

The Spur-winged Plover is now widespread on Stewart Island and should be considered well established, although it is not yet in large numbers. Much of the island is covered in unsuitable habitat (scrub, forest or swamp) and the species may never be very numerous there.

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South Island Saddlebacks transferred to Breaksea Island

The rescue of the South Island Saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus carunculatus*) from Big South Cape Island in 1964 is a well-known story. At that time, 36 of the birds were removed from the rat-plagued island and successfully released on Kaimohu and Big Islands. Further transfers took place, and by 1990, 300-500 Saddlebacks were distributed over nine small islands, ranging from 6 to 141 ha and located around Stewart Island.

Breaksea Island (166°35' 45°33') was the next site targeted for release by the draft South Island Saddleback Recovery Plan. A successful release on this island would be special for several reasons. It would mark the return of Saddlebacks to Fiordland National Park after an absence of nearly a century. Breaksea Island (170 ha) would be the largest island with South Island Saddlebacks, as transfers to Maud Island (309 ha) and Inner Chetwode (240 ha) in the Marlborough Sounds had failed. Finally, Breaksea is one of the first islands (and the largest so far) from which Norway rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) have been eradicated. A joint Department of Conservation/DSIR Ecology Division operation in 1988 had rid the island of this introduced pest. Islands free of European introduced rats are the only suitable habitat for South Island Saddlebacks, and even kiore (*Rattus exulans*) may have a detrimental effect on the birds. Putahinu Island is 141 ha, but holds a population roughly estimated at only 20 birds.

In March 1992, 59 Saddlebacks were transferred from Kundy and Big Islands and released on Breaksea a few days later after being held in aviaries. Thirty-four adults, 10 yearlings and 6 fledglings were captured and transferred, but one bird died before release. The first thorough check of the birds took place one year later, in March 1993. It was not possible to distinguish between individual birds because birds were banded by age class only. However, at least three adults, six yearlings (now 2 years old) and six fledglings (now 1 year old) were found. An additional two banded birds were seen, but their identifying colour bands were not seen. A minimum of 16 fledgling birds (unbanded birds which hatched on the island) were found. These 33 birds were found mainly on the lower eastern face and southwest ridge of the island (see Figure 1). The southern and northern faces were not searched thoroughly owing to limitations on time and access.

Nine of the 13 groups of fledglings seen were on their own or with one parent only. Accounting for their 'missing' parents would add perhaps 13 adult birds somewhere on the island, perhaps looking after second clutches. This would bring the total number of birds surviving from the original transfer to 30. If Saddlebacks are in some of the unsearched areas, the total would be even higher. The rate of survival and the number of young produced in this first breeding year suggest that Saddlebacks will do very well on Breaksea in the future.

Saddlebacks were seen feeding in the usual way: chiselling and probing under bark, probing in the kiekie (*Freycinetia banksii*) and epiphytes, and gleaning off leaves. Mahoe (*Melicytus ramiflorus*), *Coprosma* species, and pate (*Schefflera digitata*) fruits were eaten by birds.

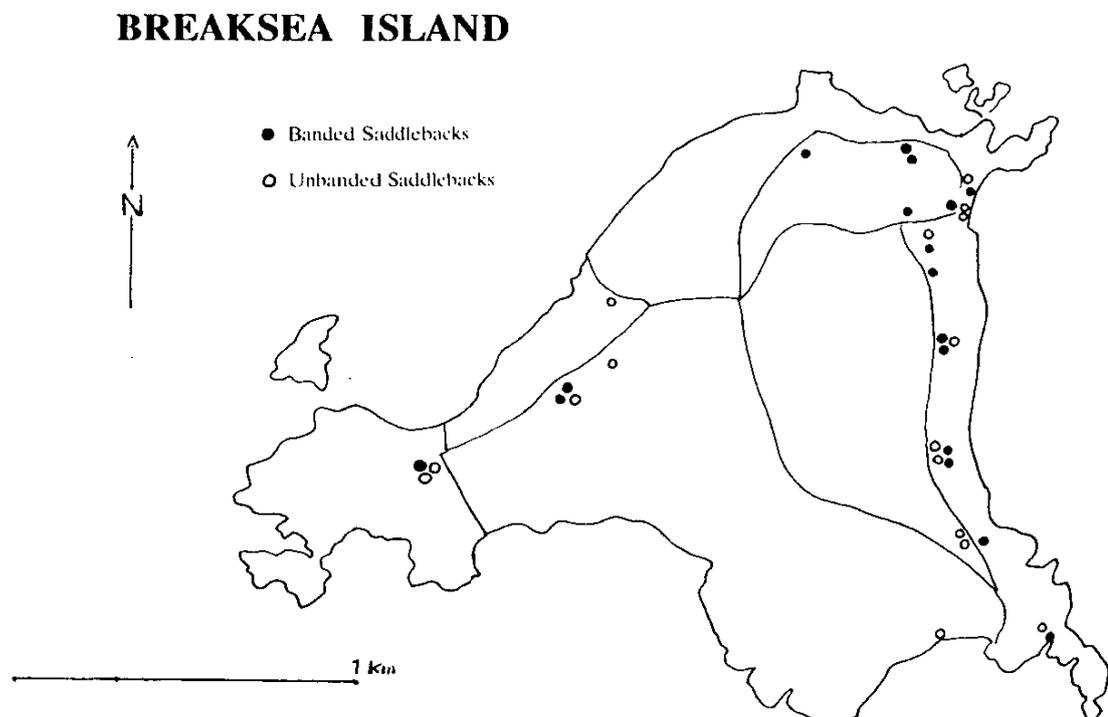


FIGURE 1

Plumage is not always a reliable indicator of age. When birds were captured on Kundy Island it was noticed that fledgling Saddlebacks ('jackbirds') were often similar in appearance to yearling birds. The two groups were distinguished on Breaksea by whether they were banded or not. Any yearling bird on Breaksea was a released bird and therefore banded, and any fledgling bird had hatched on the island and was thus unbanded. There were fledglings which might have been taken to be yearlings except for the fact they were unbanded.

As with all conservation programmes, a large number of people have contributed in important ways. Access to the Titi (Muttonbird) islands on which South Island Saddlebacks are found was granted by the Rakiura Titi Committee. Breaksea Island was made rat-free through the efforts of people from the Department of Conservation, DSIR Ecology Division (now Landcare/Maanaki Whenua), Operation Raleigh and other volunteers. The transfer and monitoring of Saddlebacks were accomplished by DOC staff, representatives of the Rakiura Titi Committee, and volunteers.

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First Spotless Crake's nest for the South Island

Spotless Crakes (*Porzana tabuensis*) are seldom reported from the South Island. A glance at the *Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand* (Bull *et al.* 1985) reveals how few have been seen. Just 14 squares had Spotless Crakes, these being in the Marlborough region, North-west Nelson, some wetlands and lakes along the Southern Alps, Lakes Waihola and Waipori in Otago, and near the coast of Southland. Classified Summarised Notes since the Atlas was published have just two additional entries, but in previously known localities. In recent years Department of Conservation staff (pers. comm.) have occasionally come across them in their work. None, however, has been known from North Canterbury, nor are there historical records. There are no skins from that area in the Canterbury Museum (Amanda Freeman, pers. comm.). Even Stead (1927), writing about rails, mentions Pukeko, Weka, Marsh Crake and Banded Rail but not Spotless Crake.

On 24 October, after a report that Spotless Crakes may have been seen at St Anne's Lagoon (near Cheviot) some years earlier, I joined Andrew Crossland, who regularly surveys waterfowl there, and made a systematic survey, using tape recordings, of all likely crake habitat around the margins of the lagoon. There was only one response, the calls being clearly identified as those of a Spotless Crake, and a brief view of the bird confirmed it. Being spring it seemed a good opportunity to search for nests and, although the water was deep, I checked the immediate area and discovered two unoccupied nests. One was a flattish platform, the other a more tightly woven and more carefully concealed nest, which in my experience would be the one more likely to be laid in.