

Island Visit Reports

Saddle Island

A Falklands Conservation Nature Reserve



**Southern Elephant Seals, Southern Sea Lions and Striated Caracaras
on the only sand beach - 21 December 2001**

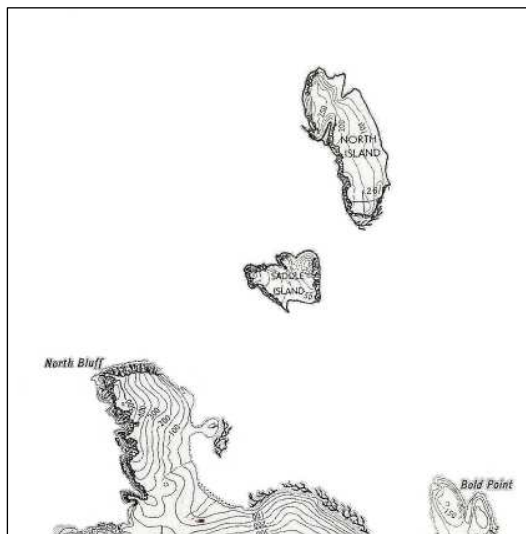
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Report on Visits to Saddle Island in 2001 and 2007

Introduction

Saddle Island with a surface area of about 35ha and the adjacent North Island (75ha) were part of the group including Coffin, Beef and Ship Islands, originally owned by the Falkland Islands Government. It is possible that Saddle Island was leased to the farmer renting New Island in the second half of the 19th century. By the mid-1950s these islands were owned by Jack Davis and in 1972 were sold to the newly formed New Island Preservation Company. When that was wound up a few years later, these small islands passed to the Society for the Promotion of Nature Conservation (SPNC), now the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC). In 1984 Saddle and North Islands were leased to the UK-based Falkland Islands Foundation (FIF), which was merged with the local Falkland Islands Trust in 1991 to form Falklands Conservation (FC). Legal ownership of Saddle and North was passed to FC in 1993 and Saddle and North now have the status of Nature Reserves in perpetuity and cannot be sold for profit.

Saddle Island is about 1.3km northeast of the North Bluff on New Island and only 550m southwest of North Island. The maximum width from east to west is about 750m. From the east, it clearly resembles a saddle. It has sheer cliffs up to about 50m (160ft) on the western coasts, extending for about 650m. The eastern cliffs run for about 600m, with the highest point at about 78m (255ft) in the northeast.



Saddle Island in relation to North Island and North Bluff, New Island

Based on DOS 1:50,000 map, Sheet 16



Saddle Island close up
from DOS 1:50,000 map
Sheet 16



Saddle Island (left) and North Island
from New Island - 25 November 1999



1.



2.



3.



4.

Above

1. South-eastern point; dense Tussac overhanging cliffs
2. Saddle Island from the east
3. Sand bay from the east, view to the north-western headland over dense Tussac
4. View to the east-southeast over Tussac flattened and eroded by Sea Lions

There is a small sandy bay facing southeast providing good shelter from prevailing westerlies. To the eastern side a narrow beach of very large boulders stretches as far as the next rocky point with hardly any dead kelp accumulation. On both sides of the sand bay there are large rock slabs which are difficult to climb. They form an undercut cliff along the south-western coast and stretch 100m or more up the slope above the cliffs. Directly above these coastal slabs, a sloping layer of mineral soil with many flat stones extends to the northwest, bordering the Tussac.

Two patches of eroded black ground above the bay were adjacent to an area where Tussac bogs had been flattened by sea lions. It is probable that the eroded area is the result of greater use by sea lions in the past. Much of the island is covered with dense but fairly low Tussac grass 1.5m to 2m tall and there are two shallow ponds in the centre. In January 2007, one pond had dried out but the other still contained water. We found no evidence that the island has been burnt, but it has been grazed; Cecil Bertrand reported in November 1983 that six cattle had been placed there 'in the

past'. It was probably before 1970 and possibly much earlier. Cecil believed that they would have had little effect on the vegetation. It is likely that sea lions were hunted there in the 19th century, given their obvious presence at the time of our visit.

In December 2001, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew funded FC to conduct fieldwork aimed at discovering populations of the Felton's Flower *Calandrinia feltonii* in the Purslane family, then considered to be a very rare endemic Falkland plant, one of their 'Ten Threatened Plants of the World'. While travelling on the auxiliary ketch *Penelope* between possible sites for Felton's Flower, the opportunity was taken to carry out brief surveys of birds and plants on islands belonging to Falklands Conservation, such as Saddle Island that had not been examined since their acquisition.



**A.K. *Penelope* approaching Saddle Island from the south-east;
21 December 2001**

Surveying Visits

On 21 December 2001 the Felton's Flower Project team including Jeannette Clarke, Jonathan Felton and Stacey Steen-Macdonald motored up from North Harbour, New Island in *Penelope* and were able to land at the southern side of the sand bay on Saddle Island (51° 40.2'S 61° 14.2'W) from 1400 to 1530 on a fine afternoon. We were only able to cover the south-western cliff top and a little way inland to the northeast in the time available. We searched for any signs of Felton's Flowers and also recorded bird and plant species.

On 20 January 2007 Jeannette and Michael Clarke with their grand-daughter Adrianna Merrey went to Saddle from West Point Island in the m.v. *Condor*. They were ashore five to six hours in the afternoon, traversed the coast and crossed the centre of the island searching for and recording Striated Caracara nests with chicks.



Dense, low Tussac above the landing place, view to east southeast - 21 Dec. 2001



Rock slabs and sand; habitat of *Spergularia marina*; skuas nesting

Flowering Plants

Tussac grass was dominant in the small area that we covered in 2001. It was dense but low, not more than 2m in height and more often not exceeding 1.5m. The skirts of dead leaves were interlacing but there were narrow ground-level tracks with much dead leaf-litter which were probably made by prions.

The only other plant species noted during this short visit was found on the stony slope above the landing bay. This was the Lesser Sea-spurrey *Spergularia marina*, a common plant of rocky areas near the coast in the Falklands. However, we did not have enough time to make a thorough search and other plants could be present, particularly Native Stonecrop *Crassula moschata*. It is also likely that Starwort *Callitriche antarctica* is present in sheltered small clearings on damp ground amongst the Tussac and around one or both ponds but we were unable to check this.

Birds

Species	Dec. 2001	Notes
Black-browed Albatross	Overhead	Many passing from New or North Islands
Thin-billed Prion	Breeding	Many burrows; corpses numerous in Tussac
Kelp Goose	Breeding	1 pair in landing bay
Turkey Vulture	x	4 resting on rocks by landing bay beach
Striated Caracara	Breeding	Several adults; 100+ immatures in landing bay and on slopes behind
Southern Caracara	x	9 immatures in bay and on Tussac nearby
Falkland Skua	Breeding	One pair with nest (2 eggs) on rock shelves
Tussacbird	x	Several foraging around landing bay
Cobb's Wren	x	1 calling and another alarm-calling in Tussac
Black-throated Finch	x	1 male singing
(x) = probably breeding		

As we reached the bay and anchored near the south-western point of Saddle Island, we could see that the place was alive with birds and seals, far more than we had seen anywhere earlier in the journey. The sand beach was not large and there was continual activity. Several adult Striated Caracaras were chasing immatures frequently and one pair showed signs of holding nesting territory near the south-western point. Several Turkey Vultures were flying around the bay and at least nine Southern Caracaras were resting up on large Tussac bogs northeast of the beach.

There is a very large breeding population of Thin-billed Prions. We heard them calling in their burrows beneath the grass and found many pairs of stripped wings and piles of feathers in the Tussac. In January 2007, Michael and Jeannette Clarke saw so many prion remains at almost every step that they felt the 19 breeding pairs of Striated Caracaras were preying largely on these petrels. The terrain and the Tussac habitat appear to be suitable for Sooty Shearwaters, White-chinned Petrels, Grey-backed Storm-Petrels and Diving Petrels and an extensive survey is required.

Only three passerine species were recorded: Tussacbird, Cobb's Wren and Black-throated Finch. The apparent absence of Long-tailed Meadowlark and Falkland Pipit was probably explained by lack of suitable habitat. Falkland Thrush, Grass Wren and Black-chinned Siskin could have been missed because neither visit covered enough ground. It is likely that these three species were present but undetected.

Introduced Predators

We found no signs of rats or mice.

Mammals

In December 2001. Four large bull Southern Sea Lions and several females or immatures were seen on the sand beach. Not far from the sea lions, four immature Southern Elephant Seals were lying on the beach; one immature, apparently a female, carried two orange tail flipper tags inscribed **N82**. This animal may have originated from Sea Lion Island, but this has not yet been confirmed.

Implications for Conservation

This is one of the few Tussac islands that has been grazed lightly by cattle and has apparently never been grazed by sheep. We did not find any introduced plant species. An extensive botanical survey, an assessment of its invertebrate fauna and an investigation for nocturnal breeding petrels should be carried out on Saddle Island as soon as funding becomes available.

This island, in its present natural state, is a valuable asset to the Falklands and it is essential that a Management Plan is drawn up by Falklands Conservation in the near future.

Any boats visiting Saddle Island should ensure that they are not carrying mammalian predators, especially if coming from New Island. If rats or mice became established, they would do serious damage to the burrowing birds and could extirpate Cobb's Wren. It would require considerable effort and cost to eradicate any invasive species.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

Woods RW. 2001 A survey of the number, size and distribution of islands in the Falklands archipelago. *The Falkland Islands Journal* 7:1-25.