

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 77

Flat Witch Island, Tasmania

Location: 43° 37' S., 146° 18' E.; one of the six islands comprising the Maatsuyker Group off south-western Tasmania and some 8 km south of Red Point, the nearest approach from the mainland.

Status: Part of the South-west National Park administered by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Tas.).

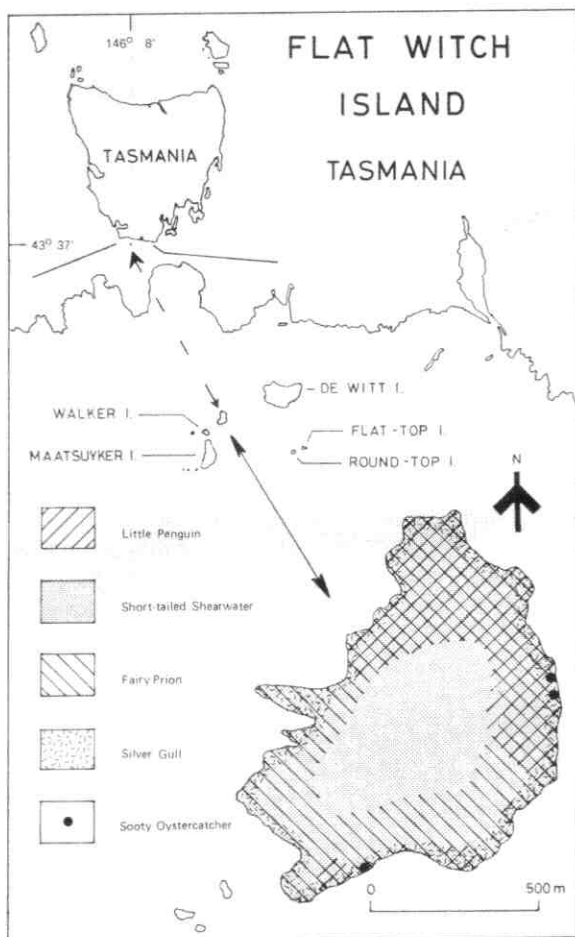
Other Names: Little Witch Island; Central Maatsuyker Island (formerly).

Description: 65 ha; about 1 300 m long by 900 m at the widest. Fairly steep to sheer slopes line the shores but gently sloping ground is widespread across the top with the summit exceeding 100 m in height towards the southern end.

The vegetation is dominated in relatively sheltered areas by the woody shrubs *Leptospermum scoparium* and *Drimys lanceolata* which form a canopy sometimes approaching 6 m in height. Other important species in these parts include *Cyathodes juniperina*, *Correa backhousiana*, *Pittosporum bicolor*, *Monotoca glauca*, *Olearia phlogopappa*, *Helichrysum paraliun*, *Billardiera longiflora* and *Solanum vescum*. Ground cover beneath the canopy is generally sparse, consisting mainly of *Dryophila cyanocarpa*, *Hydrocotyle* sp. and the ferns *Microsorium diversifolium*, *Polystichum proliferum* and *Asplenium obtusatum*. *Histiopteris incisa* and *Pteridium esculentum* are common in some of the clearings. On the more exposed slopes, including the cliffs and ridges, *Senecio lautus* and *Poa poiiformis* grow very extensively; dwarf forms of some of the other species listed above also occur, together with *Cyathodes abietina*, *Rhagodia baccata*, *Carpobrotus rossii*, *Tetragonia implexicoma*, *Apium prostratum* and *Salicornia quinqueflora*.

Soil cover across the island is extensive but not deep.

Landing: A small inlet on the north-eastern side is favoured although alternative sites, involving



steeper climbs, are available nearby. These inlets receive very little shelter from swells making landing from a boat difficult except under particularly favourable conditions. Such conditions are uncommon in the area and it may be necessary to wait weeks for a suitable day.

Ornithological History: C. Lord¹ writing on the islands off the south coast of Tasmania in 1927, referred to Flat Witch Island as the home of

Little Penguins and Short-tailed Shearwaters, but he did not go ashore to carry out investigations. The only recorded ornithological visit to the island was made by G. White from 28 December 1978 to 8 January 1979. The following information was obtained during that visit.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — Nesting is widespread with numbers greatest in the eastern and north-eastern parts. The majority of chicks were fledging but small downy ones, still under constant parental supervision, were not uncommon. Estimated 1 200 breeding pairs.

Pachyptila turtur Fairy Prion — Burrows are most common on the steep slopes lining the shores, being very abundant in some parts; but they also extend to the flatter areas beyond. Most occupied burrows contained small, down-covered chicks, unattended by adults during daytime. On 29 December an adult was found incubating an egg while on 4 January another burrow contained a newly hatched chick being guarded by its parent. Some chicks developed wing and tail feathering during the visit. Estimated 10 000 breeding pairs.

Puffinus griseus Sooty Shearwater — Along with other islands in south-western Tasmania, Flat Witch Island is recorded as a breeding station for this species² on information supplied by a former Surveyor General in Hobart. This was probably the result of incorrect identification. Its presence on islands in this area has not been substantiated.

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — Breeds extensively over most of the island. However, where taller, woody shrubs are widespread and abundant, fewer burrows occur; only the steepest slopes over the shores are avoided completely. Eggs were being incubated at the time of the visit and none was found to have hatched by 8 January. Estimated 300 000 breeding pairs.

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — Three pairs were found breeding on small headlands, one on the southern side and the other two on separate slopes along the eastern side. Only one chick was recorded to each nest and all were commencing to fledge but still down-covered.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Breeds around the periphery of the island, mostly on

headlands, in small group of about 5 to 15 pairs. Although a few chicks were well developed most were either very small or only in the early stages of fledging. Many nests containing one or two eggs were also found. The usual casualties among small chicks was evident particularly on the more exposed western slopes. Estimated 150 breeding pairs.

Factors Affecting Status

Occasionally fires have been lit in the colonies on the eastern side of the island during the breeding season; undoubtedly these take toll of the birds. Apparently penguins are seldom taken for crayfish bait nowadays but some "mutton-birding" is still carried out by local fishermen. It is most unlikely that this would have any significant effect on the shearwater population.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

The Swamp Antechinus *Antechinus minimus* appears to be common while a few Australian Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus* and Elephant Seals *Mirounga leonina* sometimes come ashore onto the rocks. Small-scaled Skinks *Leiopisma pretiosa* also occur. None of these vertebrates is likely to cause significant interference to the breeding seabirds.

Other Seabirds Recorded

Larus pacificus Pacific Gull

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Lord, C. (1927), 'Southern Outposts', *Emu* 27: 16-19.
2. Serventy, D. L., V. N. Serventy and J. Warham (1971), *The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds*. A. H. and A. W. Reed, Sydney.
3. White, G. (in prep.), *Islands of South-West Tasmania*.

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