

# SEABIRD ISLANDS

# No. 28

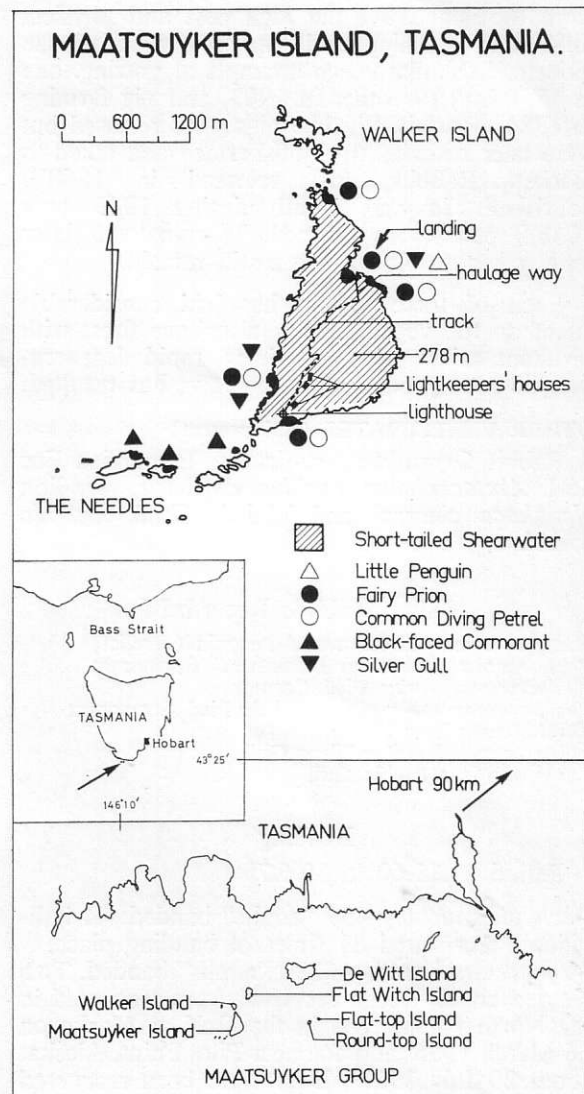
## Maatsuyker Island, Tasmania

**Location:** 43°40' S., 146°19' E.; in the Maatsuyker Group of six islands in the Southern Ocean off south-western Tasmania, 13 km due south of the Tasmanian mainland.

**Status:** Under the control of the Lighthouse Service, Australian Department of Transport. The Maatsuyker Group and other offshore islands in south-western Tasmania are currently proposed additions to the South West National Park administered by the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

**Description:** 180 ha; roughly triangular in plan, 2400 m x 1200 m, with The Needles rocks at the south-western end and Walker Island off the northern tip, it is the second largest island in the group. In shape an off-centred pyramid with the summit at 278 m, precipitous cliffs encircle the island with few breaks and the shoreline is a jumbled mass of Pre-Cambrian boulders. Mean annual rainfall is 1168 mm.

The vegetation is typical of the coastal communities of south-western Tasmania, although stunted and in places severely wind-pruned. Trees, in the form of *Eucalyptus simmondsii*, are confined to a small area on the summit. Elsewhere, except on the cliffs, very steep slopes, and at the extreme south-western end, a tall shrub complex of *Leptospermum scoparium*, *Melaleuca squarrosa* and *Banksia marginata* is dominant, forming a dense canopy which reaches about 6 metres in sheltered situations. Associated with this complex are such woody shrubs as *Drimys lanceolata*, *Acacia verticillata*, *Exocarpus strictus*, *Pittosporum bicolor*, *Cenarrhenes nitida*, *Cyathodes juniperina* and *Pomaderris apetala*. Ground cover beneath the canopy is sparse, consisting mostly of the ferns *Phymatodes diversifolium* and *Blechnum procerum*. However, along the edges of tracks and in small clearings a dense and luxuriant low cover of shrubs, herbs, grasses and ferns comprising *Epacris impressa*, *Sprengelia incarnata*, *Olearia phlogopappa*, *O. viscosa*, *Heli-*



*chrysum paraliu*, *Blandfordia marginata*, *Stylidium graminifolium*, *Billadiera longifolia*, *Gahnia* sp., *Dianella* sp., *Pteridium esculentum* and *Pteris tremula* occurs. On the cliffs, ridges and



● Maatsuyker Island from the air (looking north-east). The Needles Rocks are in the foreground and De Witt Island is in the background at left.

Photo: J. England

along the shoreline, many of the previously listed shrubs appear as dwarfs with grasses *Poa sp.*, *Stipa sp.* and succulents *Tetragonia sp.* and *Mesembryanthemum sp.*

**Landing:** The only landing is at a small jetty in a relatively sheltered cove on the north-eastern side. From here a haulage way leads 137 m up a steep slope to one end of the island's main track. Because of its exposed position in the path of prevailing westerly winds, storms and big seas may often delay a landing for several days.

**Ornithological History:** The only two recorded visits by ornithologists were from 4-15 February 1971 (Milledge)<sup>2</sup> and from 16-30 January 1975 (Brothers)<sup>1</sup>.

#### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Eudyptula minor* Little Penguin—A breeding colony is located among boulders near the landing

jetty. In February 1971 and January 1975 burrows mostly contained two well-developed chicks. One burrow in 1975 contained a small downy chick and an adult. Probably breeds elsewhere on the island. Estimated 30 breeding pairs in the "landing" colony.

*Pachyptila turtur* Fairy Prion—Four breeding colonies exist as mixed colonies with the Common Diving-petrel. These are located at the northern end of the island, about the landing jetty, along the shore west of the lightkeepers' houses and close to the lighthouse (see map). None of these four colonies is very extensive and they consist of groups of rather widely-spaced burrows. In all except the "lighthouse" colony, Fairy Prion burrows outnumber those of the Diving-petrel in the ratio of 2 to 1. Only a few prions nest in the "lighthouse" colony. These colonies do not overlap with Short-tailed Shearwater breeding areas, being placed on steeper slopes between those areas. The entrances to the Prion burrows are often concealed by *Poa*

tussock or pigface (*Mesembryanthemum*). Nesting chambers are branched with two or three entrances and extend to a depth of two metres, although burrows in the "northern" colony average only about one metre in depth due to the heavy clay subsoil. In January 1975 all Prion chicks examined were wholly in down apart from a few showing wing and tail feathering. Other small colonies may exist in more inaccessible areas and the species is possibly increasing on the island. Estimated 600 breeding pairs.

*Puffinus tenuirostris* Short-tailed Shearwater—Extremely abundant and nesting over most of the island. The colony is super-saturated, with many surface-nesting pairs in overcrowded situations and areas of shallow soil. In February 1971, most eggs had hatched and adults were feeding young, whereas in January 1975, hatching was just taking place. The thick canopy in most areas does not deter nesting birds, as the ground cover below is sparse and incoming birds dive straight through the foliage with wings closed. Estimated breeding pairs probably exceed 500 000.

*Pelecanoides urinatrix* Common Diving-petrel—As with the Fairy Prion for location of breeding colonies (see also map). The "lighthouse" colony probably contains most birds, where burrows extend to one metre in depth. In January 1975 most chicks had lost their down and were obviously more advanced than the Prion chicks. Well-developed chicks were noted in February 1971, although by that time some had probably already flown. Estimated 400 breeding pairs.

*Phalacrocorax fuscescens* Black-faced Cormorant—Existing breeding colonies are located on the outer two of The Needles rocks (see map). These are of relatively recent origin as they were not established in 1971, whereas the one present in 1971 appeared deserted in 1975. Well-grown chicks were present in February 1971. Estimated 200 breeding pairs.

*Larus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull—Several small colonies are established, one near the jetty and two along the shore west of the lightkeepers' houses (see map). In February 1971 two nests were found each containing three eggs, together with many non-flying young. However, in January 1975 only fully-fledged young were found at one of the western colonies. Estimated 100 breeding pairs.

### Factors Affecting Status

#### OTHER VERTEBRATES

Skinks *Leiopisma metallica* and *L. pretiosa* are common all over the island. There is a large but apparently fluctuating population of Tasmanian Marsupial Mice *Antechinus minimus* and the Tasmanian Fur Seal *Arctocephalus pusillus* has a colony of about 900 on The Needles. Small unidentified bats have been seen occasionally about the lighthouse.

The Lighthouse Service has afforded protection to the island's wildlife by confining clearing, wood cutting and other disturbing activities to a minimum and strongly discouraging the introduction of exotic animals. Thus at present there are no feral cats, introduced rats, mice or other potentially harmful vertebrates.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

*Pelagodroma marina* White-faced Storm-petrel—A few came about the lighthouse in 1975. Possibly it breeds on the island and others in the Group.

*Haematopus fuliginosus* Sooty Oystercatcher (probably breeds on the island).

*Larus pacificus* Pacific Gull (probably breeds around the island).

### Banding

Nil

### Bibliography

1. Brothers, N. (in prep.), 'Further Notes on the Birds of Maatsuyker Island, Tasmania'.
2. Milledge, D. (1972), 'The Birds of Maatsuyker Island, Tasmania', *Emu* 72: 167-170.

### Acknowledgements

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