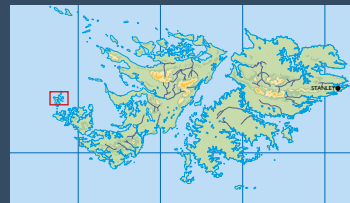


SADDLE ISLAND

Information sheet



Falklands Conservation own and manage a number of offshore islands and mainland sites across the Falkland Islands. FC strive to manage these national assets to conserve and enhance them for future generation of Islanders.

Island Summary

Saddle Island is an island within the New Island Group, known for the distinct saddle running across the centre of the island. Saddle Island is managed as a private nature reserve with healthy tussac, bird and pinniped populations, including a notable breeding colony of slender-billed prions.

Ecology

Physical

Saddle Island is 35 ha in area, rising to a height of c. 70m above sea-level on the northeast and northwest headlands. It has sheer cliffs up to c. 50m height along the western coasts. On the southern coast there is a small sandy bay facing south-east providing good shelter from prevailing westerlies for both boat anchorage and landings.

The underlying geology of Saddle Island is composed of rocks of the Devonian (400 million years in age) Port Stephen Formation (South Harbour Member), characterised by medium and coarse grained feldspathic sandstones.

Two seasonal ponds are located within the obvious central saddle of the island. These ponds are small and shallow and the lower eastern pond is normally dry by early summer. On only one occasion has water still been present in early December during visits. The ponds are of insufficient size and recharge rate to have utility for fire response.

Habitat Value

Tussac is the dominant habitat across the island covering 95% or more of the land area. Whilst tussac is very thick across the interior on the upper slopes it is often characterised by an unusual growth form where plants grow directly from a thick layer of tussac peat without obvious pedestals. Even within the eroded or more open areas of cliff slope and spray zone tussac is the dominant vegetation with seeding into sand and clay substrate derived from the underlying sandstones.

Limited grazing by cattle occurred up to the 1960s, but was likely limited to no more than 6 animals and would have had limited impact (Cecil Bertrand pers. comm, 1983). Certainly no evidence of this former land-use is visible and the tussac appears in pristine status.

The island is rodent-free.

IMAGES Saddle Island looking north-west; Falkland (brown) skua (inset).



Saddle Island (-51.6398 S & -61.2397 W) lies 1,300m north of New Island and 565m south of North Island within the New Island Group located in the south-west of the Falkland Islands.

Relevant Legislation and Policy

Statutory

None

Non-statutory

Saddle Island is part of the New Island Group Important Bird Area (IBA Ref FK 11; Falklands Conservation, 2006) and New Island Group Key Biodiversity Area (KBA Ref FKL-11; Taylor *et al.*, 2016).



Species Diversity

A total of 23 bird species have been recorded with 17 species recorded as probably breeding.

All 3 Falkland Islands endemic bird species are present (Cobb's wren, tussacbird and Falklands flightless steamer duck) whilst a further 7 endemic island race birds are present.

Cobb's wren and tussacbird are most numerous at the southern end of the island in the vicinity of the landing beach. This area contains boulder foreshore along the north and south sides of the landing beach which is a preferred habitat rich in coastal invertebrates whilst the hauled out pinnipeds likely provide indirect foraging opportunities.

Slender-billed prion burrows are frequent across the centre of the island with confirmed breeding. Small burrows (approx. 4cm diameter) are present around the eastern seasonal pond and these may be grey-backed storm petrel. The habitat and terrain appears suitable for a range of burrow nesting petrels including sooty shearwaters, white-chinned petrels, storm-petrels and diving-petrels and further survey is required.

Striated Caracaras breed on Saddle Island, with between 8–19 breeding pairs and many juveniles.

Dense tussac whilst incredibly productive and important for the sequestration of carbon and providing valuable cover and habitat is typically poor in plant species diversity. Only eight plant species have been recorded on Saddle Island, including seven native species and one introduced species. Whilst tussac is dominant all over the majority of the remaining plant species are largely associated with the drying eastern pond.

Saddle is increasingly important as a breeding and haul out site for southern sea lions and smaller numbers of southern elephant seals, with over 136 animals recorded on the landing beach and immediately adjacent. Given proximity to New Island and early sealing activity it is assumed that this increase represents a return to a former breeding site as populations begin to recover. Associated with the breeding and haul out site are Crested caracara, turkey vulture and brown skua which breed on the island and are encountered in the area of the landing beach.

Key Threats and Management

The island is currently rodent-free. Should rats or mice arrive the impact would be severe leading to the extirpation of the endemic Cobb's wren and severe depletion of tussacbird.

Non-native annual meadow grass is already present on Saddle Island. Further introduction of non-native invasive plants have the potential to compete with native species and may be difficult to eradicate if established.

There is no evidence that Saddle Island has been previously burnt,

however tussac is extremely flammable with dry pedestal skirts and large amounts of leaf litter. Therefore the island is considered extremely high risk.

It is likely that elephant seals and southern sea lions were heavily hunted in the 19th century and now as populations slowly recover from this historical exploitation they are once again re-establishing at former sites. As a newly re-established breeding site for southern sea lion, the area of the landing beach is sensitive to disturbance, especially during the breeding season. All landings should be cognizant of potential impacts and avoid causing disturbance.

Notable birds, plants, marine mammals & habitats of Saddle Island

Cobb's Wren	Endemic <i>Least Concern</i>	Falkland (brown) skua	Breeding
Tussacbird	Endemic <i>Near Threatened</i>	Grey-backed storm petrel	Possible breeding
Falklands flightless steamer duck	Endemic	Southern sea lion	Breeding
Striated caracara	<i>Near Threatened</i>	Southern elephant seal	Haul-out
Crested caracara	Breeding	Tussac (habitat)	
Slender-billed prion	Breeding		

Citation Falklands Conservation (2022). Saddle Island (New Island Group) Management Plan 2022.

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IMAGE Saddle Island from the south looking northwards to North Island

