Darwin Initiative: Half Year Report

(due 31 October 2014)

Project Ref No	DPLUS018
Project Title	**Taxonomic and conservation status of *Oceanodroma* storm petrels in the South Atlantic**
Country(ies)	St Helena and Ascension Island, South Atlantic
Lead Organisation	Environmental Management Division, St Helena Government
Collaborator(s)	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Ascension Island Government Conservation Department, St Helena National Trust and Queens University, Ontario, Canada.
Project Leader	*Miss Annalea Beard*
Report date and number (eg HYR3)	*HYR1*
Project website	*http://www.rspb.org.uk/forprofessionals/science/research/details.aspx?id=363023*

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) against the agreed baseline timetable for the project (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end September).

Clarify taxonomic status:

Queens University have now received over 30 feather samples from each breeding season on St Helena and Ascension collected from between 2012 and 2014. Blood samples were obtained from St Helena and Ascensions cool season population this year to perform next generation genomic analysis on their DNA in addition to the agreed analysis outlined in the project outputs. This will be completed in the same timeframe and aid the clarification of the species taxonomic status.

Assess population size at known colonies:

Ten nights of nocturnal mist netting on Egg Island at St Helena were completed in May this year. In total 836 birds were processed over 50 hours, this included 47 brown noddies and 789 Madeiran storm petrels. Preliminary analysis of the mark recapture data indicates that the 2014 cool season population of storm petrels on Egg Island is estimated at 6894 birds (95% credible interval 5144 – 9174). Diurnal playback trails were also conducted on Egg Island in July to measure the response rate of the population to various breeding storm petrel calls from elsewhere in the world. However this survey was completed late in the season when fewer birds were still breeding on the colony and the response rate was lower than expected.

Two St Helena Government Staff visited Ascension in June this year to conduct the diurnal playback trials on Boatswain Bird Island. Unfortunately the main boat and gantry used to access the island was out of commission at the time and it was not possible to land on the island as planned. This has impacted our ability to meet several of the outputs in the current timeframe however we have been assured by Ascension Island Government that this will not be a problem in the future as the new gantry will be in place and the Conservation Department now own their own boat which can be used to access the island.

During the St Helena government staffs visit to Ascension they received training in the use of a playback lures at a mist net during a (potential) breeding season from Dr Will Miles from the RSPB as well as training in DNA collection techniques from visiting PhD researcher Miss Rebecca Taylor from Queens University. Eight nights of mist netting were conducted on Ascensions mainland opposite Boatswain Bird Island. In total 35 storm petrels were captured using a playback lure, this enabled a sample of DNA and biometrics to be taken from that seasons population however verification of breeding activity could not be obtained due to Boatswain Bird Islands inaccessibility at the time.

Search for new breeding colonies on St Helena and Ascension:

Automated sound recorders were deployed onto St Helena and Ascension. 522 hours of recording were collected in the cool season; 40 two hour recordings from four locations on Ascension's mainland and 221 two hour recordings from three offshore islands off St Helena's coastline. Unfortunately due to programming and operational error the three mainland sites on St Helena did not record any data. It is not envisaged that this will be a problem for the Hot season as staff have now had extra instruction from the manufacturers on operating the automated sound recorders efficiently. 60 template vocalisations from St Helena's cool season population have been sourced from recordings using the Sound ID software and sent to the manufacturers to develop the acoustic recogniser. Analysis of the digital sound recordings will commence once the digital recogniser has been received.

2a. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments that the project has encountered over the last 6 months. Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Application for a six month extension follows this half year report to enable us to complete all of the project outputs. It is not envisaged that there will be any changes to the budget or timetabled expenditure.

2b. Have any of these issues been discussed with LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with LTS:	No
Formal change request submitted:	Yes
Received confirmation of change acceptance	No

3a. Do you currently expect to have any significant (eg more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this year?

Yes ☐ **No** ☒ Estimated underspend: £nil

3b. If yes, then you need to consider your project budget needs carefully as it is unlikely that any requests to carry forward funds will be approved this year. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project and would like to talk to someone about the options available this year, please indicate below when you think you might be in a position to do this and what the reasons might be:

4. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to Darwin's management, monitoring, or financial procedures?