

# Jason Islands Group

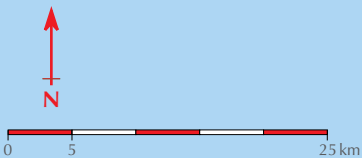
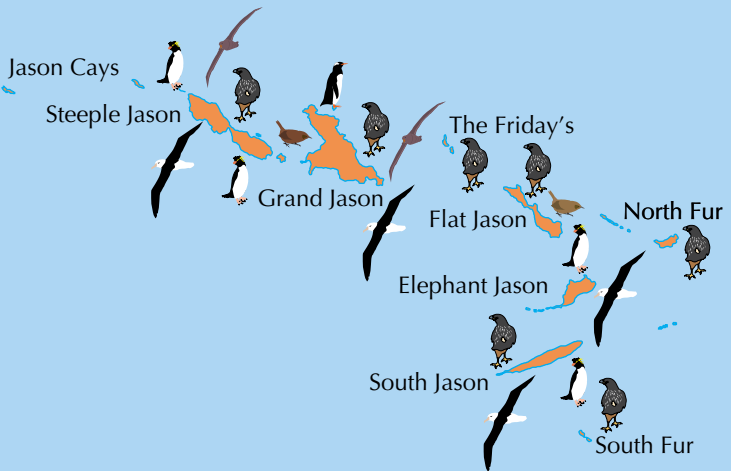
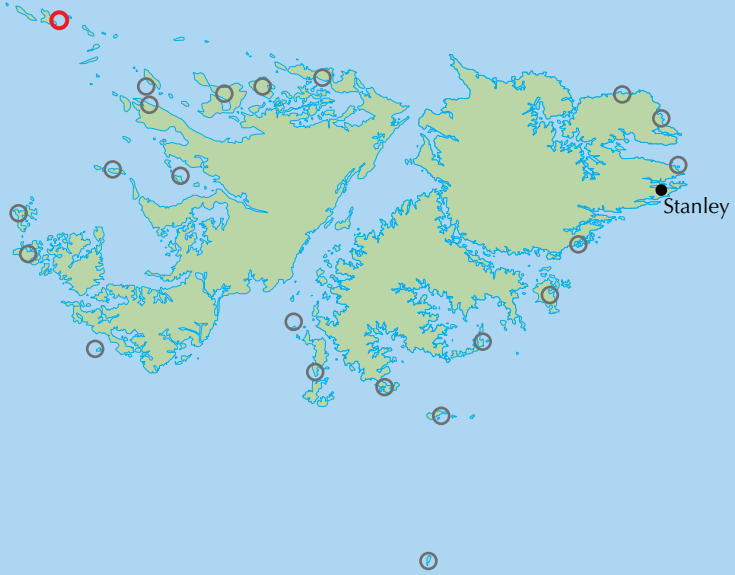
Ref number	FK07
Admin Region	Falkland Islands
Co-ordinates	51°05'S, 61°02'W
Area	Steeple Jason (790 ha), Grand Jason (1,380 ha), 'Clarke's Islet' (5 ha), Steeple Islet (22 ha), Flat Jason (375 ha), Elephant Jason (260 ha), South Jason (375 ha), North Fur (75 ha), South Fur (25 ha), The Fridays (2) (21 ha), Jason West Cay (22 ha), Jason East Cay (18 ha), and several small islets
Altitude	0–361 m
IBA categories	A1, A2, A4ii, A4iii
Status	Steeple Jason, Grand Jason and Clarke's Islet: Private nature reserves owned by the Wildlife Conservation Society, New York, USA.  Steeple Islet, Flat, Elephant and South Jason, North and South Fur, The Fridays, Jason West and East Cays and several small islets: National Nature Reserves (all designated 1973 except Flat Jason in 1966) owned by Falkland Islands Government.

## Site description

The Jasons are a group of remote islands, to the far north-west of West Falkland. Some are scenically spectacular, with cliffs and craggy peaks, while others are low-lying and covered with Tussac.

**Steeple Jason** is a large island, 8 km long, running south-east to north-west with an average width of around 1 km. The island is divided into two main sections by a narrow neck, which marks the only break in a ridge of hills with steep slopes on both sides. The island peaks at 263 m towards the north and again at 290 m towards the south. At the northern point a wide low plateau forms an important area for breeding colonial seabirds, which extend, in more scattered colonies, along the southern steep coastlines. The main stands of Tussac are along the southern shorelines and extend from around 30 m to the highest points of the island. Scattered patches of Tussac also exist in the centre of the island and there is a large stand in the middle of the northern half on the eastern coast.

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WEST POINT  
FK16

**Grand Jason** is the largest of the group and has a similar history of stocking to Steeple Jason. The terrain varies from steep cliffs and high plateaux with gullies to Tussac-covered west-facing and south-facing slopes. There are severely eroded areas of 'black ground', particularly at the northern, south-eastern and western extremities. The island's peak is at 361 m and Tussac is sparse above 60–90 m, with low grasses and small cushion plants.

**Steeple Islet** is a small island, generally low-lying, with boulder beaches and low cliffs, sloping towards a rocky north-western point. Almost the entire island is covered in dense Tussac grass, which has apparently never been grazed.

**Flat Jason** is a low-lying Tussac island with vertically dipping rock strata, and is possibly the largest island in the Falklands archipelago that has not been grazed, partly due to the difficulties of access. The island is almost 6 km long on a north-west to south-east axis, with an average width of some 600 m. At the centre of the island there is a narrow neck with a boulder beach that may sometimes be tidally inundated. The northern coasts are mainly boulder beaches with rocky outcrops, while the southern shores are more formidable, with steep-sided mini stacks and cliffs.

**Elephant Jason** has a long ridge rising to a height of 208 m, sloping into low-lying plateaux thickly covered with dense Tussac on the northern and eastern coasts and with sheer cliffs on the western coast. The fringe of Tussac extends around most of the island, giving way at the northernmost point to areas of grass and heath. For a short time early in the 20th century Elephant Jason was used as a base for government sealing inspectors, who constructed a shanty on the island. The remains of the cast iron stove can still be seen.



**South Jason** is a long, narrow island, running almost due east-west and reaching over 7km in length and only 1 km wide at its widest point. The entire island has a central ridge reaching around 300m in height, flattening out to the east and west. The eastern point has a dense cover of Tussac, while the western point is drier, with sparse grassland and a small pond. The southern slopes are mostly covered with dense Tussac, while the northern slopes are rocky and the vegetation consists of dry upland heath, with Balsam-bog *Bolax gummifera* and exposed rock layers.

**South Fur** is a small island lying around 5 km off the south coast of South Jason. Just 1 km long and 300m wide, its highest point is only 18m. Unusually, it is composed mainly of large blue-grey dolerite boulders, with a dense but low Tussac covering. It has not been stocked with sheep or cattle.

**North Fur** lies east of Flat Jason and is difficult to access due to steep cliffs formed from vertically bedded rocks. It is heavily overgrown with dense and tall Tussac and has small amounts of Wild Celery *Apium australe*, Stonecrop *Crassula moschata* and Swordgrass *Carex trifida*, but it has never been stocked, probably because access is difficult.

**'Clarke's Islet'** lies about 0.5 km off the north-eastern coast of Grand Jason. It is a rugged low island with many rock outcrops, patches of 'black ground' and open low Tussac, heavily used by Southern Sea Lion.

**The Fridays** are two small islands situated around 5 km from the north-west coast of Flat Jason. Both are low-lying, and consist of large coastal rocky strike ridges with Tussac between. On the larger of the two, this area gives way in the centre to open peaty ground, which is the site of a Southern Giant Petrel colony. Southern Sea Lion use both islands.

View of Steeple Jason looking east to west RUSSELL EVANS



<b>FK07</b>	<b>Jason Islands Group</b>	Breeding (pairs)	Notes
Criteria	Key species		
A1, A4ii	Black-browed Albatross <i>Thalassarche melanophrys</i>	213,800	Largest Falkland colony is on Steeple Jason
A1, A4ii	Gentoo Penguin <i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	12,300	Steeple and Grand Jason only
A1, A4ii	Rockhopper Penguin <i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	142,000	Steeple, Grand and Elephant Jason only
A1, A4ii	Southern Giant Petrel <i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	1,500	Main colonies Grand and Steeple Jason, small colony on The Fridays
A1	Magellanic Penguin <i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Numerous	Breeding on Grand, Steeple, Flat and Elephant Jason and North Fur, no counts
A1	Macaroni Penguin <i>Eudyptes chrysolophus</i>	10	Maximum count
A1, A2, A4ii	Striated Caracara <i>Phalacrocorax australis</i>	250	Jason group are the Falkland stronghold of this species
A1, A2	Cobb's Wren <i>Troglodytes cobbi</i>	Numerous	All islands except Steeple Jason
A2	Ruddy-headed Goose <i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>	10	Few pairs on Grand and Steeple Jason only
A2	Canary-winged/Black-throated Finch <i>Melanodera melanodera</i>		On all islands in group, not counted
A2	Falkland Steamer Duck <i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>		All islands except Clarke's, not counted
A2	Tussacbird/Blackish Cinclodes <i>Cinclodes antarcticus</i>		All islands in group, not counted but numerous
A4iii	Combined seabirds	>369,850	

## Birds

*See table opposite for details of key species.*

On Steeple Jason in October and November 1997, 36 species were noted, with 27 probably breeding, and 39 species were recorded on Grand Jason with 30 of them almost certainly breeding. A total of 12 species, 11 probably breeding, were found on Steeple Islet during a visit of only 90 minutes. Clarke's Islet held only 10 species, almost all breeding and including Cobb's Wren, Tussacbird and Canary-winged/Black-throated Finch. On Flat Jason, 32 species were seen, with 26 probably breeding. On Elephant Jason, 33 species were noted, of which 30 were probably breeding. Populations of Thin-billed Prion, Wilson's Storm-petrel, Grey-backed Storm-petrel, Rock Shag and Imperial Shag warrant further investigation.

Endemic subspecies present are Common Diving Petrel, Black-crowned Night-heron, Upland Goose, Short-eared Owl, Dark-faced Ground-tyrant, Falkland Grass Wren, Falkland Thrush and Long-tailed Meadowlark. The Falkland Pipit is apparently absent from all islands in this extreme western group.

## Other species of interest

The presence of breeding Southern Elephant Seal, Southern Sea Lion and South American Fur Seal has been confirmed on most of the islands in the group. About 200 Southern Sea Lion pups are born annually in the archipelago and there are many non-breeding adults and sub-adults. Islands where breeding occurs are Steeple Jason (46 pups), Fridays (29), Flat Jason (17), Elephant Jason (26), South Jason (5) and South Fur (4). South American Fur Seals breed on Jason West Cay (2,000) and East Cay (2,000), Seal Rocks (200), Elephant Jason (200) and North Fur (33 pups).

At least 43 species of flowering plants have been identified in the group. These include six endemics: Coastal Nassauvia *Nassauvia gaudichaudii*, Vanilla Daisy *Leucheria suaveolens*, Woolly Falkland Ragwort *Senecio littoralis*, Smooth Falkland Ragwort *Senecio vaginatus*, Falkland Rock-cress *Phlebotobium maclovianum* and Lady's Slipper *Calceolaria fobergillii*. The most surprising plant found on Grand Jason was an unidentified purslane (*Calandrinia*), possibly a new endemic plant.

## Conservation issues

Steeple and Grand Jason were stocked with cattle and up to 5,000 sheep from the late 19th century to about 1968. In 1970, after all the sheep had been removed, the islands were bought by Len Hill of Birdland, UK, to safeguard the habitat. Since then, some regeneration of the vegetation has occurred. Ownership recently passed to the Wildlife Conservation Society of New York (WCS). In 2002 a fire broke out on Steeple Jason as a result of dry weather and a lightning strike. This was contained to a narrow gully in the southern slopes of the northern half of the island and continued to burn, although control measures were taken to ensure that it did not spread to the albatross colonies. The fire was thought to be totally extinguished by May 2003. Elephant Jason was stocked briefly in 1967 when the Falkland Islands

Government leased it for grazing of several hundred sheep. These were removed in 1971 and the island has not been grazed since.

South Jason was accidentally burnt in 1960 and the fire continued burning into the peat for several months. In 2001, a fire was caused on the northern coast by the detonation of unexploded ordnance, from a military plane that had crashed in 1982. The fire burnt through most of the Tussac on the southern slope, but the level of damage is not known, as the numbers of burrowing birds and songbirds had never been recorded. There is evidence that a severe fire affected the island in 1949 and traces of this were still visible in the 1980s, having left much of the north-western side of the island devoid of vegetation and prone to erosion. Government permits to visit South Jason include a strong warning of the fire risk. In order to minimise this, visits should only take place between May and July.

All the government-owned islands were made Crown Reserves in July 1950, declared as wild animal and bird sanctuaries in May 1966, and reclassified as National Nature Reserves in 1999. Many of the islands are in their original state with dense Tussac and other natural vegetation.

The flora and fauna of the Jasons urgently need a full survey of species present and abundance. The remoteness of these islands from Stanley and the difficulties of access mean that, in the past, it was impossible to make basic biological surveys. The research station constructed in 2003 on Steeple Jason by the WCS should facilitate long-term ecological studies. WCS and Falklands Conservation are currently developing a management plan for Grand and Steeple Jason.

Overgrazing has left large parts of Steeple and Grand Jason badly eroded. A Tussac replanting programme could improve the habitat for birds, though the logistics would be difficult. On other islands in the group, Tussac is still mostly dominant, except on the higher parts of Elephant Jason, where heathland predominates.

Steeple and Grand Jason, the two largest islands in this archipelago, are becoming a popular tourist destination for cruise ships. It is very important that the Falkland Islands Countryside Code (see Appendix 1) is followed, particularly to guard against the risk of fire. The islands in this group are free of introduced predators, with the exception of Steeple Jason, which has a feral population of House Mouse *Mus musculus*. This probably explains the absence of territory-holding Cobb's Wrens and poses a threat to other passerines and ground-nesting species, which would benefit from the eradication of mice. All visitors should be informed about the dangers of accidentally introducing alien species to the islands.

## References

Clausen (2001), Huin (2001), Kerr (1994), Poncet (1998), Strange, Parry, Parry and Woods (1988), Thompson (2003) Thompson and Rothery (1991), Woods and Smith (1999), Woods (2002a).

Striated Caracara with Steeple Jason in the background DEBBIE SUMMERS

