

Key Site 12: Seal Islands, Alaska

Location: 56°40'28"N, 159°22'28"W

Size: 47 km²

Description: Seal Islands is composed of a series of sparsely vegetated barrier islands that form a shallow lagoon on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula, about 50 km (Appendix 1) west of the village of Port Heiden. Several partially vegetated islands occur within the lagoon. At low tide, most of the Seal Islands lagoon is exposed sand/mud, with a few deeper channels. The upland area surrounding the lagoon is mostly wet sedge meadows with numerous ponds and lakes.

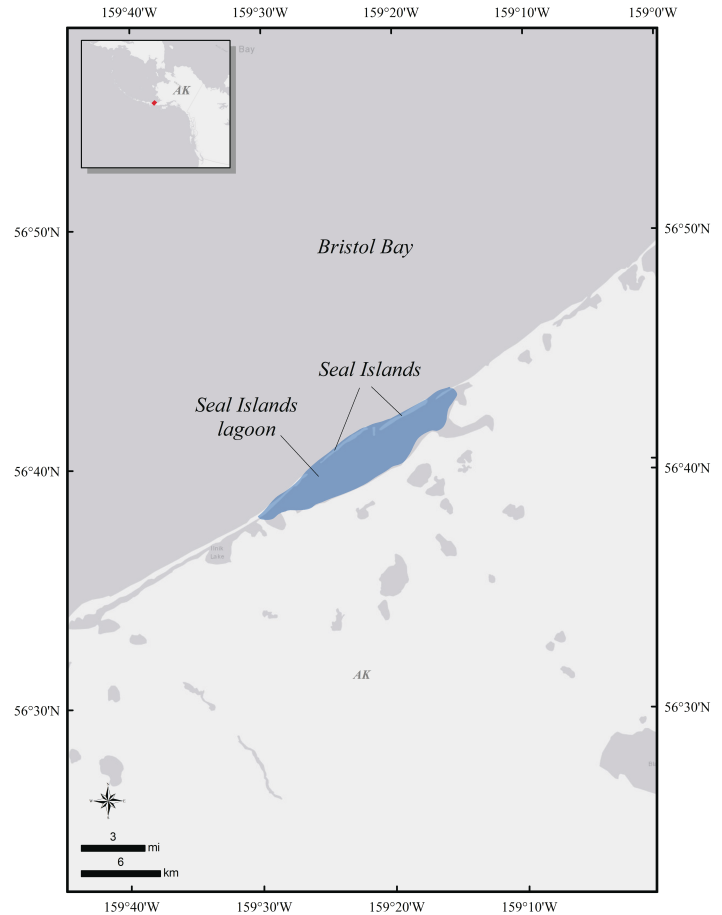
Precision and Correction of Abundance

Estimates Presented: Abundance estimates are based on numbers of sea ducks observed during a fall survey of molting Steller's Eiders (*Polysticta stelleri*). During that survey, all birds are photographed and manually counted using imaging software. Thus, counts are considered a fairly accurate census and are not adjusted for incomplete detection.

Biological Value: This site is an important molting and staging area for Steller's Eiders that breed in Russia and northern Alaska. They are present in this area from mid-August through October. Between 4000 and 20,000 molting Steller's Eiders have been observed in the lagoon in August and September 2012–2016 (Williams et al. 2016; Appendix 2). Seal Islands is among the few known molting sites on the Alaska Peninsula, and numbers of Steller's Eiders using the area seem to be increasing in recent years (Williams et al. 2016).

In addition to Steller's Eiders, several hundred Pacific Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima v-nigra*) and smaller numbers of Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) also inhabit this area during late summer and fall.

Sensitivities: The barrier islands that form a protective shield from the adjacent Bering Sea are subject to erosion, which may increase due to sea level rise, reduced ice coverage in the southern Bering Sea, and increased frequency of storm tides as a result of climate change.



Alaska-breeding Steller's Eiders are listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (USFWS 1997), and this area is designated as critical habitat for the species (USFWS 2001).

Potential conflicts: Seal Islands is remote and there is little human use of the area, with the exception of fishing in the waters outside the lagoon on the Bering Sea side. Birds that molt in this area would be particularly vulnerable to oil spills because they cannot fly and leave the area. The area of the Outer Continental Shelf currently designated by BOEM as the North Aleutian Basin Planning Area, including Bristol Bay, was withdrawn from federal offshore oil and gas leasing and development in 2014 for an indefinite period of time due to the area's importance to Alaska Native subsistence users, fish and wildlife species, and commercial and recreational fisheries. The withdrawn area includes the Seal Islands.

Status: Seal Islands is a designated Important Bird Area of Global importance (National Audubon

Society 2017) because of its importance to waterfowl and shorebirds. This key site falls within the boundary of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge but is under the jurisdiction of the State of Alaska, as are the adjacent uplands and subtidal lands. There are no private inholdings within this area.

Literature Cited

National Audubon Society. 2017. Important Bird Areas: Seal Islands, Alaska. <http://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/seal-islands>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1997. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants: Threatened

Status for the Alaska Breeding Population of the Steller's Eider. Final Rule. Federal Register 62:31748.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2001. Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants: Final determination of critical habitat for the Alaska-breeding population of the Steller's Eider. Federal Register 66:8850.

Williams, A. R., T. D. Bowman, and B. S. Shults. 2016. Molting Pacific Steller's Eider surveys in southwest Alaska, 2016. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska.



Steller's Eiders. Photo: Tim Bowman.