

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 32

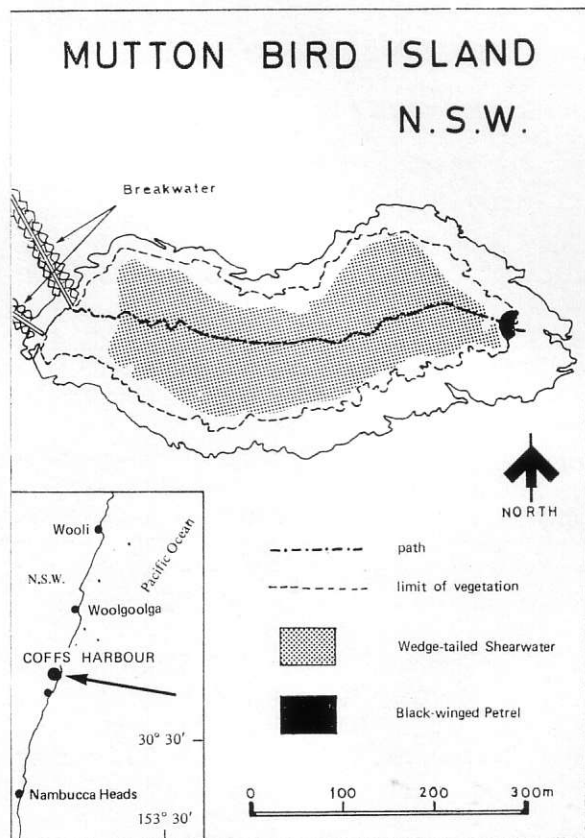
Mutton Bird Island, New South Wales

Location: 30°18' S., 153°09' E.; joined to the mainland at Coffs Harbour, N.S.W., by a breakwater thus forming part of the harbour after which the town is named.

Status: A nature reserve under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (N.S.W.).

Other Name: North Coffs Island.

Description: 8 ha; 600 m by 200 m at the widest. Roughly ovoid in shape with a humped appearance when viewed from the harbour area. Formed of a sedimentary 'Greywacke' rock which is evident in the adjacent outcrops rising sharply from the sea. A track winds up steeply from the breakwater to an undulating ridge which runs lengthwise on the island and rises to 45 m at the highest point before dropping to the rocks at the ocean end. The shallow soil cap supports a thick, low vegetation cover. Shearwater burrows are all in areas where the major vegetation is Blue Wandering Jew *Commelina cyanea*, and a vine, Dusky Coral Pea (Soldier Vine) *Kennedia rubicunda*. Other plants that grow in the areas favoured by the shearwaters are Variable Groundsel *Senecio lautus*, New Zealand Spinach *Tetragonia tetragonioides* and Saloop Saltbush *Rhagodia hastata*. Prickly Couch *Zoisia macrantha* is the main grass in shallower soil and areas exposed to salt spray; Prickly Couch areas contain few burrows. The most prolific of eight species of introduced grasses on the island is Spiny Burr Grass *Cenchrus caliculatus* which covers large areas of the northern slopes, the western and north-eastern ends and large patches on the top ridge. It has spread considerably since 1970. The only bushes are low stands of Tuckeroo *Cupaniopsis anacardioides* and the introduced



Lantana camara. Pigface *Carpobrotus glaucescens* is found in areas similar to the Prickly Couch.

Access: A breakwater connects the island to the mainland making it easily accessible in most weather conditions. Occasionally strong winds and a big sea swell from the north-east cause waves to crash over the breakwater making access



● Mutton Bird Island (looking south-east).

Photo: S. G. Lane

dangerous. A vehicle track runs along the top of the breakwater but vehicle access is controlled at present by a locked gate at the shore end.

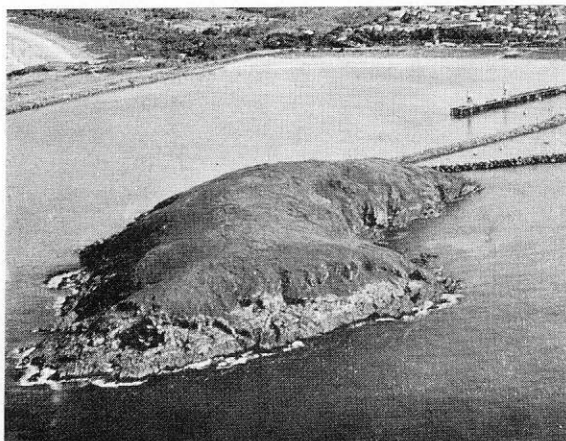
Ornithological History: A. J. North⁷ recorded probably the earliest ornithological information from the island; he stated that Wedge-tailed Shearwaters' eggs were "taken by E. H. Sanchis on Mutton-bird Island, in November 1887, . . .". The next recorded visit by ornithologists was in 1913 by A. F. Basset Hull and Henry Grant⁸, well before the building of the breakwater about 1925.

I could find no other records of visits until banding commenced on 13 March 1960 when N. W. Burnett banded 21 Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, including 14 nestlings. In the following season D. G. Dent and J. L. McKean⁶ banded 418 incubating adults during visits on 29 November and 7 December 1960.

In ten breeding seasons from 1959-60 to 1968-69, between one and four visits were made each season by banders except in 1963-64 when there were seven visits, and eight in 1964-65. During the period 1963-65 H. E. Brenton banded 2 681 free-flying Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. Since 1969 regular visits and studies have been carried out^{2,11,14}. In all, 24 banders have operated on the island.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Pelagodroma marina White-faced Storm-petrel — On 8 September 1966, S. G. Lane found a wing, leg and feathers of one of these birds on the top



● Mutton Bird Island (looking south-west); the breakwater, jetty and part of the township can be seen at the top of the picture.

Photo: North Coast Color Productions

of the island; the bird had been killed during the previous night and a cat was thought to have been responsible. Despite frequent visits from 1969 to 1971, none was observed. In 1972, F. D. Merritt and P. E. Roberts¹¹ observed these birds in May; Roberts indicated that they were present through the winter with ". . . a falling off in the numbers . . ." by early August when they ". . . were spending a lot of time burrowing". He went on to say: "By September 1972 our visits to the island failed to find any storm-petrels." He recorded that a large colony of storm-petrels had returned to the island in August-September 1973. However, no further evidence of breeding has been recorded.

Pterodroma nigripennis Black-winged Petrel — Probably present about the island in December 1974. Observed in January 1975 by N. G. Holmes² who reported three pairs apparently attempting to colonise. Present again the following season when four of the banded birds were recaptured.

Puffinus pacificus Wedge-tailed Shearwater — A large colony occupies most of the island wherever soil depth and vegetation permits. Present from August to early May with egg-laying in late November and early December; hatching occurs