

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 237

Cook Island, New South Wales

Location: 28°12'S, 153°35'E; one kilometre off Fingal Head and 4 km south-east of Tweed Heads, New South Wales.

Status: Nature Reserve controlled by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW). Entry permit required.

Description: 550 m by 300 m; 4.7 ha; Basically there are three levels; a rock platform surrounds the island at sea level and there are two distinct elevated flats or steps above, each separated by a steep rocky slope or cliffs.

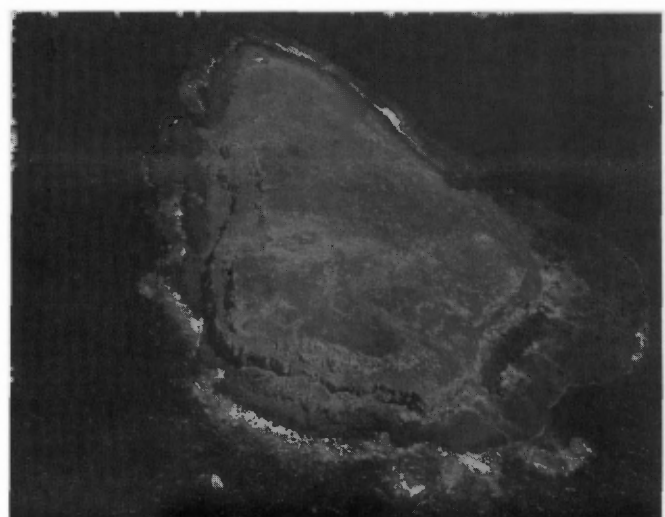
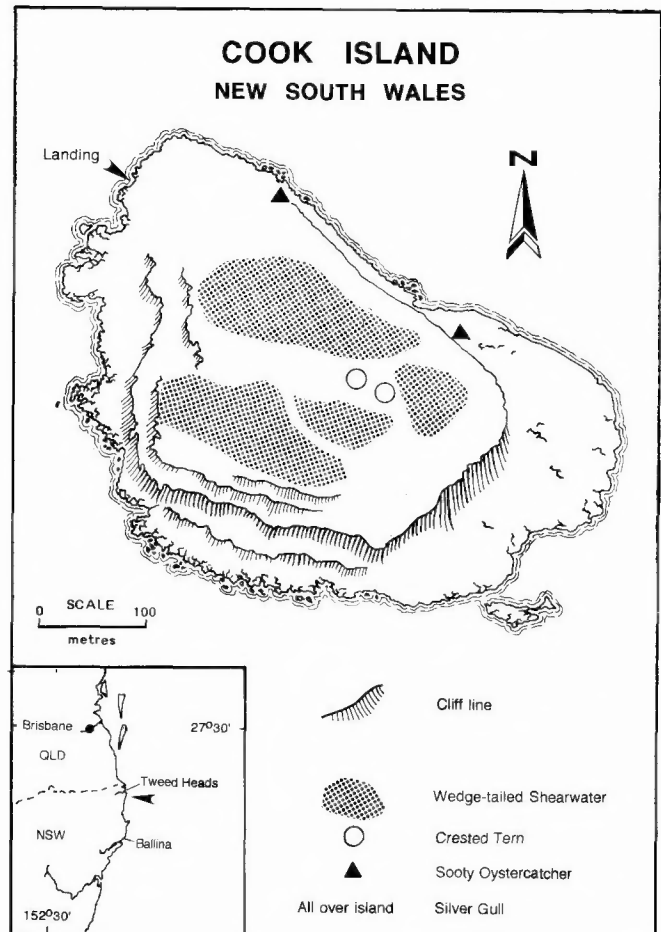
Wandering Jew *Commelina cyanea*, was reported by Lane² (in error as *Tradescantia albiflora*) and Floyd¹ over much of the island. In 1992 dense mats covered the north and north-eastern parts of the lower levels and slopes. It was generally absent from the elevated flats where the soils were deepest. These areas were considerably disturbed and characterized by numerous shearwater burrows. Some grasses, principally crows foot grass *Eleusine indica*, remained between the burrows.

Scattered stands of wind-pruned Tuckeroo *Cupaniopsis anacardioides*, dominate the south-eastern parts of the island. Many of these small trees (to 2.5 m) appeared to be dying, possibly as a result of the 1990-1991 droughts, or from being undermined by numerous shearwater burrows. Floyd¹ made reference to the prevailing drought condition and that there were many dead plants, presumably herbaceous species. Photographs taken by Floyd indicate that the Tuckeroos were generally in good health and fruiting. This would seem to suggest that the recent drought was very severe or that the shearwater burrows had affected the trees. Scattered mats of *Marsdenia rostrata*, *Malaisia scandens* and *Canavallia rosea* occur on the rocky slopes and boulder fields (see also Floyd¹).

Landing: On to rocks at the north-western side.

Ornithological History: A. J. North⁴ recorded that eggs of the Crested Tern were taken on Cook Island in September 1890. No other visits by ornithologists are recorded until 8 December, 1963, when H. Battam, S. G. Lane and J. Liddy³ spent four hours on the island and found Wedge-tailed Shearwaters breeding but no signs of nesting by terns. At that time Lane (pers. comm.) noted that there were only a few silver gulls flying overhead and none breeding on the island.

On 23 July, 1967, F. K. Hersey found no shearwaters but saw a Reef Heron and flushed a Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* from a small swampy area on the lower part of the island. On 5 November, 1992,



• Cook Island from south-east.

Photo: S. G. Lane

D. Charley, R. Moffatt and L. Tarvey visited the island for 2.5 hours.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Puffinus pacificus Wedge-tailed Shearwater — The burrows of the birds were spread extensively over much of the island. Some 1 500 burrows were estimated. The greatest densities occurred on the elevated flats where deeper soils have developed. A number of adult birds were located during our visit. There appears to be little change in the number of breeding shearwaters on the island when compared with Lane's estimates of 1963².

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — Three pairs were observed. Two nests were found, one at the base of the cliffs at the northern side of the island. The other was at the base of the cliffs at the north-western edge of the island. The species was not recorded on the island in 1963².

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — This species was not recorded on the island in 1963². An estimation of more than 2 500 was made during the visit. Some 23 nests containing eggs or nestlings were located. A number of empty nests and runners were also found. These nests were found in all parts of the island and were usually located among the Tuckeroo shrubs or on the vine mats. The establishment of a nesting population of Silver Gulls on the island appears to be a relatively recent occurrence.

Numerous items of household food scraps, including cooked meat bones, were found on the island and it was suspected that the gulls were foraging in the urban areas of Tweed Heads about 4 km to the north-west.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Over 200 individuals were observed on the island during the 1992 visit. They were not recorded by Lane² in 1963 but he recorded that local fishermen stated that the terns nest 'some years but not others'. During the 1992 visit two small colonies, one of eight and the other of eleven nests were located at the crest of a rocky slope mid-way along the island.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Great Cormorant
<i>Puffinus tenuirostris</i>	Short-tailed Shearwater (One found dead on the shoreline).
<i>Egretta sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Heron

Factors Affecting Status

Human visitation appears to be confined to the lower slopes and rock platforms. The fishermen's hut, noted during the 1963 visit, Lane², has been removed from the island.

The increase in the number of silver gulls may be having a detrimental impact on the Crested Tern and Sooty Oystercatcher breeding which may necessitate some future management action. Gulls were observed harassing the terns and a number of broken eggs were found within the colonies. The large number of gulls on the island probably accounts for the small number of breeding Crested Terns.

Bibliography

1. Floyd, A. (1981). Vegetation of Cook Island Nature Reserve. Report to the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, Alstonville.
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3. Liddy, J. (1964). 'A visit to Cook Island, NSW'. *Aust. Bird Bander* 2: 93.
4. North, A. J. (1914). Nests and Eggs of Birds Found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania. *Aust. Museum Special Catalogue*, Vol. IV, 1913-1914.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Robert Moffatt and Lance Tarvey for assisting in the field and Guy Holloway and Bill Lane for providing useful comments on this article.

Date compiled: 15 May, 1995.

Revised: 22 October, 1997

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