

The Great Falklands Seal Count of 2021

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An adult female fur seal with a caracara in the background.

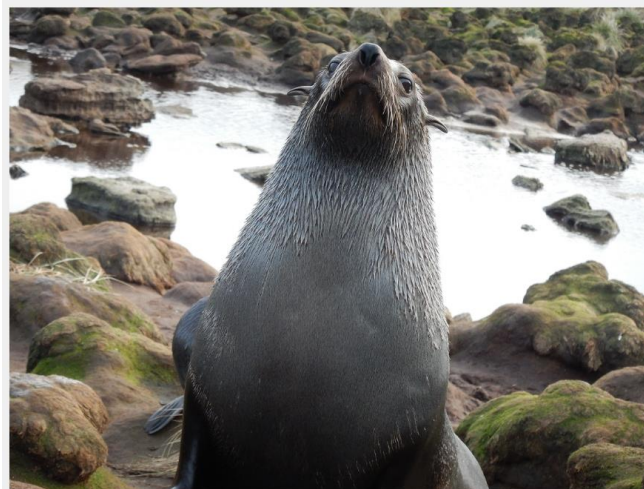
The Falklands is a wildlife wonderspot and a scientific frontier – there are few places on earth where the potential for scientific discovery is matched, and where research has tangible links to informing management and policy. An Aussie seal biologist by trade, I still have to pinch myself how fortunate and privileged I am to have the opportunity to live, work and explore the Falklands. Unlike many of my colleagues overseas, we were lucky here in the Falklands to be able to

continue our science program in the 2021 austral summer. So, in January 2021 we ambitiously set out to census fur seals and sea lions, concurrently. Why do a seal census in 2021? The 2021 census was in-part because we wanted to repeat our 2014 sea lion census. However, we also discovered the largest breeding population of South American fur seals in the world in 2018, some 38,000 fur seal pups right here in the Falklands – and we were keen to repeat the fur seal census to begin to piece together fur seal population trends.

Conveniently for logistics and planning, fur seals and sea lions (both of which are eared seals that belong to the family Otariidae) have similar life histories. For example, both give birth to a single pup during the austral summer, with peak pupping typically being late December. This made planning relatively easy – we timed the 2021 to occur after peak pupping, because we used pups as an index of population size. Pups are a useful metric of population size because they are easy to distinguish from other age-classes based on their size and black natal hair (lanugo). In addition, young pups (age < 1 month) remain ashore. In comparison, the proportion of adult seals away at-sea on any given day is unknown and juvenile colony attendance varies seasonally.

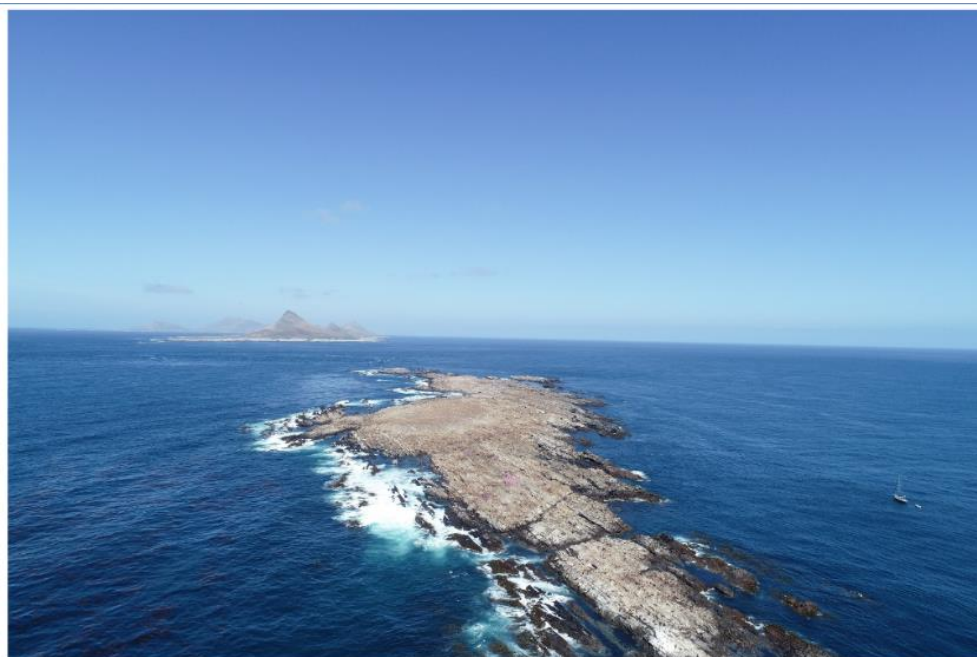
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The census took 3 weeks to complete and I was incredibly fortunate to be working with Rachel Orben (Oregon State University) and Leiv Poncet (Beaver Island), using Leiv's yacht, the *Peregrine*, as our research vessel. Leiv worked tirelessly to make the census a success in often less than ideal conditions. While I don't have all the details in front of me (we are still counting), I can say is that the population of sea lions have



An adult female fur seal.

increased by a modest amount. With regard to fur seals, we discovered two new breeding colonies in the Jason Islands group that were not detected in 2018. One of these (Flat Jason) was very large, so we almost certainly missed this colony in 2018. The other colony (Fridays) is very small, and is likely to have been recently established. The Falklands fur seal population is therefore, likely larger than in 2018, with the Jason Islands group home to over 95% of Falklands fur seals and almost 50% of the global population of South American fur seals. However, we still have some 3,000 photographs left to count, so more soon! Sincere thanks to FIG Environment Studies Budget for funding the census and to land owners for access to breeding colonies.



Jason East Cay – a small island amongst the Jason Islands off the northwest coast of the Falkland Islands