

Keppel Island

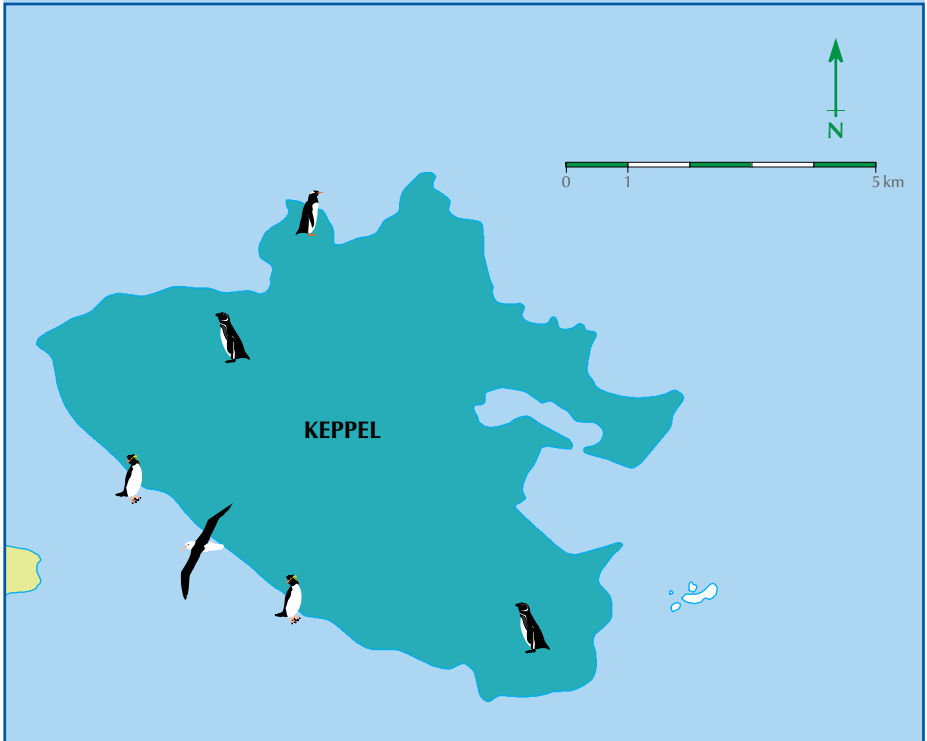
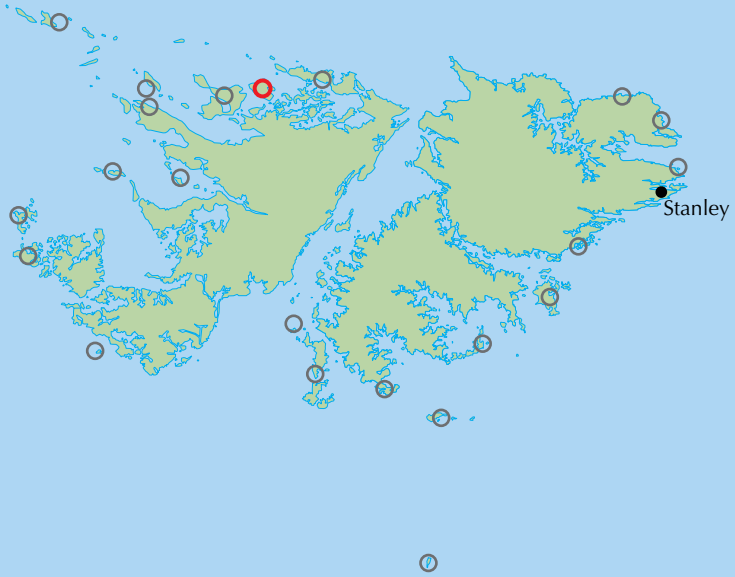
Ref number	FK08
Admin Region	Falkland Islands
Co-ordinates	51°19'S 59°58'W
Area	3,626 ha* [* = rats present]
Altitude	0–341 m
IBA categories	A1, A2
Status	Privately owned by L. Fell, Ilminster, Somerset, UK.

Site description

Keppel Island lies approximately 5 km off the north-western coast of West Falkland and peaks at 341 m on Mount Keppel. The land rises steeply from a central valley, forming a ridge along the south-western coast of the island and cliffs to the west and north. There is a wide, flat valley in the centre of the island containing several freshwater lakes, which provide important habitat for waterfowl. To the north-east, the coastline is deeply indented with several sandy beaches and bays and there is a large area of sand dunes. The majority of the island is covered by heathland and Whitegrass associations, with the north-eastern coast having extensive green areas



FK08 Keppel Island



FK08	Keppel Island	Breeding (pairs)	Notes
Criteria	Key species		
A1	Black-browed Albatross <i>Thalassarche melanophrys</i>	1,869	Apparently increased 1997–2001
A1	Rockhopper Penguin <i>Eudyptes chrysocome</i>	782	Three colonies
A1	Gentoo Penguin <i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	1,250	Two colonies
A1	Magellanic Penguin <i>Spheniscus magellanicus</i>	Hundreds?	Widespread and numerous, no counts
A2	Ruddy-headed Goose <i>Chloephaga rubidiceps</i>	Hundreds?	Widespread and numerous
A2	Canary-winged/Black-throated Finch <i>Melanodera melanodera</i>		Present, probably low numbers
A2	Falkland Steamer Duck <i>Tachyeres brachypterus</i>		Numerous around coasts, not counted

interspersed with Magellanic Penguin burrows and frequented by flocks of geese. Coastal Tussac is very limited. Keppel Island is one of the most historic sites in the Falklands. The first long-term settlement in the archipelago and home to the South American Missionary Society was established there in February 1855. It was occupied for 40 years by a group of British missionaries with a small population of Fuegian natives, who ran one of the earliest and most successful agricultural settlements in the Falklands. Activities were increased on islands south of Tierra del Fuego from the 1880s. Keppel was sold to Dean Brothers of Pebble Island in 1911 and continued in use as a sheep farm until 1992.

Birds

See table above for details of key species.

A total of 38 species was recorded in December 2001, of which 33 were breeding or probably breeding. The first pair of Barn Owls proved to be breeding (2001) on Keppel Island found suitable habitat in the extensive European Gorse and the shearing shed at the settlement, and they were apparently feeding solely on the introduced rat population. During a visit in 2003, both Southern Caracara and Striated Caracara were noted as present, though not shown to be breeding. Falkland Grass Wren, White-tufted/Rolland's Grebe and Black-necked Swan are often seen, especially on or near the ponds in the central valley. Very large numbers of Upland Geese were reported in December 2001 and from sample counts, it was estimated that more than 3,000 were present. Cobb's Wren and Tussacbird were notably absent during the December 2001 visit, which is consistent with the recorded presence of many rats.

The possible presence of petrels has been suggested, from sightings of burrows and traces of petrels. The burrows are most likely those of the numerous rats and the remains of petrels are probably either corpses of storm-driven birds or the prey of Peregrine Falcons or Short-eared Owls. However, the status of nocturnal petrels on the island has not been investigated.

Other species of interest

Robinson's Point on the northern coast is a popular haul-out site for Southern Elephant Seals and, in past years, pups have occasionally been born here. There have been unsubstantiated reports of Fuegian Otters at Keppel within the last 10 years, but no breeding sites have been found. There is an old plantation of Monterey Cypress and Broom *Cytisus* sp. in a valley nearby, which has provided attractive habitat for Black-chinned Siskin.

Six endemic plant species have been recorded for Keppel: Hairy Daisy *Erigeron incertus*, Vanilla Daisy *Leucheria suarveolens*, Coastal Nassauvia *Nassauvia gaudichaudii*, Woolly Falkland Ragwort *Senecio littoralis*, Smooth Falkland Ragwort *Senecio vaginatus* and Lady's Slipper *Calceolaria fothergillii*. There is also a rare native plant, Fir Clubmoss *Huperzia fuegiana*.

Conservation issues

Keppel Island has a high population of introduced Norway Rats, which is clearly having a negative impact on the wildlife. Eradication of rats from the island might require the use of a helicopter or a very large workforce on the ground. All visitors should be informed about the dangers of accidentally introducing alien species to the islands. At the settlement, European Gorse has grown uncontrolled since 1988 and during 2003, a working party from the Falkland Islands National Trust and Museum, and Falklands Conservation, removed large quantities to safeguard important historical buildings. The Box-leaved barberry or Calafate *Berberis buxifolia* has also become more abundant and is spreading along the coastal plains. Experimental plantings of Tussac made in 1985 produced useful results when compared with similar plantings at Port Howard and Sea Lion Island. Over 700 trees were planted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and more than 600 were still alive at Christmas 2001.

Cruise ships were scheduled to start visiting the island in late 2003. It is very important to promote the Falkland Islands Countryside Code (see Appendix 1), particularly to guard against the risk of fire. Consideration should be given to year-round occupancy of the island as this would afford a level of protection to the site and also facilitate the management of introduced species.

References

Clausen (2001), Huin (2001), McAdam and Walton (1990), Nutter (2002), Philpott (2003).