

Falklands Fur Seal Census

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Like most fur seal populations, Falkland's fur seals were severely depleted by unregulated sealing in the 1700s and 1800s. By the 1920s, the government took drastic steps to protect the remaining fur seals from poachers. This included armed guards stationed on Elephant Jason Island and a patrol vessel. In an effort to assess population size and status, government naturalists also undertook counts in the mid-1920s. These counts revealed 400 pups on Elephant Jason, 50 at Volunteer Rocks and just 4 pups at Bird Island (West Falkland). Several breeding sites were visited again in the 1950s, when 10,000 fur seals of all ages were estimated (rather than counted). More recent surveys in the 1960s and 1980s by local naturalist Ian Strange revealed the Falklands fur seal population had continue to recover and numbered about 20,000 seals of all age classes.



To continue to monitor the recovery of the Falklands fur seal population, SAERI in collaboration with the Falkland Islands Fisheries Department, undertook an archipelago wide census in Jan 2018. The census was timed to occur after peak pup laying, which is mid to late December. Pups are of interest because they are the primary count unit for seal censuses and provide an index of population size and a reliable proxy of overall changes in abundance.



For the 2018 census we used a UAV because fur seals typically breed in dense colonies, on rocky remote rocks or rocky outcrops on the fringes of islands, which makes ground counts impractical. We visited all known fur seal breeding colonies and photographed each colony (the UAV was flown at height of 30 m and the seals didn't blink an eye). The only downside to the UAV, is the 3,000 photographs that I am yet to count. However, as a brief overview of results. Fur seals breed at 10 sites around the Falklands. The largest

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breeding colonies are East and West Jason Cay, and Seal Rocks, all in the North West of the Falklands. Bird Island is also important, but it isn't the largest breeding colony. As a rather conservative guess (so please don't quote this!), the number of pups is roughly 10,000. This means the Falklands is the second largest breeding colony in the Atlantic (Uruguay has 30,000 pups, Argentina has <2,000 pups) – and is much more important than currently recognised. Results will be available at the end of 2018, but it is fantastic to see the continued recovery of the Falklands fur seal population.



A special thanks to landowners for access to fur seal colonies, the crew of the Protegat who made the census a success, and Falklands Conservation and Sullivan shipping for equipment loan.

