



## South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

Office of the Commissioner  
Government House,  
Stanley,  
Falkland Islands.

**Press release March 2013**

### **REINDEER ERADICATION PROJECT A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD IN PROTECTING SOUTH GEORGIA'S ENVIRONMENT**

The GSGSSI is pleased to announce the completion of the first phase of the eradication of reindeer from the island of South Georgia. The first phase of the project, which ran throughout January and February 2013, saw the removal of over 1900 animals from the Busen area (one of two peninsulas on South Georgia that were inhabited by reindeer).

Norwegian whalers introduced the reindeer to two parts of the island in the early 1900s and Norwegian expertise has been instrumental in their demise. Reindeer numbers increased after whaling ceased in the mid-1960s and they have had a devastating impact on the island's vegetation, with knock-on effects on native bird species.

In January and February 2013 a group of Norwegian experts, including indigenous Sami herders and expert marksmen, joined GSGSSI staff to undertake the £500,000 first phase.

Depending on the terrain, one of two methodologies was utilized. In central areas, the team of Sami reindeer experts gathered the reindeer into a corral where they were humanely killed under veterinary supervision. In outlying areas, where the terrain meant it was not possible to herd animals, animals were shot by experienced marksmen from the Norwegian Nature Inspectorate (SNO).

Meat was recovered from approximately half of all animals that were killed, and proceeds from the sale of the meat will partially offset some of the costs of the eradication.

Small numbers of reindeer may have been missed by the operation, but are likely to be spotted from South Georgia Heritage Trust helicopters that are now dropping rat bait over the Busen area. Skilled marksmen will shoot any remaining reindeer that are spotted.

In parallel with the removal of reindeer, several scientific research projects were undertaken, including the establishment of long-term monitoring programmes of plants, birds and invertebrates to track the recovery of the island's systems after the eradication. It is encouraging that only a few weeks after the removal of the reindeer there are already good signs that the vegetation is recovering.

In addition to the work on the Busen area, the SNO marksmen made a start on the larger Barff Peninsula and shot over 1500 animals from remote locations. It is thought that over 1500 animals remain in the Barff area and this work will be completed in January and February 2014.

The eradication of reindeer is one of a number of projects (including eradication of rats, mice and non-native plants) that are designed to safeguard the native species, habitats and landscape of the unique environment of South Georgia.

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Commissioner Nigel Haywood who recently visited the island to witness the project first hand said:

“This represents a very important landmark in our efforts to safeguard the native fauna of South Georgia.”

GSGSSI CEO Martin Collins, who was on the island overseeing the project, said:

“The combination of reindeer and rat eradications will help return South Georgia to a more natural state. We expect to see a rapid recovery in vegetation, invertebrate populations and, in particular, ground nesting birds.”

Additional notes:

1. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands is one of the UK's most remote and environmentally pristine Overseas Territories. It is internationally recognised for its biological importance, including its biodiversity and breeding populations of seabirds and marine mammals and was regularly featured in the recent BBC series *Frozen Planet*.
2. The first introduction of reindeer to South Georgia was 10 animals to Ocean Harbour on the Barff Peninsula in 1911, with further introductions in 1912 and 1925 to the Busen area (close to the whaling stations at Stromness, Leith and Husvik). During the whaling era numbers of reindeer were controlled by regular shooting for food and recreation. Following the end of land-based whaling the numbers increased rapidly and, prior to the start of the eradication there were estimated to be between 4000 and 5000 animals on the island.
3. Reindeer are voracious grazers on tussac grass, flowering plants such as prickly burr (*Acaena magellanica*) and lichens. Density of reindeer on the two peninsulas on South Georgia was considerably higher than in their native Scandinavia and the reindeer were having a major impact on the vegetation. Tussac is an important habitat for many breeding birds and the loss of large areas of tussac has had a major impact on seabird populations.
4. The reindeer were restricted to two principal areas by large glaciers, but rapid glacial retreat on the island meant that urgent action was needed to ensure they did not spread further afield.
5. The South Georgia Heritage Trust are currently undertaking the second phase of a major project to eradicate rodents from the island.

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Fencing in the corral area. [Photograph - Alastair Wilson]



Reindeer herding with the derelict Husvik whaling station in the background. [Photograph – Samantha Crimmin]

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Reindeer with king penguins in the background [Photograph - Alastair Wilson]

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Male reindeer (*Rangifer tarrandus*) on South Georgia [Photo: Martin Collins]

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Male reindeer (*Rangifer tarrandus*) on South Georgia [Photo: Martin Collins]