

# SEABIRD ISLANDS

## No. 44

### Masthead Island, Queensland

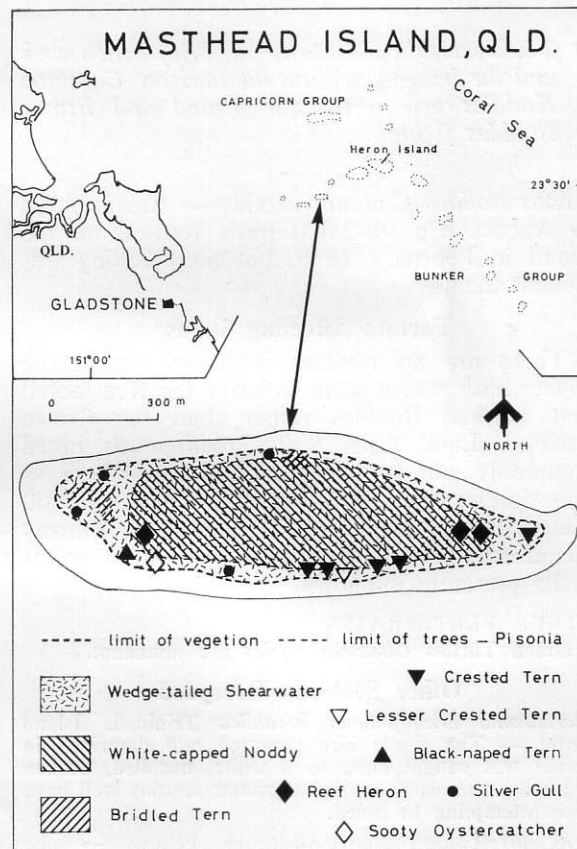
**Location:** 23°32' S., 151°44' E.; about 58 km north-east of Gladstone, Qld.

**Status:** Recreation and Scientific Reserve.

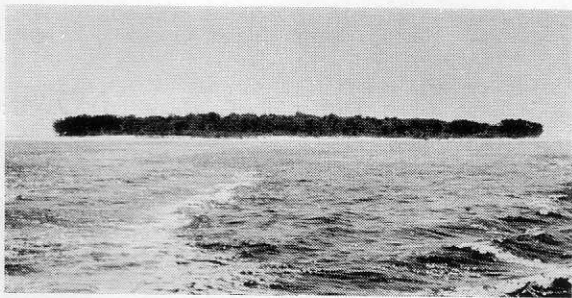
**Description:** A typical coral cay, somewhat oval in shape and about 1 400 m long by 400 m at the widest point. It is composed of coral sand with some coral beach rock along the southern shore and at the most, it is about 2 m above extreme high tide mark. Most of the island is covered with almost pure stands of *Pisonia grandis* to 15 m high and surrounding strand vegetation of *Casuarina equisetifolia*, *Tournefortia argentea*, *Scaevola taccada*, *Pandanus* sp., *Ficus opposita*, *Sophora tomentosa*, *Cordia subcordata* and *Celtis paniculata*. At a depth of about 30 cm a crumbly brown rock is found which is thought to be a humus soil named by F. R. Fosberg as of the Jemo series<sup>4</sup>. On many islands such as nearby Heron Island this soil is not found and its absence there has been attributed to the burrowing activity of the Wedge-tailed Shearwaters; yet this soil occurs on Masthead Island where these birds are very active breeders.

**Landing:** Because of the surrounding reef, access is best made up to and on high tide when a dinghy may be used to cross over the reef from an anchored vessel. However, on very high tides in calm weather a launch can, with caution, pass over the reef and beach on the sand surrounding the island.

**Ornithological History:** In 1843 Professor Jukes visited the island in HMS *Fly* and C. Hedley of The Australian Museum made some notes on the bird life during his conchological studies there in 1904<sup>8</sup>. However, the first major ornithological study was made in October 1910, by a party from the Royal Australasian Ornithologists



Union and documented by Charles Barrett, A. J. Campbell and Captain S. A. White<sup>1, 2</sup>. J. A. Edgell visited the island in December 1926<sup>6</sup> and commented on the teeming bird life. There are specimens in The Australian Museum of the Greater Frigatebird taken by Charles Hedley in 1905 and of the Lesser Frigatebird taken by A. R. McCulloch in 1912 and 1914. W. D. K.



● *Silhouette of Masthead Island — a typical coral cay.*

MacGillivray, an amateur ornithologist of Broken Hill, New South Wales, revisited the island in 1927 "to become better acquainted with the birds"<sup>12</sup>. His earlier visit in 1925 with the then Tasmanian Government Botanist, F. A. Rodway, was to study the plant life. In 1946, R. P. Cooper and others visited the island to study the bird life<sup>3</sup>, and in November-December 1972 the Queensland Naturalists' Club conducted a field trip to coincide with the nesting of the seabirds. With other members of the Club B. R. Jahnke endeavoured to obtain a numerical estimate of some species of seabirds nesting at the time<sup>9</sup>.

### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Puffinus pacificus* Wedge-tailed Shearwater — These birds are very common on the island where the sandy soil is easily utilized for nest burrows. Most authors have made special mention of the abundance of these birds, or of their burrows if visiting the island in the non-breeding season. In 1972, estimated 5 000 to 6 000 breeding pairs<sup>9</sup>.

*Egretta sacra* Reef Heron — In 1946 these birds were reported to be common and breeding freely<sup>3</sup>, but in 1972 only three unoccupied nests were found<sup>9</sup>. However in 1971-72 they were known to be breeding in large numbers on One Tree Island which is also in the Capricorn Group<sup>5</sup>.

*Haematopus fuliginosus* Sooty Oystercatcher — A pair was found nesting in the strand vegetation on the southern side of the island in December 1972<sup>9</sup>.



● *Part of the beach at low tide showing beach rock and some coral reef rubble.*

*Larus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull — These birds were found to be breeding at intervals around the island in October 1910<sup>2</sup> and again in 1946<sup>3</sup>. In November-December 1972 most of the nests were among the more open vegetation around the western half of the island<sup>9</sup>. Estimated 10 breeding pairs (1972).

*Sterna sumatrana* Black-naped Tern — A few probably nest irregularly on the island. Three breeding pairs in 1972.

*Sterna anaethetus* Bridled Tern — Regularly breeds on the outer zone. In 1972, 12 breeding pairs.

*Sterna bergii* Crested Tern — Also a regular breeding species; in 1927 W. D. K. MacGillivray<sup>12</sup> reported colonies on the eastern and western ends of the island; in 1946 R. P. Cooper<sup>3</sup> described seven colonies above the southern shore. In November-December 1972<sup>9</sup> there was one colony on the eastern end and four others along the southern shore; estimated 270 breeding pairs.

*Sterna bengalensis* Lesser Crested Tern — Probably breeds irregularly on the island. There was a small nesting colony in December 1946<sup>3</sup> but no breeding was evident in the 1972 visit. In 1946, 7 breeding pairs<sup>3</sup>.

*Anous minutus* White-capped Noddy — This is the most common and conspicuous bird on the island. During the 1910 visit, good descriptions were recorded of its nesting behaviour<sup>2</sup>. Estimated 75 000 to 85 000 breeding pairs in 1972<sup>9</sup>.

### Factors Affecting Status

The large number of White-capped Noddies may be controlled by the sticky fruit of *Pisonia grandis* as many dead and dying birds are found on the ground during the breeding season, covered in the sticky seeds. The birds appear to succumb very easily to this hinderance and rapidly become exhausted.

Silver Gulls are known to feed freely on the eggs of the Crested Terns and White-capped Noddies while no doubt cyclones cause considerable damage to breeding seabirds as they do on nearby Heron Island<sup>11</sup>.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

*Sula leucogaster* Brown Booby (derelict).  
*Fregata minor* Greater Frigatebird.  
*Fregata ariel* Lesser Frigatebird.  
*Haematopus ostralegus* Pied Oystercatcher.  
*Hydroprogne caspia* Caspian Tern.  
*Sterna dougallii* Roseate Tern.

### Banding

Nil.

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### Acknowledgement

I am indebted to the Queensland Naturalists' Club for providing the opportunity through its 1972 field trip to become more acquainted with the island and its fauna.

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Date compiled:  
 26 April 1976