklands and others formerly on Recalada. Other counts of other species of avifauna will add comparable information on avian life in this unique part of the world. We also anticipate that foraging areas will be identified. The disappearance of the Rockhopper colonies at Recalada presents a most unique challenge. Collectively, we are hopeful that our more detailed reports that will be published in the future will lead to the recognition, preservation and protection of these wild and remote lands for future generations of people, penguins and all avian life.

This expedition was part of an ongoing ecological assessment of Isla Noir and other coastal islands of southern Chile, conducted by Feather Link, Inc., a non-profit avian conservation and educational organization of which David A. Oehler is a most dedicated founder and President. Anyone with questions, information, observations or an interest in avian conservation in the far north or far south is invited to email David at david.oehler@fuse.net.

Respectfully submitted,

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