

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 166

Price Cay, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

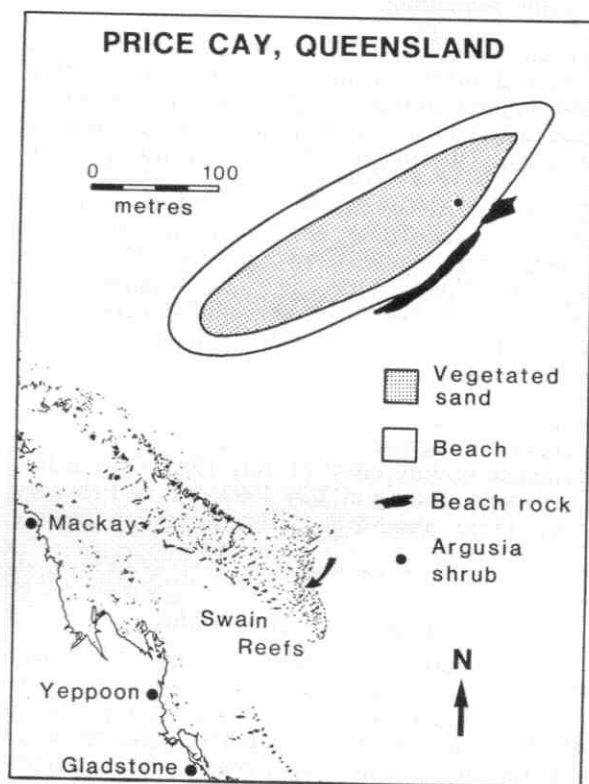
Location: 21°47' S., 152°27' E.; centrally situated in the Swain Reefs complex at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef (GBRMPA reef code 21-518). The nearest mainland is about 190 kilometres west-south-west at Perforated Point (Port Clinton) and the nearest town is about 230 kilometres south-west at Yeppoon, Qld.

Status: Vacant Crown Land; Queensland Fauna Sanctuary.

Description: 1.6 ha; 290 m x 70 m, with an elevation of less than 2 m (measured at high water). This sand cay is sited at the western end of an elongate platform reef 2.2 km long. Beach-rock is exposed in areas previously covered by the cay. Changes in the area, position of the cay and vegetation over twenty years have been described by Flood and Heatwole¹. Roughly 90% of the island (above high water, 1984) still covers an area on the reef that was previously covered in 1964. The cay has a cover of herbs and grasses. The dominant species is *Boerhavia diffusa* with *Thuarea involuta*, *Lepturus repens* and *Coronopus integrifolius*. A stunted *Argusia argentea* bush (<1 m) is also present.

Landing: Across the reef flat at the western end.

Ornithological History: Gillett and McNeill² described and named the cay on 31 October 1960, at the same time recording the presence of three breeding and one non-breeding species of seabird. Limpus and Lyon³ visited on 10 November 1976 and censused eight species of seabirds, only one of which was not breeding. Moverley⁴ described winter bird populations in July 1983 and July 1984, including five species of breeding and four species of non-breeding seabirds. T. A. Walker and/or M. E. Jones surveyed



the birds on 22 January 1985, 20 July 1985, 19 February 1986 and 6 April 1986.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Sula dactylatra Masked Booby — Breeding occurs throughout the year and was observed on all visits except for October 1960³. The highest number of pairs was fifty-one in July 1985.

Sula leucogaster Brown Booby — Breeding occurs throughout the year and was recorded on all visits. The highest number of pairs was 316 in February 1986.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Breeding was recorded on six of the eight visits. The highest counts were five nests and a total of 28-35 birds in February and April 1986.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — Breeding occurs mainly in November and December. In November 1976 there were 50-100 nests with eggs³. In January-February surveys there were only a couple of unfledged young and their parents remaining.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Nesting was observed during all surveys except those in 1985. The highest number of pairs was about 500 in November 1976³. In February 1986 there were 99 eggs, 230 runners and 1 400 adults present.

Sterna bengalensis Lesser Crested Tern — There are two records of nesting occurring among Crested Tern colonies. In November 1976 there were nine pairs with eggs³. In February 1986 there were six pairs with eggs and 100-200 adults on the beach. The only other report is of thirty non-breeding birds in July 1983⁴.

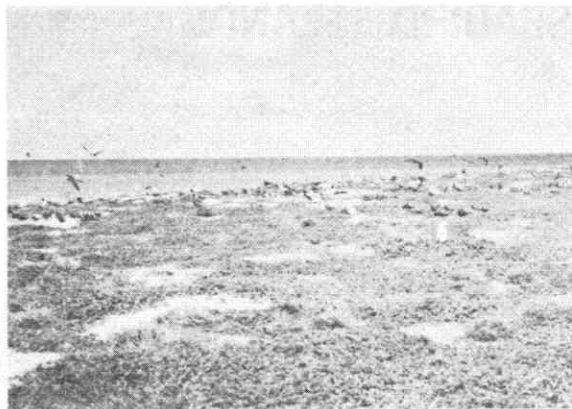
Anous stolidus Common Noddy — Breeding occurs throughout the year but none was in evidence in July 1984⁴ or July 1985. Only a few pairs were nesting in July 1983⁴ but in February 1986 there were 248 nests containing mainly (single) eggs.

Factors Affecting Status

The surface of the cay is less than 2 m above high water and is therefore susceptible to overwash and erosion by the sea during severe storms. Gulls predate unattended eggs of other species and this activity increases when people visit the island. Human visitation to the cay is low but is becoming more frequent. Nesting birds also suffer disturbance from nesting sea turtles.

Other Species Recorded

Sterna hirundo Common Tern⁴
Sterna dougallii Roseate Tern (c 3 300 on 19 Feb. 86)
Sterna sumatrana Black-naped Tern (c 500 on 20 July 85)
Sterna albifrons Little Tern



• Typical vegetation on Price Cay with Common Noddies, Masked and Brown Boobies nesting.

Photo: T. A. Walker

Banding

Commenced January 1985.

Sula dactylatra—47 adults, 2 juveniles, 13 chicks.

Sula leucogaster — 78 adults, 4 juveniles, 17 chicks.

Bibliography

1. Flood, P. G. and H. Heatwole (in press). Coral cay instability and species-turnover of plants at Swain Reefs, southern Great Barrier Reef, Australia. *J. Coastal Res.*
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3. Limpus, C. J. and B. J. Lyon (1981). Seabirds breeding on the Swain Reefs, Queensland. *Corella* 5: 101-105.
4. Moverley, J. H. (1985). Winter bird observations for cays in the southern section of the Swain Reefs, Queensland. *Sunbird* 15: 73-79.

Acknowledgements

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