

# Bleaker Island Group

Ref number	FK04
Admin Region	Falkland Islands
Co-ordinates	52°11'S, 58°50'W
Area	Bleaker Island* (2,070 ha), Sandy Bay Island (32 ha), Halt Island (13 ha), North Point Island (20 ha), Ghost Island (3 ha), First Island* (3 ha), Second Island* (2 ha), Third Island* (3 ha) [* = rats present]
Altitude	0–27 m
IBA categories	A1, A2, A4i
Status	Privately owned by M and P Rendell, Stanley; all land north of the settlement and Long Gulch to North Point is a National Nature Reserve (designated 1970).

## Site description

**Bleaker Island** and its outlying islands, off the south-eastern coast of East Falkland, are low-lying and rarely exceed 15 m except at Semaphore Hill north-east of the settlement. Coasts vary from low cliffs with sloping bedrock beaches to wide sandy bays and sheltered coves.

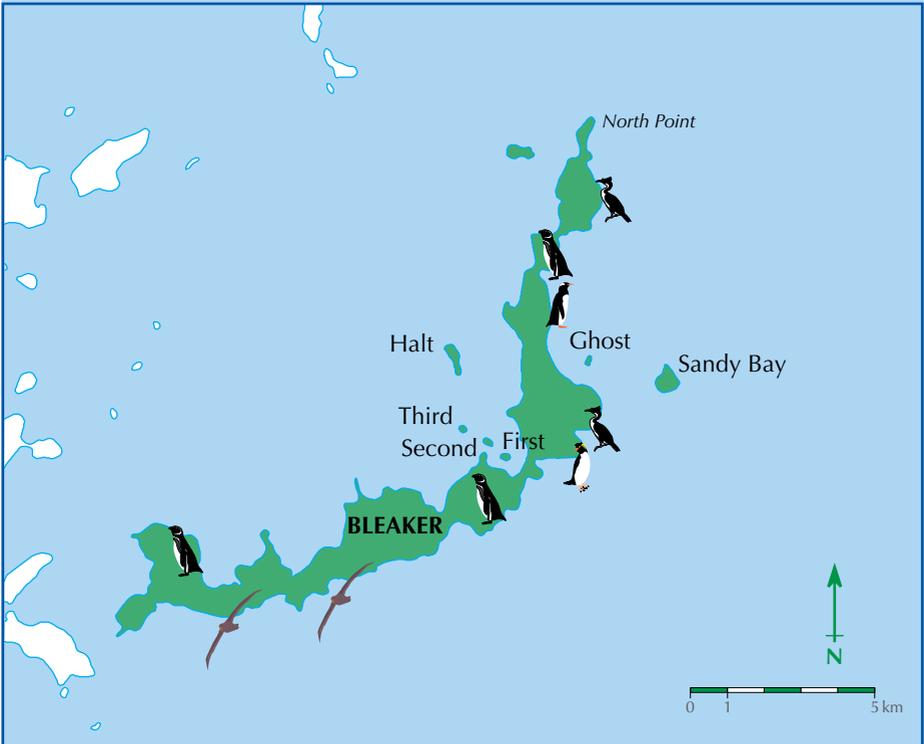
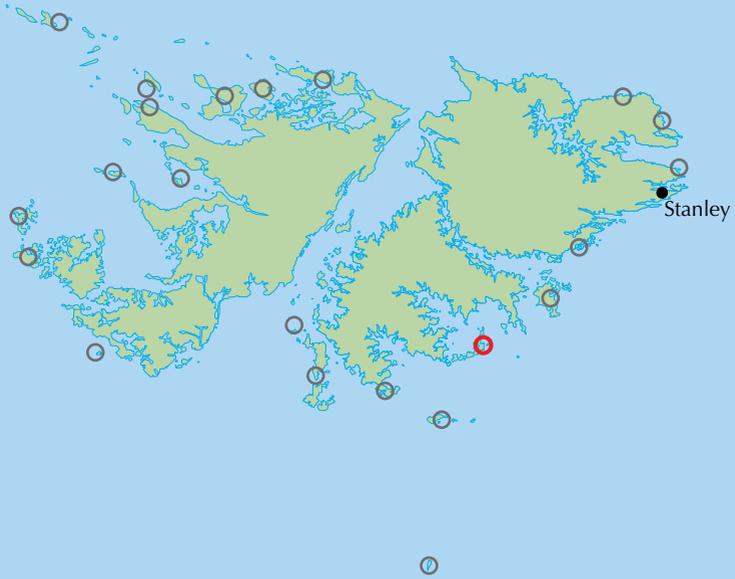
Inland, Bleaker Island is mostly open heathland, with several ponds, some of which provide good habitats for waterfowl. There are extensive coastal beds of giant kelp.

**Ghost Island** lies only 300 m from Bleaker Island, across a channel thick with kelp and it is not known if rats are present. It is likely that this island, with two-thirds of its area covered with tall Tussac, has not been grazed.

**Sandy Bay Island** has not been stocked but the rodent status is unclear. The island lies 1.5 km off the Bleaker coast and is relatively high, at nearly 20 m in the centre, with a good coverage of Tussac grass. The greater distance from Bleaker Island makes infestation by rats across the channel unlikely, though possible.

**Halt Island** lies at the mouth of Bleaker Island harbour, only 2 km from the settlement, making this an obvious choice for stocking and grazing in the past. Again, the rodent status is not known. Few details exist for the smaller Tussac-covered **First**, **Second** and **Third Islands** in the settlement bay, except that First Island is linked to Bleaker and it is possible to cross on foot at low tides. In November 2003 the resident manager reported that all three islands had rats.

### FK04 Bleaker Island Group



<b>FK04</b>	<b>Bleaker Island Group</b>	Breeding (pairs)	Notes
Criteria	Key species		
A1	Southern Giant Petrel <i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	170 (approx)	Total count from four sites
A1	Rockhopper Penguin <i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	720	In seven sub-colonies along southern side of Long Gulch
A1	Gentoo Penguin <i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	1,250	One colony north of settlement
A1	Magellanic Penguin <i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>		Numerous, no counts
A2	Ruddy-headed Goose <i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>	25	Total count in 2003
A2	Canary-winged/Black-throated Finch <i>Melanodera melanodera</i>		Moderately numerous, no counts
A2	Tussacbird/Blackish Cinclodes <i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>	>10	Numerous prior to rat infestation, now restricted to areas inaccessible to rats, such as Long Gulch
A2	Falkland Steamer Duck <i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>		Breeding, large population, no counts
A4i	Imperial Shag <i>Phalacrocorax atriceps</i>	4,150 (approx)	Main colony near centre of island



Part of the main colony of Imperial Shags on Bleaker Island ANN BROWN

## Birds

*See table opposite for details of key species.*

During a four-day surveying visit by a British Schools Exploring Society (BSES) party in November 2003, 46 possible breeding species were recorded, of which 37 were either confirmed or probably breeding. A few immature Striated Caracaras visit the settlement but they are not known to breed within the group. The island rates A4i status through the large colonies of Imperial Shag and Rock Shag present in November 2003. The globally threatened Macaroni Penguin may breed, but this needs confirmation. The Tussacbird was numerous prior to rat infestation but very few are breeding now. Endemic subspecies present include White-tufted/Rolland's Grebe, Black-crowned Night-heron and Upland Goose. The Falkland Grass Wren was only present in protected Tussac paddocks along the south-east-facing coast.

## Other species of interest

The BSES recorded 79 species of flowering plants from 20 1-km squares; 53 were native and 26 were introduced. This proportion is typical of islands that have been used for sheep farming over many years. Four endemic species were found: Lady's Slipper *Calceolaria fobergillii*, Clubmoss Cudweed *Chevreulia lycopodioides*, Vanilla Daisy *Leucheria suaveolens* and Coastal Nassauvia *Nassauvia gaudichaudii*. Interesting species of note included Yellow Orchid *Gavilea littoralis*, Whitlowgrass *Draba funiculosa*, Californian Club-rush *Schoenoplectus californicus* and Gillie's Dandelion *Taraxacum gilliesii*.

## Conservation issues

Norway Rats were accidentally introduced to Bleaker in the mid-1980s and have now spread throughout the island and on to First, Second and Third. Feral cats were present for many years until they were eradicated in 2001. It is very important to establish whether rats are present on Sandy Bay, Halt, North Point and Ghost Islands. Cobb's Wren was present and breeding on Bleaker Island in 1961 before the introduction of rats, but noticeably absent in November 2003. All visitors should be informed about the dangers of accidentally introducing alien species to the islands. On Bleaker Island itself, a limited programme is under way to control rats around the settlement, and eradication work for the whole island may be considered in the future. If this is successful, there is high potential for increased numbers of IBA qualifying species in the future.

The vegetation on the main island has suffered from years of overgrazing. Reduced grazing pressure in recent years and replanting of eroded areas in protected paddocks is allowing slow regeneration of Tussac and native flowering plants. Bleaker Island is a developing tourist destination within the Falklands and it is very important that the Falkland Islands Countryside Code (see Appendix 1) is followed, particularly to guard against the risk of fire.

On the outlying islands, the main priority for future work is to assess their bird populations. No management plans can be made until this information is obtained.

## References

Kerr (1994), Towns and Broome (2003), Woods and Thompson (2004).