

'There's so much wildlife...there are deer everywhere, otters, birds, eagles. The corncrakes, you hear them everywhere'

Photographer Aniket Sardana

By Katie Macleod

Connections between Lewis and the South Atlantic Archipelago of the Falklands are myriad, whether through history, landscape or the remote way of life.

Now there is another link to add to the list: Aniket Sardana, locum vet, globetrotting photographer and Director of wildlife tour company Focus Nature.

Following a second stint as one of only two vets in the Falklands this spring, Aniket found himself helping Hector Low in the Stornoway practice at the start of the summer.

At home in London, an agency had contacted Aniket about the job opening in the islands: "I had always wanted to go out to see the wildlife of the Scottish islands, so I thought, hey, why not?"

For a photographer who loves nothing more than spotting subjects in their natural habitat, the Western Isles were wonderful. "There's that lovely light, especially at that time of year. It was great that after finishing work there were still five to six hours of light to go out and shoot in," says Aniket.

"There's so much wildlife. The things we think are rare elsewhere aren't rare – there are deer everywhere, otters, birds, eagles. The corncrakes, you just hear them everywhere."

When out on calls he would consult with crofters on the best locations to catch a glimpse of the local wildlife. "They would say go down there, turn left, wait at the ditch for ten minutes and you'll see something. Whatever they said you would see, you saw it. Those leads helped me a lot."

As well as terrestrial animals, Aniket also encountered sea life in the form of common seals, which, despite their name, are relatively rare in the rest of the country. Joining Keose resident Lewis Mackenzie – whom he met through a mutual friend from the Falklands – on his boat, Aniket was able to get up close and personal with a colony of seals Lewis has habituated over the years. "It's quite special to see common seals, it's not that easy, especially a breeding colony of them," he explains.

Lewis was in fact friends with Aniket's housemate from the Falklands, Frin Ross, who at one point lived in North Tolsta. "I love it there, it's just a fantastic place," says Aniket of the South Atlantic islands. "The people are great and it's a photographer's dream."

There have long been links between the Western Isles and the Falkland Islands, as well as the nations of South America. In 1983, a 'Noah's Ark' initiative introduced livestock from Scotland to the Falklands in an attempt to diversify the gene pool; a century earlier islanders were leaving for South America and opening business which are still on the go today. As Aniket points out, "Almost everywhere I went, people had some connection."

Aniket first arrived in the Falklands in November 2011 on a veterinary contract, where he worked as well as watched for wildlife with his camera. While not as clinically busy as Lewis – the Falklands are home to around 3500 residents in comparison to the Hebrides' 20,000 – the vets are kept occupied with public health inspections, where they are responsible for checking fishing boats, cruise ships and military ships.

Although clinical work is less constant, the Falklands are home to plenty of wild animals, and occasionally assistance is required with these as well. On one occasion an elephant seal pup had been discovered on a popular local beach; Aniket suspected it had been attacked by a predator such as an orca or sea lion, and with assistance loaded it into a borrowed red Land-Rover before treating it and then releasing it in a quieter location.

"It got quite a lot of attention on the island," says Aniket. Hardly surprising, given that an adult elephant seal, at four tonnes, is the largest pinniped in the world. Another interesting encounter occurred with a fur seal which had plastic caught around its neck. "We managed to get a bucket over its head – they're quite snappy – cut off the plastic, cleaned the wound out, and gave it injections."

Then there are the penguins: the king penguin with a broken leg, the penguin stranded in a shed, and the rockhoppers who return from oil spill areas and need a good clean. "They're pretty much on every beach," explains Aniket.



A corncrake in South Uist

While the wildlife varies greatly from that of the Western Isles, there are some familiar characters: the sheep. It's with them – and the islanders' pet dogs – that another connection emerges between the two island outposts: hydatid disease.

Caused by *Echinococcus granulosus*, a type of tapeworm that is passed between dogs and sheep (and occasionally on to their owners) hydatid disease is common in the Western Isles, with several sheep carcasses being condemned each year in the abattoir. While this is one of the only places in Britain where the disease persists, it has just this year been eradicated in the Falklands.

"Since the 1970s each vet has been trying to be the one who eradicates it," he explains. A programme was established where worming your dog every six weeks was a compulsory requirement across the islands; recently the time frame was increased to four weeks, with the latest Falkland-wide test producing the first 100 percent negative results. As Aniket points out, "it's another interesting comparison between the islands."

After his veterinary stints in far-flung locations, Aniket stays on for a few weeks to "do some shooting" of the photographic kind. He has an appetite for adventure and an evident enthusiasm for the natural world. It's an enthusiasm that started early – "I always liked to have a camera nearby" – but really took hold on a school safari to Tanzania in 2000. "I had always wanted to go on safari, to see the wildlife, and I was hooked after that really," he remembers.

In the last few years he has expanded into providing guided wildlife tours in India and the Falklands with his company Focus Nature. The tours take place once a year, and Aniket concentrates on offering high quality content and information in these two locations, as opposed to little over a larger area.

While it is difficult to make a living solely as a photographer, wildlife tours offer an additional option. "Tourism is one of fastest growing industries, it's a huge market," says Aniket. "Everyone wants to travel now. They don't want to go to Disneyland any more – they want to swim with wild dolphins or whale sharks, or go on safari. Nature related holidays have become very, very popular. If you want to work with wildlife and do something you want to make a

living out of, it's an expanding area."

The Focus Nature Falklands Tour presents "a priceless photographic opportunity", as it is possible to get up close and personal with many of the animals out there, and the penguins in particular. Unlike other wildlife subjects, penguins are easy to locate as they occur in known, fixed colonies. "If you maintain a low profile and lay quiet and still on the beach, often they will approach within a few feet. Penguins are much-loved birds, perhaps because of their human-like gait and charming character."

In the Indian Himalayas, the focus is on tigers and snow leopards, although that's not all the country has to offer wildlife fans. "It's more like a continent than a country, there are so many different environments in one place," says Aniket with a hint of amazement. "There's so much to see there. Elephants, thousands of birds, tigers, crocodiles, monkeys..."

Tigers have always been one of Aniket's "big favourites" in the wildlife world, and on his first hike into the Himalayas had a near-miss. On the return from a walk to the river with the rangers, they spotted tiger footprints on top of their own. "It was like cat and mouse, she probably waited for us to pass, then came quietly behind us. There was a huge striped cat walking behind us, and we had no idea it was even there!" Most people would be petrified at the thought of being followed by a tiger; Aniket wasn't afraid, only frustrated at not seeing the striped feline face to face.

He has since seen tigers, and saw snow leopards in Ladakh earlier this year – eight in 24 hours this spring, just one short of the world record sighting. "If you're there at the right time, with the right guide, you probably have a 70 percent chance of a sighting." This is what he loves about travelling. You're not likely to find him at the Taj Mahal on his Indian adventures; history holds little appeal for Aniket. "Anything that's not living is of no interest to me!" he laughs.

Whether he's snow leopard spotting in India, playing with penguins in the Falklands, or listening for corncrakes in the Western Isles, Aniket is in his element out in the wild. "I just enjoy it, I like spotting things, showing them to people, seeing them get excited. It's the best job in the world – even if I'm supposed to be a vet!"



Dusk over Luskentyre Beach



White-tailed sea eagle off the Isle of Skye.