



Farewell Spit Nature Reserve

Nelson/Marlborough



Farewell Spit is New Zealand's longest sandspit, a 25-kilometre long nature reserve that lies at the very tip of the South Island. It is an internationally renowned bird sanctuary and it is particularly important for migratory shorebirds.

How was Farewell Spit formed?

This landscape has been shaped and moulded by wind and water. The spit has its origins in the short, turbulent rivers flowing from the Southern Alps to the south. In times of flood, these rivers stain the Tasman Sea with suspended sediments, which are swept northwards by the Westland Current. The heavier debris soon comes to rest, but the finest material is carried right to the tip of the South Island. Here the current meets the mixing bowl of greater Cook Strait and loses momentum, depositing its load of sand on Farewell Spit. A 1947 study estimated that at least 3.4 million cubic metres of material is added to the spit each year.

Much of the sand arriving on the outer beach is blown across the spit and 'captured' on the Golden Bay shore. Other sand blows inland but is swept back again by wind changes. In this way, the spit's great dunes, known as barchan dunes, move in an easterly direction before the dominant westerly wind, leaving crescent-shaped lakes in their wake. Indeed Farewell Spit is slowly lengthening, although its main growth is a widening of the huge sandplain on the Golden Bay shore.

The spit began building at the end of the last ice age 14,000 years ago. It is the most recent of several sandspits to occupy the area, and at least once in the past a vast sandplain connected Golden Bay all the way to the Wanganui/Manawatu area.



Human history

Early Māori once camped on Farewell Spit, perhaps awaiting favourable conditions before portaging waka across on their journeys to the West Coast. In 1846, Charles Heaphy reported waka being portaged across the base of the spit, and an early landowner found carvings from waka here in 1867, which are now located at the Nelson Provincial Museum.

Abel Tasman sailed east along the spit in 1642, describing it as a land full of sand dunes. In 1770, Captain James Cook named it Farewell Spit as he left New Zealand at the end of his first visit.

In the nineteenth century, frequent ship wrecks occurred on the spit. Between 1840 and 1887, ten ships were wrecked and numerous others stranded on the beach. These were pushed or towed off, many of them throwing cargo overboard to lighten the load.

To prevent further wrecks, a lighthouse was erected in 1870. The hardwood timber was carried along the beach on horse-drawn sledges. After 30 years, the lighthouse had to be replaced due to exposure to wind and sand, and in 1897, the 30-metre steel tower that stands today was built.

Farewell Spit has been extensively grazed since the 1850s, when James Mackay took a lease on the land. Grazing and fires caused considerable damage to the vegetation, and in 1938 the area was declared a sanctuary. In the 1970s, 258 wild cattle were removed from the areas and the spit is now free of domestic animals.

Vegetation and wildlife

Early reports of the spit's vegetation are scarce, but it seems that much of what is now bare, driving sand was once covered with low, wind-swept scrub and patches of stunted forest. There is little doubt the spit formerly supported a mosaic of flax/harakeke, scrub and light coastal forest.

Changes to the vegetation probably began in Māori times.

given the rich evidence of Māori occupation in the area. The European impact was dramatic, though, as fires swept across the spit and stock were moved in. These effects are now being mitigated and as a result, vegetation has recovered rapidly. Shrub species are now establishing, which will eventually assist in the regeneration of forest.

The birds of Farewell Spit are its main claim to fame and the reason for its creation as a nature reserve. Over 90 bird species have been recorded, ranging all the way from kea and weka to spoonbills and sparrows. The spit provides a variety of habitats from saltmarsh, open mudflat, freshwater and brackish lakes, ocean sand beach, and vegetated and bare sand dunes.

Farewell Spit is most well-known for its wading birds. Many migratory birds settle here during our summer, departing in autumn for the thawing northern tundra of Alaska and Siberia. A colony of Australasian gannets has also settled on the spit, now representing about 4% of the total New Zealand gannet population.

As the spit extends out into the open ocean, it acts as a trap and collects a range of marine life on its shores. Sunfish, oarfish and giant squid have all been recorded, along with single strandings of various dolphins, toothed, beaked and baleen whales. Pilot whales have stranded on mass several times on the spit.

Visiting Farewell Spit

Public access to Farewell Spit is strictly controlled to protect wildlife. Walking access is allowed for four kilometres along the ocean beach and 2.5 kilometres along the inner beach. Further excursions are available through licensed concessionaires.

When visiting the spit, please observe the following:

- Do not light fires or smoke.
- Vehicles, bikes dogs and other pets are not allowed past the carpark.
- Camping and firearms are both prohibited.
- Take your rubbish away with you.
- Keep at least 20 metres away from seals.

Further information

For more information on Farewell Spit, contact the Golden Bay Department of Conservation Area Office (phone 03 525 8026, goldenbayao@doc.govt.nz) or visit www.doc.govt.nz.

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