SEABIRD ISLANDS No. 27

Lady Julia Percy Island, Victoria

Location: 38°25′ S., 142°00′ E.; 9 km offshore from Yambuk and 22 km west of Port Fairy, Vic.

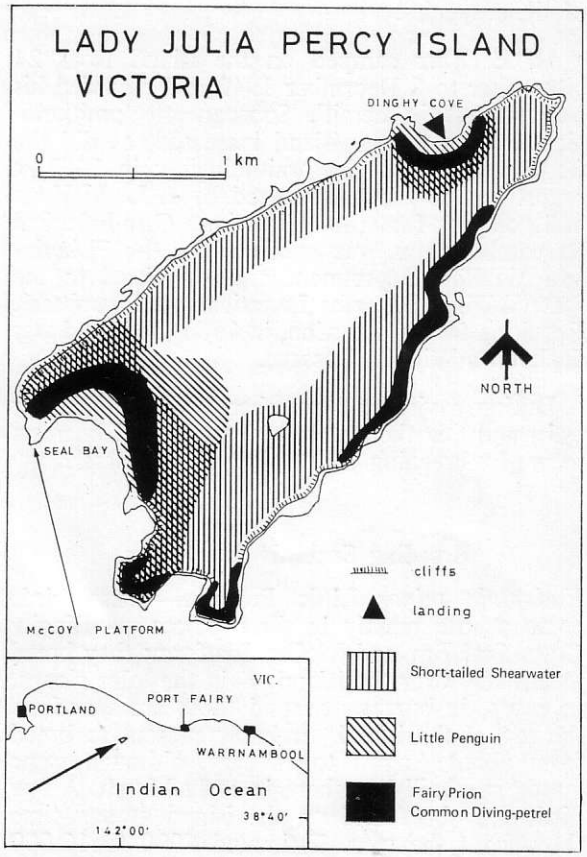
Status: State Fauna Reserve under the control of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Vic.: entry permit required.

Description: 100 ha; 2.4 km long by 1.2 km at the widest point and roughly in the shape of an arrowhead; flat topped with sheer cliffs rising to some 30 m to 45m. In two places the cliffs have collapsed and the resulting talus slopes provide nesting sites for seabirds, beaches where seals congregate, and the only points of reasonable access for human beings to climb to the top of the island.

Formed during a time of submarine volcanic activity, the island consists of six layers of basalt lava separated by beds of volcanic ash, all laid down during successive eruptions; surrounded at sea level by a series of reefs, the exposed faces are stable with little erosion occurring.

An early survey report in 1862 mentioned the presence of low, thick scrub, rushes and creepers, but neither scrub nor creepers exist now. The vegetation types can be grouped broading into six categories generally according to the dominant plant or plants as follows:

1. Bracken *Pteridium esculentum* — in association with some grasses, thistles and other plants, the bracken covers about 90 per cent of the island's surface.
2. Variable Groundsel *Senecio lautus* — a broad strip dominated by this plant exists at the southern end of the island.
3. Grassland — the eastern and central portions are well grassed with Blown Grass *Agrostis avenacea*, Silvery Hair-grass *Aira caryophyllea* and other species.
4. Swamp — a small depression is located south-east of the centre of the island. *Chenopodium glaucum* and *Anagallis arvensis* are the dominant plants in this area.



5. Angular Noon-flower (pigface) *Carpobrotus aequilaterale* — this plant forms a dense mat around Horseshoe Bay, and over Thunder Point and Pinnicle Point at the elevated south end.
6. Sea Celery *Apium australe* — a small area at the east end of Seal Bay contains this plant.

Landing: The only satisfactory landing place is Dinghy Cove, and then only in calm conditions.

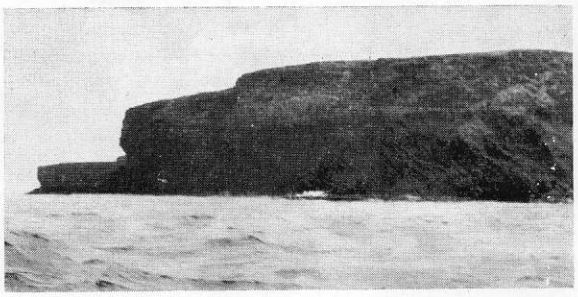
Ornithological History: The early visitors to the island made no mention of the bird life, their

remarks being confined to the general vegetation and formation.

The McCoy Society for Field Investigation and Research carried out the first study of the Island's fauna during a two-month camp in the summer of 1935-1936[11]. The report listed 11 indigenous nesting species including the Little Penguin, Short-tailed Shearwater, Fairy Prion and Common Diving-petrel; subsequent observations have confirmed the presence of substantial nesting colonies of these species.

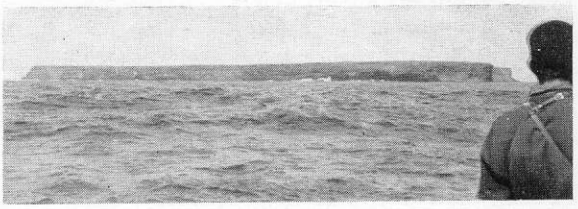
H. E. Tarr camped on the island from 24 November to 8 December 1949 and recorded his observations in detail[7]. Subsequently ornithological interest in the island increased, as did the frequency of visits by ornithologists; in 1962, a report on the fauna, prepared by J. L. McKean and others for the Victorian Ornithological Research Group, was published by the Fisheries and Wildlife Department and submitted to the State Wildlife Reserves Investigation Committee[9]. Resulting from this action, in 1964 the island was declared a Wildlife Reserve.

During a visit in December 1964, J. Wheeler estimated that there were at least 90 000 burrows in use by breeding Short-tailed Shearwaters[8].



• *Approaching Dinghy Cove which is behind the higher headland (looking east).*

Photo: H. E. Tarr



• *Silhouette of the island (looking south-west).*

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin—These birds come ashore mainly in three places — Dinghy Cove, Seal Bay and McCoy Platform; they breed extensively over the island — in the talus slopes, in caves, in burrows around these areas and on the top of the island. Probably present to breed from about August to January, although some young may still be ashore in early March. A few birds may be found on the island at any time throughout the year. Estimated 5000 to 10 000 breeding pairs.

Pachyptila turtur Fairy Prion—Nests are found in a number of places, the most accessible being at Dinghy Cove and among the tumbled rocks at Seal Bay. On this island these birds nest among boulders, whereas in adjacent island colonies they excavate burrows in the surface soil. It has been suggested that the number of rabbits on the island may have caused the birds to adopt the rock-strewn slopes, but as there are no ornithological records before the introduction of the rabbits in 1868, it is not known if they bred in burrows prior to that time. Probably present to breed from about September to early February. Estimated 500 breeding pairs.

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — Surprisingly there is no reference in the early reports on the island to the presence of this abundant breeding species. The first recorded breeding was in 1935-36[11] when they were found nesting in "large numbers". There burrows are distributed over much of the surface of the island. Present to breed from late September to early May. Estimated 90 000 breeding pairs[8].

Pelecanoides urinatrix Common Diving-petrel— This species uses the same habitat for nesting as *P. turtur* under the tumbled boulders in the talus slopes of Dinghy Cove and Seal Bay. Some nests in holes excavated in parts of the cliff face. Probably present to breed from June (?) to late November or early December. Estimated breeding pairs not known.

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — Several pairs were observed in December 1963; young birds have been found.

Factors Affecting Status

The various human activities have had their effect on the island's wildlife. A large colony of Fur Seals attracted sealers and there was heavy toll of these animals early in the nineteenth century[11]. The sealers obviously lived on the island for long intervals although there was no permanent settlement. In the 1870s, guano, presumably from the seal colonies, was removed from the island but the high cost and physical difficulties in shipping it apparently stifled the industry[11]. Similarly two attempts at grazing, one in 1879 and the other in 1908, and pig farming in 1884 also failed[11]. The pigs were released but were later rounded up by fishermen and taken to market. Rabbits, first released in 1868[11], flourished. In one month during 1949 over 10 000 pairs were trapped. Myxomatosus later took a heavy toll but some still remain.

Each of these factors has had considerable effect on the vegetation, as also have fires, with resultant soil erosion. At times, rapid degeneration of petrel and penguin burrows has resulted.

OTHER VERTEBRATES (still present)

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus,* Tasmanian Fur Seal *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus,* Sea-lion *Neophoca cinerea*[7] and White's Skink *Egernia whitei.*

Other Seabirds Recorded

Eudyptes atratus Erect-crested Penguin (derelict)
Phalacrocorax fuscescens Black-faced Cormorant
Phalacrocorax varius Pied Cormorant
Phalacrocorax melanoleucos Little Pied Cormorant
Egretta sacra Reef Heron
Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull
Larus pacificus Pacific Gull

Banding

Period 21.11.60 to 30.6.75

Pachyptila turtur—457 "adults" banded; 44 individuals recaptured 51 times at banding place.
Puffinus tenuirostris—1890 "adults" banded. Two banded on 29 December 1964 were recovered in the North Pacific, one in the Gulf of Alaska on 26 March 1966[1] and one near Pilot Point, Alaska, about 20 July 1967[5]. Eight have been recovered on the east coast of Australia and 26 individuals have been recaptured 27 times at the banding place.

Pelecanoides urinatrix—24 "adults"; 14 nestlings banded. No recoveries reported.

Bibliography

1. Anon. (1966), 'Recovery Round-up', *Aust. Bird Bander* 4: 80-82.
2. McKean, J. (1961), 'Lady Julia Percy Island', *Bird Observer* 352: 3.
3. Pescott, T. (1965), 'A Visit to Lady Julia Percy Island', *Vict. Nat.* 81: 290-301.
4. Pescott, T. (1968), 'Lady Julia Percy Island Revisited', *Vict. Nat.* 85: 125-128.
5. Purchase, D. (1969), Fourteenth Annual Report of the Australian Bird-banding Scheme, July 1967 to June 1968', *Tech. Pap. Div. Wildl. Res. CSIRO, Aust.,* No. 19 (p. 44).
6. Simpson, K. (1961), 'Fauna Survey Group', *Vict. Nat.* 77: 277.
7. Tarr, H. E. (1954), 'Diary Notes from Lady Julia Percy Island (Victoria) — November-December, 1949', *Bird Observer* 276: 2-4 (Nov.); 277: 3-7 (Dec.).
8. Wheeler, J. (1965), 'Report on Birds Recorded by Geelong Wildlife Research Group on Visit to Lady Julia Percy Island, 27.12.64 to 30.12.64', *Geelong Nat.* 2: 50-57.
9. V.O.R.G. (1962), The Fauna of Lady Julia Percy Island and Lawrence Rocks. Submission to the State Wildlife Reserves Investigation Committee. Fisheries and Wildlife Department.
10. Wood Jones, F. (1936), 'The Breeding of Prions on Islands off the Coast of Victoria', *Emu* 36: 186-188.
11. Wood Jones, F. *et al.* (1937), 'Lady Julia Percy Island. Reports of the Expedition of the McCoy Society for Field Investigation and Research', (Section Aves), *Proc. Roy. Soc. of Vic.* 49: 327-437.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife for permission to study the reports on the fauna and flora of the island, and Mr D. Purchase, Secretary, Australian Bird-banding Scheme, for checking banding data.

Date compiled:
15 June 1975

T. W. Pescott,
4 Victoria Terrace,
Belmont, Geelong, Vic.