



Ulva Island

Southland



Listening to the dawn chorus on Ulva Island is like stepping back in time, to an era when New Zealand's bird fauna was still largely intact. This predator-free island, located in Paterson Inlet, Stewart Island, is not only a bird enthusiast's paradise, it is also one of the few offshore islands with a largely undisturbed podocarp forest. This mature forest distinguishes Ulva from other, better-known sanctuaries such as Kapiti and Tiritiri Matangi, which are largely covered in regenerating vegetation.

Ulva Island has a land area of 267 hectares and a coastline of about 11 kilometres. It is managed by the Department of Conservation as an 'open sanctuary' with full public access, a place where New Zealand's native plants and birds can live in a safe environment and the public can enjoy and learn about them.

Free of predators

Ulva Island has high natural values and its relatively unmodified state makes it an important island for the conservation of threatened species. Cats, mustelids and possums never inhabited the island, and rats were successfully eradicated by 1997. This lack of predators has enabled birds to flourish on Ulva, especially small bird species that are threatened on Stewart Island by the presence of three rat species. In fact, predator control on Ulva has also directly helped birds on mainland Stewart Island, because many kākā and kererū around Oban breed on Ulva Island.

The Ulva Island experiment is significant nationwide as part of the leading edge in island conservation management. The project has been invaluable in the knowledge and skills it has provided for removing pest species from other offshore islands around New Zealand and, subsequently, for keeping them off.

Human history

Ulva Island was visited periodically by Ngāi Tahu Māori to strip bark from tōtara trees for use in storing tītī (muttonbirds). Some sites where tōtara trees have been stripped are probably 100 – 200 years old.

Post Office Bay
G. Lind



In 1872 Charles Traill established the first regional post office in the Stewart Island region at Post Office Bay. Ulva was a central point in Paterson Inlet, and so Traill could alert the scattered communities around the Inlet to the arrival of the mailboat by raising a flag. The post office meant that Ulva Island became a social meeting place for locals, who would dress in their finest clothes to pick up mail and hear news from their neighbours.

The post office operated until 1923. Charles Traill and his brother Walter, both Orkney Islanders, established an extensive garden which included radiata pine and other exotic tree species. Some large survivors of their garden are still growing alongside the native forest trees on the island.

In the 1880s the Tourist Department provided funding for the island's tracks, and in 1922 the island became the first scenic reserve in New Zealand. Traill's 7-hectare homestead remains in private ownership today, while the remaining 259 are managed by the Department of Conservation.

Birds

The island is inhabited by a number of native birds which are rare on, or have disappeared from, the mainland. The inquisitive weka, New Zealand's native woodhen, has little fear of people and will approach visitors quite closely.

Depending on the time of year and the availability of seasonal foods, some of the other birds which may be seen include South Island kākā, kakāriki, kererū (wood pigeon), korimako (bellbird), pīpī (brown creeper), miromiro (tomtit), pīwakawaka (fantail), tui and tokoeka (Stewart Island brown kiwi).

Tieke (saddleback), mohua (yellowhead), toutouwai (Stewart Island robin) and

tītipounamu (rifleman) have also been reintroduced to Ulva Island within the last six years. The University of Otago is monitoring these bird species to learn more about the effects of small founder populations on the long-term survival of island populations.



Kākā
D. Veitch

Gunnera hamiltonii
G. Lind



Trees and plants

The island's forest is a typical southern New Zealand podocarp mix dominated by rimu, southern rātā and kāmahi, with associated stands of Hall's tōtara and miro. The bright scarlet flowers of rātā present a distinctive splash of colour on the island during the summer. Rimu is the tallest of the island's native trees, emerging high above the forest canopy.

Around the coastal fringe areas of the forest, smaller shrubs form a buffer from the sea. In the more sheltered areas inside the forest grows a diverse understorey of broadleaf species, as well as a number of tree and ground ferns.

The eradication of mammals from the island has also benefited plants, and millions of tiny seedlings are emerging from the forest floor. In addition, some threatened Stewart Island plants are being reintroduced, such as the sand herb *Gunnera hamiltonii*. This is one of the rarest plants in the world with only seven plants known to exist on a few west coast Stewart Island beaches.

How can you help?

As an open sanctuary with full public access, the risk of re-invasion by rats is high. The Sydney Cove and Post Office Bay areas are the most likely areas for a reinvasion due to the high numbers of visitors to these places. Rats can swim ashore from moored boats, stow away in bulk supplies and building materials or even arrive in kayaks, packs and picnic baskets. They are very clever at getting aboard even the best kept boats, particularly at night.

They proved this in the summer of 1998/99 when two rats got ashore Ulva Island from moored boats. Luckily the two rats were caught within a few days. More recently, two rats were caught around Post Office Bay in January 2006. On average, one rat reaches Ulva Island every year, usually with the help of an unwitting visitor. Protecting Ulva from introduced plants and animals needs to be the responsibility of all of us.

As a quarantine measure, rat-kill traps are maintained on the island around likely re-invasion points. However, for Ulva Island to remain rat-free, there will need to be a genuine commitment from the visiting public. Don't visit the island at night and complete a thorough check of boats, packs and supplies at wharves before departure to Ulva Island, not just for rats but also for other potential stowaways – mice, seeds, etc. Any rat sighting should be reported immediately to the Department of Conservation office at Stewart Island phone (03) 219-0002.

No camping or night visits are allowed to Ulva Island.

Further information

For more information on Ulva Island, please contact the Stewart Island Department of Conservation office, or visit www.doc.govt.nz.