

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 29

Rottnest Island, Western Australia

Location: 32°00' S., 115°30' E.; 18 km off lower west coast of W.A. and 35 km west of Perth.

Status: Recreation Reserve controlled by the Rottnest Island Board.

Description: 1800 ha including 200 ha of salt lakes; 12 km long and 5 km wide; maximum elevation 47 m. From 20 m to 0.8 km offshore from main island are 8 small islands and several stacks and permanently exposed rocks. All land masses are composed of aeolian limestone, which is covered to varying depths by sand. Around much of the coast, rocky headlands alternate with sandy beaches backed by sand dunes. Annual rainfall is 750 mm, mostly falling between late April and October.

Much of the island is an undulating steppe of tussock grasses (*Stipa variabilis* and *Poa caespitosa*) and the prickly liliaceous undershrub *Acanthocarpus preissii*. In the more sheltered parts of the island are scrubs of *Acacia rostellifera*, *Melaleuca pubescens*, *Templetonia retusa* and *Spyridium globulosom*. Dwarf, wind-swept shrubbery occurs along the coast, and samphires cover the flats around the salt lakes. On islets and main island cliffs inhabited by seabirds, coprophilous plants like *Carpobrotus rossii* and *Tetragonia implexicoma* became dominant.

Access: Regular plane and boat services operate to the east end of the island.

Ornithological History: Little was known of Rottnest Island birds before A. J. Campbell's visit¹; notes and photographs taken in November 1889 appear in his "Nests and eggs of Australian Birds". F. L. Whitlock visited Rottnest in 1904¹⁹, then between the wars, A. H. Robinson, D. L. Serventy and L. Glauert made several visits. From 1953 to 1961 the present writer spent 275 days on the island. Other recent visitors include G. M.

Dunnet (working on the Silver Gull and Crested Terns), W. N. Holsworth (working on the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*) and T. L. Riggert (working on the Mountain Duck *Tadorna tadornoides*).

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Puffinus pacificus Wedge-tailed Shearwater — Adults present from late August to late April, breeding on the main island at Cape Vlaming (500 pairs in 1956-7) and nearby Radar Head (70 pairs) and on Dyers (or Seal) Island (20 pairs), with a few pairs occasionally nesting on other islets. Most eggs are laid in burrows in shallow sand over rock on the plateau and slopes of headlands and islets, but a few are laid in crevices and under ledges of rock. Estimated 600 breeding pairs.

Puffinus assimilis Little Shearwater—A few pairs formerly bred on tiny Parakeet Island.

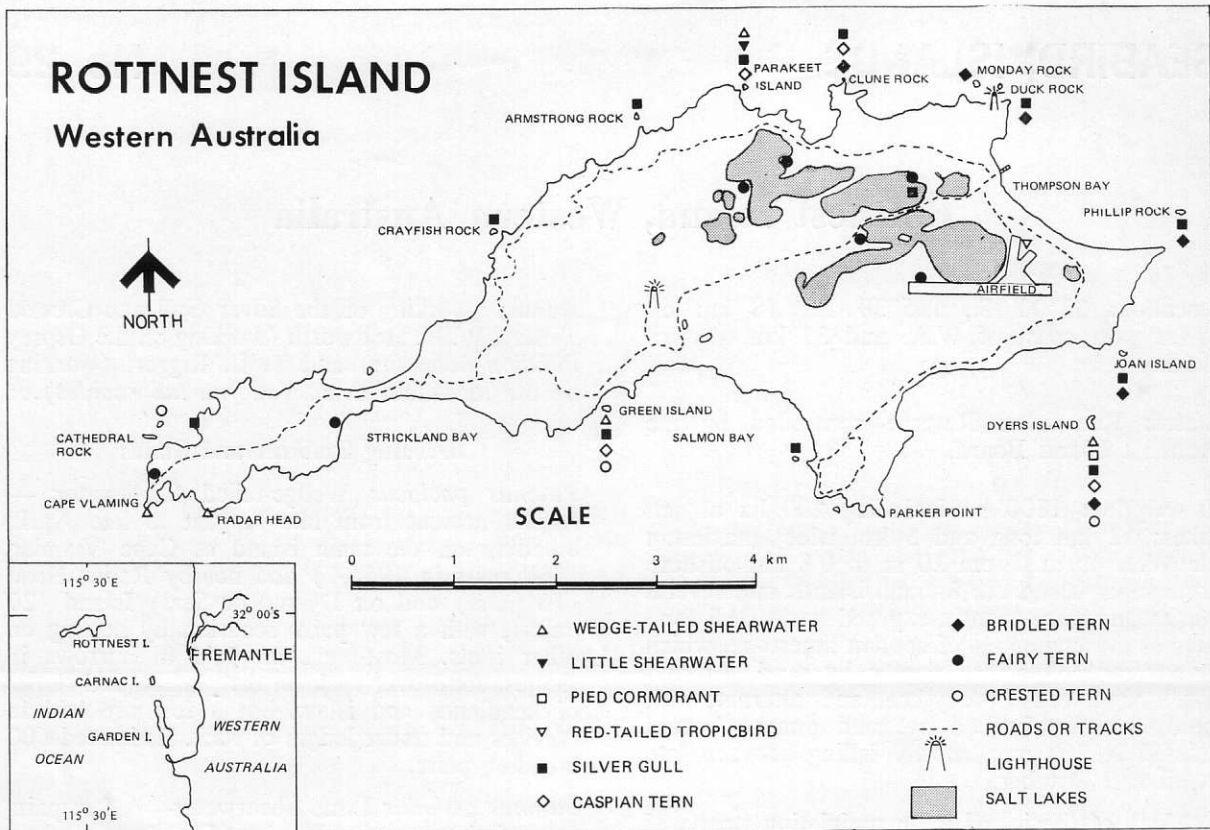
Phalacrocorax varius Pied Cormorant—Common in the seas around Rottnest, breeding in autumn on Dyers Island. The nests are built on top of wind-pruned bushes of *Nitraria schoberi*. Estimated 30-120 (variable) breeding pairs.

Phaethon rubricauda Red-tailed Tropicbird — Rare spring-summer visitor, an occasional pair attempting to breed beside the airfield on flat shelly ground sparsely covered with the tussocky sedge *Scirpus nodosus*.

Egretta sacra Reef Heron—Uncommon resident (mostly grey phase). Only one local record of breeding.

Haematopus ostralegus Pied Oystercatcher — Small numbers on sandy beaches of main island, breeding in spring.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull—Very common resident, breeding from autumn to late spring, mostly on offshore islets (especially Dyers and Green Islands). Estimated 1000 breeding pairs.



Hydroprogne caspia Caspian Tern—Uncommon resident, breeding in winter and spring on offshore islets (never more than one pair per islet).

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern—Common visitor between mid-October and the end of February, breeding on a few offshore islets in crevices or under ledges of rock.

Sterna nereis Fairy Tern—Common visitor between early September and April, breeding on main island on bare shell-grit covered flats around the salt lakes and occasionally on ocean beaches.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern—Common resident, breeding in spring and early summer, mainly on Dyers Island or Green Island. Estimated 300-400 breeding pairs.

Factors Affecting Status

Rottneest Island is a popular tourist resort. Birds that breed on the main island or on islets which can be waded to are subject to much human interference. The main victims are Fairy

Terns and those Silver Gulls that breed on islets in the salt lakes or on easily reached islets like Green Island. There is little doubt that Little Shearwaters (and Rock Parrots *Neophema petrophila*) no longer breed on Parakeet Island because of the number of people who scramble over the islet in the breeding season. The failure of Red-tailed Tropicbirds to rear their young can also be attributed to human interference.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

A wallaby, the Quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*), the introduced House Mouse (*Mus musculus*), two snakes (including the highly venomous *Demansia affinis*), and several lizards (including the egg-robbing skink *Egernia kingii*) are found on the island.

Other Seabirds Recorded

- Eudyptes chrysocome* Rockhopper Penguin
- Diomedea chrysostoma* Grey-headed Albatross (derelict)
- Diomedea chlororhynchos* Yellow-nosed Albatross (derelict)



● Rottneest Island from the air (looking west-north-west).

Photo: Illustrations Pty Ltd
Kindly supplied by W.A. Department of Tourism

Macronectes giganteus Southern Giant-petrel (derelict)
Fulmarus glacialis Antarctic Fulmar (derelict)
Daption capense Cape Petrel (derelict)
Pachyptila desolata Antarctic Prion
Morus serrator Australian Gannet (derelict)
Phalacrocorax melanoleucos Little Pied Cormorant
Phalacrocorax sulcirostris Little Black Cormorant
Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher

Banding

Period: 18 October 1955 to 30 June 1975.

Puffinus pacificus—82 “adults”; 20 nestlings banded. One recovery 29 km NE of banding place.

Sterna bergii—2 “adults”; 218 nestlings banded. Five recoveries 22 km to 24 km from banding place and 4 recaptured at banding place.

Note: A Crested Tern banded as a runner by G. M. Dunnet on Dyers Island on 26 Oct. 55 was caught (“released without band”) at City Beach, Perth, W.A., on 12 Dec. 71, over 16 years 1 month after banding. This is the oldest recorded for this species—see Recovery Round-up, *Aust. Bird Bander* 10: 41.

Larus novaehollandiae—118 nestlings banded. Five recoveries 24 km to 220 km from banding place and 6 recaptured at banding place.

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● Portion of Baghdad, the largest salt lake on Rottneest Island. A samphire community surrounds freshwater seepage at left.

Photo: T. L. Riggert

19. [Whitlock], F. Lawson (1905), 'A Visit to Rottneest Island, W.A.', *Emu* 4: 129-132.

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● Grasshopper Island (looking east).

Photo: S. G. Lane

(See No. 25, page 27)



● Wasp Island (looking north-east).

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