

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 160

Pipon Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

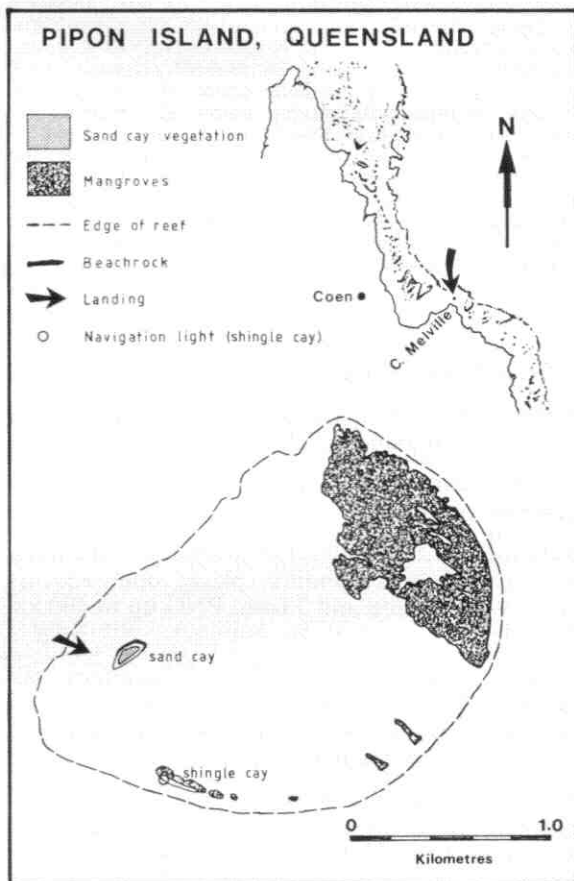
Location: 14°08'S., 144°31'E.; five kilometres north of Cape Melville and 90 kilometres east from Port Stewart, Cape York Peninsula, Qld.

Status: A Commonwealth Lighthouse Reserve.

Other Name: Pipon Islets.

Description: One of the "low wooded islands" of the inner reef of the far northern Great Barrier Reef. As described by Hopley², a "low wooded island" is a complex consisting of seaward shingle rampart, a leeward sand or shingle cay and an enclosed lagoon containing mangroves. Pipon Island is a single low wooded island upon a small inner coral reef. The "islets" are the component parts, i.e. a sand cay, a seaward shingle and mangrove cay (on which is an unmanned navigation light tower), and four mangrove areas, one of which is extensive (1 400 m x 700 m). The "islets" enclose a shallow lagoon with a floor of sand and rubble.

The sand cay, c 200 m x 100 m, was once the site of the light station residence and shows evidence of former occupation and stabilisation. It is elongate with beachrock ramparts along the sides above high water level. Old walls and a groyne of coral blocks have been built to stabilise and raise the level of the cay which is composed of coral sand and rises to about three metres. A sand-spit runs south-westerly. The sand cay is vegetated with a grass/herb mat over its upper surface, and a few small areas of shrubs, some introduced e.g. Oleander and a fig *Ficus* sp. The south-eastern side is bordered by mangroves *Rhizophora stylosa* and *Avicennia marina*. The upper beachrock ramparts have patches of *Sesuvium portulacastrum*.



The shingle cay (c 400 m x 50 m) which bears the light tower, consists of a narrow ridge of coral shingle and coralline rock. It is vegetated with an area of *Sesuvium* and mangroves. The large mangrove islet (c 1 400 m x 700 m) covers most of the north-eastern portion of the reef



• Pipon Island from the air (looking south) with Cape Melville in the background.

Photo: D. Hopley.

flat. It consists of outer shingle and coral rock ramparts, inside of which is a large area of mangroves, mostly *Rhizophora* and some *Avicennia*. On the rim between the shingle cay and the large mangrove area are three small islets of rock and mangroves.

Landing: By dinghy from a vessel anchored in the lee of the reef and islets. At low tide it is possible to walk between the islets.

Ornithological History: A number of early expedition reports have made reference to Pipon Islets but published no bird records, e.g. King⁵ sailed past Pipon on 13 July 1819, J. MacGillivray landed there on 22 August 1849 and Coppinger¹ landed in 1879. In 1924 Basset Hull³ recorded Caspian Terns breeding and Australian Pelicans. The islets were mapped in the Great Barrier Reef Expeditions of 1928-1929⁹, 1936¹⁰ and 1972¹¹, but no bird records were published from these visits. Warham¹² observed birds from 16-19 October 1958 and, among others, recorded Little Terns courting and found a cracked egg. He also found Pied Oystercatchers breeding. Lavery and Grimes listed Pipon as an important Great Barrier Reef seabird island, while Serventy *et al.*⁸ and Kikkawa⁴ referred to Pipon's seabird records from published sources.

Recent visits include four by Qld National Parks and Wildlife Service officers: By D. H. C. Seton for 3.5 hours on 30 June 1980; two by B. R. King for three hours on 6 July 1982 and four hours on 11 July 1984; and one by D. Reimer for three hours on 10 November 1984. On these visits the cay was mapped, vegetation collected and seabirds observed.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret — Recorded in 1958¹² and on all visits from June 1980 to November 1984. A number of disused nests were found on shrubs of the sand cay in June 1980.

Hydroprogne caspia Caspian Tern — Recorded breeding in June 1924³. Present on all recent visits. Breeding recorded in October 1958¹², June 1980, July 1982 and July 1984. Only a single nest has been recorded on each occasion and both the sand cay and the shingle cay are used for nesting. The nest is a shallow depression in the sand or coral shingle, with some vegetation as lining. One or two eggs are laid.

Sterna albifrons Little Tern — In 1958 Warham¹² saw courtship behaviour in "many" of these birds on the beach of one of the cays. He also found "a fresh egg, cracked and apparently laid at random" on the sand. He said that the behaviour "gave the impression that laying was about to begin".

Factors Affecting Status

Human disturbance to nesting seabirds occurs, and also to the large Torresian Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula spilorrhoa* colony in the big mangrove islet, from crews of fishing and light maintenance vessels. Occasional storms and tropical cyclones¹³ also destroy nests.

There are no large seabird colonies on Pipon and in view of recent surveys by N.P.W.S. officers the island does not rate the degree of importance given it by Lavery and Grimes⁶.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i>	Australian Pelican
<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Brown Booby
<i>Phalacrocorax melanoleucos</i>	Little Pied Cormorant
<i>Fregata ariel</i>	Least Frigatebird
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	Black-naped Tern
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern
<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common Noddy (dead)
<i>Anous minutus</i>	Black Noddy (dead)

Banding

Nil.

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Acknowledgements

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