

Farewell Spit and Puponga Farm Park

NELSON/MARLBOROUGH



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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Wharariki Beach. Photo: Markus Baumann

Introduction

Welcome to Farewell Spit (Onetahua) and Puponga Farm Park, at the northwest tip of the South Island. Farewell Spit currently comprises 25 km of stable land with a further 5 km of sand spit.

Farewell Spit is a Ramsar Site, one of 1651 wetland sites included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. A Ramsar Site refers to The Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

The Spit is also a Flyway Reserve Network Site, one of a chain of important wetlands around the world where migratory shorebirds visit to rest and feed on their long-distance journeys.

Both these international designations reflect the importance of this wetland and sanctuary for migrating birds and afford it the highest possible protection for a New Zealand natural area.

Puponga Farm Park is one of a number of farm parks created throughout New Zealand and managed by the Department of Conservation. It provides a buffer zone to the Farewell Spit reserve and offers many recreation opportunities.



Landscape

This is a landscape shaped by wind and water, constantly being built up and worn down.

Farewell Spit is the longest sand spit in New Zealand. A unique landform, its origins are in the short, turbulent rivers flowing from the Southern Alps well 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 sediments soon sink, but the finest material is carried north 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 3,400,000 cubic metres of material are added each year.

Much of the sand arriving on the outer beach is blown across the Spit and ‘captured’ on the shore of Golden Bay. 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. Indeed, Farewell Spit is slowly lengthening, although its main growth is a widening of the huge sand plain 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 sand spits to occupy the area. At least once in the past, a vast sand plain connected Golden Bay to the Whanganui/Manawatu area in the North Island.

At Wharariki, the coastline of cliffs, caves, arches, islands and stacks is among the most dramatic in the country. Behind the beaches, parallel dune systems of at least four separate ages have disrupted the drainage from low hills to the south, creating a series of lakes and swamps. These reveal all the stages in their evolution, from initial damming by wandering dunes, to eventual demise when they dry up entirely or dwindle into swamps.

At Puponga, the landscape ranges from the stark bluffs of the Old Man Range through hills of mudstone and limestone to the ancient shorelines crossing Triangle Flat. West from Fossil Point a wonderful line of banded cliffs soars above the sea.

On a smaller scale, there are many landscape features. Near Cape Farewell, fault lines cut through the coastal cliffs in vertical-walled slots, and puzzling streams flow inland instead of to the coast.

At Puponga there are remnants of limestone landscapes with dry valleys, sinkholes, caves and sharply sculptured outcrops. At Puponga Point, rock types spanning most of the last 65 million years are displayed in orderly sequence.



Farewell Spit, Old Man Range. Photo: Markus Baumann



Wildlife

The birds of Farewell Spit are its main claim to fame, the reason for its creation as a nature reserve, and its most fascinating residents. The Spit provides a variety of habitats for birds: salt marshes, open mudflats, freshwater and brackish lakes, ocean sand beaches, and sand dunes both vegetated and bare. Over 90 species have been recorded on the Spit, ranging from kea through spoonbills to sparrows, but the most important are the migratory birds, the waders.

Waders

Each northern hemisphere autumn, hundreds of thousands of waders leave the tundra of Siberia and Alaska, where they have spent the summer nesting and feeding. After flying over 12,000 km, they disperse throughout New Zealand, a large proportion arriving at Farewell Spit. Best known are the bar-tailed godwit and the red knot, which reach their highest numbers in late summer. Counts of red knot have dropped significantly during the last 10 years (to c. 7000 birds) although their numbers have increased at other sites in New Zealand. A more recent halving of the number of godwits (to c. 9000 birds) is causing concern. There are many other bird species, including the Mongolian dotterel, wrybill, long-billed curlew, little whimbrel, greytailed tattler and ruddy turnstone.

Once on the Spit, the birds frequent the intertidal zone in search of molluscs, small crustaceans, marine worms and the like. The birds are utterly controlled by the rhythm of the tides: day or night the pattern is the same—as the falling tide exposes

the sand flats, flocks of birds arrive to feed. When the tide turns, they retreat; as the sand flats vanish, the flocks move back to roosting areas in open sand or low vegetation to await the ebb.

As summer turns to autumn the flocks prepare to return to their breeding grounds. They gather in big clouds, become more excitable and indulge in short flights here and there. Eventually they leave, streaming north in one of the most amazing mass migrations known, bound for the tundra, which is just emerging from its winter snow. They leave behind a few of their number as an over-wintering flock.

Other birds



Black swan
Photo: Steve Wood

More than ninety species of birds is a lot: it includes inquisitive weka, hawks, the occasional skua, and many introduced birds, such as finches, thrushes, skylarks, and yellow-hammers. Probably the most impressive looking are the black swans with their white-tipped wings.

There are important breeding colonies of Caspian terns beyond the lighthouse.

Australasian gannets first bred at the Spit in 1983 and the colony increased rapidly from 75 nests to 3060 nests in 2001. The survey in 2006 recorded about 3300 pairs. This colony now represents about 4 percent of the New Zealand breeding population of Australasian gannets. During the first eight years, the number of discrete colonies also increased—from only two in 1983/84 to six in 1990/1991. These are all situated on elevated dune systems, integrated in a long shell bank. The lower nests are prone to regular flooding during spring tides.

This gannet colony is unusual because the gannets are breeding at sea level, unlike most other gannet colonies, which



Ruddy turnstones. Photo: Steve Wood



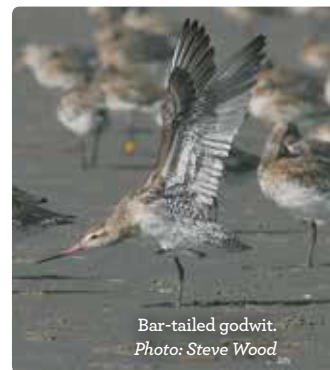
Gannets. Photo: Steve Wood

are on high, stable rock formations, well above sea level. Also, Farewell Spit is a highly dynamic region where wind and sea action are constantly modifying the shape of the shell banks on which the gannets breed.

Numerous bird species, including waders, sea birds, water fowl and forest birds can be seen at Puponga Farm Park too. The track to Wharariki Beach and the beach itself are good places to look. On the Archway Islands just offshore, fluttering shearwater, little blue penguin and white-fronted tern breed. The penguin also breeds at Fossil Point and can be seen travelling between burrow and sea at dawn and dusk. New Zealand scaup and paradise shelduck are found in high numbers on the Farm Park lakes.

Another good place to see birds is Puponga estuary. White herons and royal spoonbills frequent this area in winter and can often be seen from the road near the inlet mouth. The mouth itself is quite spectacular. Being the only inlet/outlet for the estuary, a strong current often develops under the bridge. At more peaceful times shoals of small fish—food for the estuary birds—can be seen making their way into the inlet against the current.

All birds are protected on the Spit, a far cry from the day when a local resident, writing to the Department of Lands and Survey in Nelson, said “*you may realise how numerous the red bills (oystercatchers) and godwits used to be when a man could kill 23 at one shot, to say nothing of the wounded.*”



Bar-tailed godwit.
Photo: Steve Wood

Marine mammals

A sad note is sounded by the occasional mass stranding of whales on Farewell Spit, notably pilot whales, but also sperm, minke and fin whales. Dolphins have also stranded here.

In 1991, 325 whales came ashore, the biggest mass stranding to date. Stranding normally occurs during late spring and summer.

Seals, usually found on rocky shores, come ashore on the ocean beach and at Wharariki, where the Archway Islands are a popular breeding place.

Vegetation

Not much is written about the natural vegetation of Farewell Spit in the early days. In 1827, Dumont D'Urville described the Spit as *"little rounded sandhills and a few sparse clumps of bushes"*. However, from various reports it would seem that much of what is now bare, driving sand, was covered with low, windswept scrub and patches of stunted forest. There is little doubt that the Spit formerly supported a mosaic of harakeke (flax), scrub and light coastal forest—akeake, ngaio, māhoe, kaikōmako—with perhaps some pockets of karaka and kohekohe and a few tōtara, hīnau or northern rātā.

Changes to the vegetation probably began in Māori times, given the rich evidence of Māori occupation in the area. The European influence was immediate and drastic; fires swept the Spit and stock began their destructive work. Once stock were removed in 1975, the vegetation recovered rapidly and, during the following 10 years, a vigorous, low vegetation developed, with both exotic and native species prominent. Lupins, pasture grasses and marram were among the exotics; the natives included sand coprosma, wireweed and tauhinu.

This vegetation is now changing again: across wide areas shrub species are establishing. Along the sand plain's shoreline are ngaio and akeake, while through the swamps and stable low dunes, thousands of cabbage trees, twiggy coprosmas, kānuka, māhoe and other plants are springing up. These appear to mark an important milestone in the Spit's return to shrublands, or even forests.

In places, the vegetation of the large sand plain in the lee of the Spit shows clear zonation—a tendency for plants to congregate according to how much salt immersion they can

tolerate. At upper tidal limits, hard against the fringing dunes, a thin belt of harakeke gives way to a zone dominated by distinctive bronze-coloured, jointed rush. Further down the almost imperceptible slope, is a zone of sea rush. Next begins the salt marsh proper, with a low turf of glasswort, sea primrose (our only native primrose) and the coast plantain.

Below the salt marsh, out to the low-tide limit of 8 km from the dunes, is a huge area of eelgrass. Living in this intertidal area is an incalculable number of animals: molluscs, marine worms, crabs and echinoderms, together with myriad smaller beings. This abundant food source supports the Spit's huge population of wading birds.

The vegetation at Puponga Farm Park contains some unusual communities and rare plants. Puponga Point supports the locally rare kohekohe, a close relative of the tropical mahogany tree. It has large leaves, smooth, grey bark and drooping stalks of greenish-white flowers, which sprout from the trunk and branches in winter. Also uncommon and found in this area are whau and the large-leaved milk tree. Whau is the lightest of our native woods and was used by Māori for net floats.

Coastal shrub-rush lands and moorlands are best developed on the Old Man Range. The most exposed ridges are quite barren, with plants clinging to cracks and crannies. In moist valleys or poorly drained places, the vegetation is stunted.

Of the 39 species recorded, at least a third are normally sub-alpine or alpine. Here, however, they out-compete less hardy plants to make a living in the acid and infertile soil. The Old Man Range is managed as a reserve within the Farm Park and is protected against fertiliser spread, which would have an unnatural influence on the existing vegetation.

Further west, kānuka forest covers much of the Wharariki dunes, in association with rātā, rimu, mataī, tānekaha and kaikōmako. Māori used the very hard wood of kaikōmako with the softer māhoe to make fire.



Glasswort. Photo: J L Kendrick



This map is a guide only. For more information consult Topo50 map BM24 Cape Farewell.

1 View Point (page 13)

2

[Pillar Point Lighthouse Track via Old Man Range \(page 13\)](#)

3 Cape Farewell via Hill Top Track (page 13)

4 Wharariki Beach via Hill Top Track (page 14)

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8 Pillar Point Lighthouse (page 14)

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10 Wharariki Beach (Archway Islands), (page 15)

11 Puoponga Farm Park Track/Green Hills Route (page 15)

12 Puoponga Coal Mine

Mountain bike track grades

Easy/Grade 2

Mostly flat with some gentle climbs on smooth track with easily avoidable obstacles such as rocks and potholes.

Intermediate/Grade 3

Steep slopes and/or avoidable obstacles possibly on narrow track and/or with poor traction. There may be exposure at the track's outside edge.



Track categories

Walking track - - -

- Easy-to-moderate walking from a few minutes to a day.
- Track is mostly well formed, some sections may be steep, rough or muddy.
- Suitable for people with low-to-moderate fitness and abilities.
- Clearly signposted. Stream and river crossings are bridged.
- Walking shoes or light tramping/hiking boots required.

Tramping track - - -

- Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- Track is mostly unformed with steep, rough or muddy sections.
- Suitable for people with good fitness. Moderate to high-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills required.
- Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- Tramping/hiking boots required.

Route

- Unmarked beach walking route.
- Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- Track unformed and natural, rough, muddy or very steep.
- Suitable for people with above average fitness. High-level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills required.
- Complete self-sufficiency required.
- Track has markers, poles or rock cairns. Expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- Sturdy tramping/hiking boots required.

History

There is much evidence of Māori occupation in the Puponga area. Evidence associated with the hunting of moa might be over 700 years old, while several of the many shell middens clustered along the eastward fringe of Triangle valley (from the Spit entrance gate parallel to the main shelterbelt of pine trees) have recently been dated to the 16th century.

Middens have been found here—piles of rubbish, which reveal the lifestyle of the early people. They contain predominantly shells (tuatua, cockle and mudsnail), with some fish and bird bones, hāngi stones used to heat earth ovens, and waste flakes of stone (argillite and quartzite) from tool making. More middens have been found along the margins of Triangle Flat and at Whau Creek, where the small, natural terrace provided an ideal living site with easy access to the open sea for fishing.

Cliff-bound Puponga Point was the site of a pā and the defensive ditches and house terraces can still be seen. In times of threat, the pā offered a place of refuge to people harvesting the abundant local food resources.

Even on windswept Farewell Spit, isolated Māori campsites can still be found, indicators, perhaps, of people waiting for favourable conditions before portaging their waka (canoes) across to the West Coast. In 1846, Charles Heaphy reported waka being portaged across the base of the Spit and in 1867, Edmund Davidson, an early Triangle valley landowner, found carvings from waka here. These are now at the Nelson Provincial Museum.

Archaeological sites such as these are protected under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014.

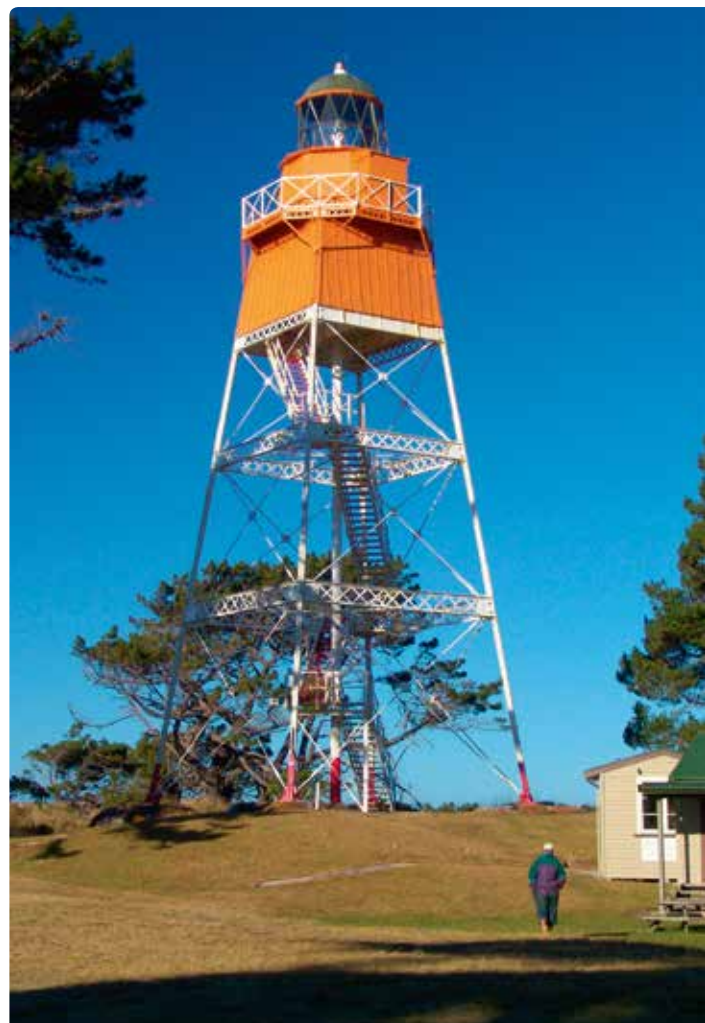
Please respect their importance to understanding our past and leave them undisturbed.

Abel Tasman sailed east along the Spit in December 1642, describing it as *duijnich landt en zandduijnen*: duney land and sand dunes. In 1770 James Cook named it Farewell Spit as he left New Zealand at the end of his first visit.

The need for a lighthouse arose because of frequent wrecks on the Spit in early European days. Between 1840 and 1887, 10 ships were wrecked and numerous others stranded on the beach. These were pushed or towed off, many of them throwing cargo overboard to lighten their load.

The original lighthouse was erected in 1870. The hardwood timber was carried along the beach on horse-drawn sledges. After nearly 30 years of exposure to wind and sand, this lighthouse had to be replaced. The present 30 m steel tower is the only one in the country built on the open lattice-work principle. It was completed in 1897.

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. Realising this, the Department of Lands and Survey proposed a sanctuary for the area in 1933, which was formalised in 1938. In the years 1972-75, 258 very wild cattle were removed and the Spit is now free of them.



Farewell Spit Lighthouse. Photo: Markus Baumann



Puponga Farm Park. Photo: Markus Baumann

Farming at Puponga

The Puponga area has been farmed since the late 1800s. Triangle Flat was once a dairy farm supplying milk to far-off Brightwater, near Nelson, until this became uneconomic.

The 1021-hectare Farm Park is made up of three former farms, now known as the Puponga, Wharariki and Cape Farewell blocks, purchased in 1973, 1981 and 1987 respectively.

The total grassed area of 478 hectares is given over to raising Romney sheep and Angus cattle, which are well suited to the climate and pastures of Puponga. The proportion of sheep to cattle varies as the farm manager assesses the farming markets and alters herds to suit. Future farm development will be limited in order to protect the special features and enhance public enjoyment of the area.

The farming programme revolves around the seasons.

Spring: Lambing and calving occur in early spring. Once these are completed, the lambs' tails are docked and the hoggets and dry ewes are shorn.

Summer: After weaning in mid-November, drafts of lambs are progressively sent to the freezing works, about 800 ewe lambs being kept for replacements. Several hectares of surplus grass are mowed to produce bales of hay. The main shearing of ewes is completed before Christmas. Summer droughts can occur, requiring hay to be fed out. Dipping, to control parasites, occurs in mid-January prior to sorting the ewe flock for mating, which takes place in early March.

Autumn: Cows are pregnancy-tested and some calves and all dry cows are sold. Weed spraying is carried out during settled weather.

Winter: The climate is mild and usually only a small amount of hay is required for cattle. In June the ewes are shorn for a second time.

What to do at Puponga Farm Park

Puponga is managed as a farm, with special care taken to protect its rare native plant life and areas of historic importance. Communities of native vegetation are fenced off, archaeological sites have special grazing regimes, lake levels are not altered, and swamps are not drained.

Signposted tracks lead visitors to spectacular scenic viewpoints and places of interest. Stiles have been built so there is no need to open gates or climb fences.

1 View Point, 10 min (250 m) one way

From the entrance of the visitor centre car park, a short climb over farmland takes you to a viewpoint over the farm park and surrounding area.

Puponga Hill Top Track

The track starts at the visitor centre and finishes at Wharariki Beach and is described below in three sections.


2 Pillar Point Lighthouse Track via Old Man Range, 1-2 h (4 km) one way

The track starts opposite the visitor centre car park and climbs steadily through open farmland and stunted bush along the Old Man Range to Pillar Point Lighthouse, with panoramic views all the way. Behind the light are the ruins of one of New Zealand's first radar stations, built during World War Two. For a round trip, continue down a 4WD track to Wharariki Road (30 min) and return to the car park via Wharariki Road (1 h).

3 Cape Farewell via Hill Top Track 2-3 h (6 km) one way

From Pillar Point continue along Hill Top Track over undulating open farmland to Cape Farewell. The track is exposed to strong wind gusts and has steep drop offs. Stay well clear of the cliff edge and children should be well supervised.

The rewards for walking this track are panoramic views of the rugged coastline. It is a further 5 minutes walk from the viewing platform to Cape Farewell car park.

4  **Wharariki Beach via Hill Top Track**
3–5 h (8 km) one way

From Cape Farewell the track continues over open undulating farmland, steep drop offs and panoramic views to Wharariki Beach. It is a further 20 minute walk to Wharariki car park and roadend.

Walks from Triangle Flat car park

5  **Fossil Point, 30 min (2 km) one way**

From the car park, walk across Triangle Flat to Ocean Beach through open farm land and coastal bush; turn left along the beach to Fossil Point. Fossilised shells and worm casts can be found in blocks of mudstone fallen from the cliffs. Seals can often be seen here playing in the water. For a longer trip, continue along Ocean Beach and then take the Spit Track back to the car park.

6  **Spit Track Circuit, 1 h 30 min (6 km)**

The entrance to the Inner Beach from the car park is through an entrance in the fence (kissing gate); walk along the beach until you reach the 4WD Spit Track. Cross over the spit to Ocean Beach and return via Triangle Flat.

7  **Spit Track Circuit via Farewell Spit, 3–4 h (12 km)**

Walk along Inner Beach 4 kilometres to a marked track crossing the spit to Ocean Beach. Return back down Ocean Beach to the 4WD Spit Track or continue down the beach to Triangle Flat Track for a slightly longer return trip.

Walks from Wharariki Road

8   **Pillar Point Lighthouse**
45 min (1.5 km) one way




From a small car park off Wharariki Road the walk climbs steadily up a 4WD track to the lighthouse.

9  **Cape Farewell, 5 min (200 m) one way**



Follow the signposted road from Wharariki Road to the Cape Farewell road end car park. A short walk takes you to a lookout over Cape Farewell.



Cape Farewell. Photo: Markus Baumann

10    **Wharariki Beach (Archway Islands)**
20 min (1 km) one way

This is the most spectacular coastline in the region, with its caverns, islands, sand dunes and long stretch of beach. Access is at the end of Wharariki Road. From the car park to the beach takes 20 minutes over farm paddocks and through a section of coastal forest. At low tide you can walk along Wharariki Beach returning to the car park via Green Hills Track. No swimming – there are strong currents and rips in this area. Keep at least 20 metres away from seals.

11   **Puoponga Farm Park Track/Green Hills Route, 3 h (10 km) return**

From the Wharariki car park, follow a vehicle track west to Green Hills Stream and beyond. Superb farmland, lakes, cliffs and wind-carved moorlands are features of this area. Mountain biking is allowed on this track.








What to do at Farewell Spit

Public entry to Farewell Spit is strictly controlled in order to protect the wildlife in this unique area. East of the vehicle track, walking access is allowed along the Inner Beach from the car park gate, and 4 km from the Spit Track on Ocean Beach. The boundaries of this area are well signposted.

Exceptions to this rule are tourist trips to the lighthouse, and scientific groups. By having free foot access to the base of the Spit, visitors are able to enjoy its sights, sounds, and feeling without disturbing the wildlife or vegetation.









Please remember

General

-  No dogs or other pets are allowed.
-  Firearms are prohibited.
-  Camping is not permitted on both the Spit reserve and the Farm Park. This includes staying overnight in road end car parks in the Farm Park and Spit reserve.
-  Take your rubbish away with you when you leave.
-  Fires are not permitted.
-  Care is required in windy conditions on the Puponga Hilltop Walk.
-  Keep at least 20 metres away from seals.




At Puponga Farm Park

Seemingly harmless acts, such as leaving a gate open or taking a pet for a walk, can have drastic consequences for farm management. In opening the farm to visitors, the Department of Conservation asks you to obey the following rules:

-  Cars and motorcycles must stay on formed roads and car park areas.
-  Leave gates as you find them; don't be tempted to close an open gate—it's open for a purpose!
-  Hay and bull paddocks and the airstrip (during operations) are off limits to visitors.
-  Livestock, birds and plants are not to be disturbed or interfered with.
-  Fires are not permitted.
-  Keep at least 20 metres away from seals.
-  No swimming at Wharariki Beach (Archway Islands), Fossil Point and Ocean Beach as there are VERY strong currents and rips in this area.
-  At times the farm may be closed to the public. This is usually during lambing or calving, or when the fire risk is extreme. During such times, visitors are asked to keep to roads and car parks.

At Farewell Spit

To preserve the integrity of this area we ask you to observe the following:

-  Please do not light fires or smoke.
-  Foot access only—no vehicles or bikes are permitted past the car park.
-  Fishing is not permitted in the nature reserve between high and low tide east of Puponga Point (Abel Head)

- Plan ahead and prepare
- Travel and camp on durable ground
- Dispose of waste properly
- Leave what you find
- Minimise the effects of fire
- Respect wildlife and farm animals
- Be considerate of others



Commercial operators

The following businesses hold Department of Conservation concessions, which allow them to operate in this area.

Guided trips

Farewell Spit Eco Tours

More than 60 years experience, four different tour options, only permit to visit the Gannet colony and inter-tidal plain. Tours depart from our office in Collingwood. Bookings essential. Ph 64 3 524 8257. Toll free in NZ 0800 808 257
inquiries@farewellspit.co.nz www.farewellspit.co.nz

Activities

Cape Farewell Horse Treks

Guided horse treks for all levels of abilities. Bookings essential in summer. Ph/Fax (03) 524 8031
fun@horsetreksnz.co.nz www.horsetreksnz.co.nz

Food and information

Farewell Spit Visitor Information Centre and Paddle Crab Café

Information on Farm Park and Farewell Spit. Bookings for Farewell Spit tours operators. Café offers light lunches and beverages. Ph +64 3 524 8454

Further information

We hope you enjoy your visit to Farewell Spit and Puponga Farm Park.

For more information, visit our website www.doc.govt.nz or contact:

Department of Conservation Takaka Office

62 Commercial Street, Takaka 7110

Phone 03 525 8026

Fax 03 525 8444

Email: takaka@doc.govt.nz

Department of Conservation Nelson Visitor Centre

Millers Acre Centre/Taha o te Awa

79 Trafalgar Street, Nelson 7010

Phone 03 546 9339

Email: nelsonvc@doc.govt.nz

Golden Bay Information Centre

Willow Street, Takaka 7110

Phone: 03 525 9136

Email: info@goldenbaynz.co.nz

DOC HOTline
0800 362 468

**Report any safety hazards
or conservation emergencies**
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111

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