

Ulva Island/Te Wharawhara Open Sanctuary



Listening to the bird song on Ulva Island/Te Wharawhara 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/Whaka a Te Wera, Stewart Island/Rakiura, 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 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 part of Rakiura National Park and 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 but rats were a problem. In 1992 an eradication programme was instigated and in 1997 the island was declared rat free. Occasional rat incursions since this time have required further trapping to maintain the predator-free status of the island.

Ulva Island 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 mutton birds/tītī. Some of the sites where tōtara trees have been stripped are estimated to be 100–200 years old.

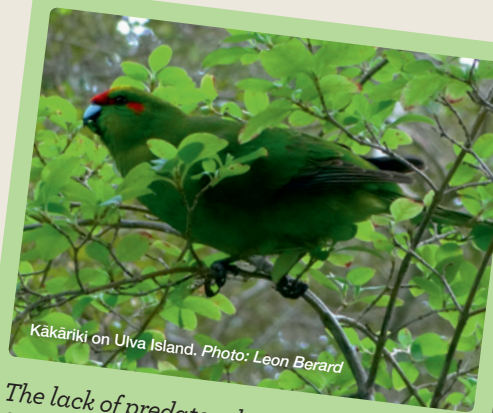


Historic Post Office today. Photo: DOC

In 1872 Charles Traill established the first 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 mail boat 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 settlers from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, 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 northern edge of 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.



Kākāriki on Ulva Island. Photo: Leon Berard

The lack of predators has enabled birds to flourish on Ulva Island, particularly small bird species that are threatened on Stewart Island by three rat species. In fact, predator control on Ulva Island has directly helped birds on mainland Stewart Island, because many kākā, tūi, kākāriki and kererū around Oban breed on Ulva Island.

Birds

The island is inhabited by a number of native birds that 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 bird species that may be seen include South Island kākā, kākārīki, kererū (wood pigeon), korimako (bellbird), pīpipi (brown creeper), miromiro (tomtit), pīwakawaka (fantail), tūi and Stewart Island tokoeka (brown kiwi). Tīeke (saddleback), mohua (yellowhead), toutouwai (Stewart Island robin) and tītīpounamu (rifleman) have also been reintroduced to Ulva Island.

A long-running University of Otago research project monitoring some of the bird species on Ulva Island to look at survival of island populations was completed in early 2013. The findings of this research help support DOC's work with species recovery. Visitors to the island may see some of the banded birds that were involved in the research.

Trees and plants

The island's forest is a typical southern New Zealand podocarp mix dominated by rimu, southern rātā and kāmahī, 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 understory 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.

The scarcity of weeds on Ulva Island has also contributed to the now diverse and prolific understory and expansive mossy ground cover. However there is a continuing risk of weeds being introduced in the form of seeds arriving on footwear and in bags and other gear, which is why visitors to the island are asked to take a few precautions.



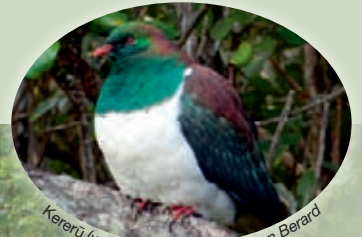
Toutouwai (Stewart Island robin). Photo: Jeremy Pearce



Stewart Island weka. Photo: Michael Jones



South Island kākā. Photo: Leon Berard



Kererū (wood pigeon). Photo: Leon Berard



Stewart Island tokoeka (brown kiwi). Photo: Leon Berard



Mohua (yellowhead). Photo: Michael Jones



Tītīpounamu (rifleman). Photo: Michael Jones



Prolific understory. Photo: DOC



Rats: a threat to the island

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 reinvasion due to the high numbers of visitors.

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.

This was proven in the summer of 1998/99 and again in 2006 when rats came ashore from moored boats. Luckily the rats were quickly caught. In 2010 a population of Norway rats was found to have established on the island. A major rat re-eradication operation was undertaken and a subsequent extensive survey using a rodent dog in 2012 has shown the island is once again free of rats.



Fantastic rodent dog Moss.
Photo: Gareth Eyres

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 across the island, with extra traps around likely re-invasion points. However, for Ulva Island to remain rat free, visitors must follow some easy procedures for checking their gear.

Further information

For more information on Ulva Island or to report a problem, please contact:

Rakiura National Park Visitor Centre
15 Main Road
Halfmoon Bay
Phone 03 219 0009
www.doc.govt.nz



Miriam and rodent dog Moss. Photo: DOC

How you can help keep Ulva Island predator-free

- Check your boat/kayak, bags or packs for rats and other pests before setting out for the island.
- Make sure there are no rats or other pests on your boat or in your gear.
- Check your footwear, pockets and Velcro tabs for any seeds that may be hitching a ride (weeds are a threat to Ulva's vegetation).
- If you see evidence of rats or other pests on Ulva Island, please report it immediately to the Department of Conservation.

Please follow these guidelines

- ⚠ Night visits are not permitted.
- 🚫 Dogs are not allowed on Ulva Island. They can kill ground birds.
- 🚫 Please don't feed the weka! Keep them friendly, not greedy.
- 🚫 Take all your rubbish with you when you leave. There are no rubbish bins.
- 🚫 There is no public accommodation on the island and camping is not permitted.
- 🚫 Any rat sighting should be reported immediately to the Department of Conservation Field Centre Stewart Island/Rakiura: phone 03 219 0002.



Family-friendly Sydney Cove. Photo: DOC



Boulder Beach. Photo: DOC



Rāpoka/whakahao/sea lion. Photo: Leon Berard



Kororā/little blue penguin trio having a chat. Photo: DOC



Torea/oyster catcher. Photo: Michael Jones



Nesting kawau/shags. Photo: Leon Berard